

## Accidental Surrogate

Chapter 262 – Ella Goes Into the desert

Ella

In the darkness of the back room, Regina instructs us to strip down to our skins and then hands us two rough robes that we pull over our heads, hardly more than bleached potato sacks with cowl necks and long sleeves.

“Is this part of the ceremony?” I ask, curious and disliking the feel of the fabric on my skin. Honestly, given my choices I’d rather wear the leggings and simple shirt that I arrived in.

“No,” Regina answers, looking at me evenly, not a hint of emotion on her face. “It will simply keep you cool in the heat of the desert. But your nakedness beneath,” she notes, letting her eyes travel down my small body beneath my robe, “that is to honor the goddess. When you perform the ceremony, you must be naked before the moon. You can bring nothing with you from your earthly life.”

I run my fingers lightly over the claiming mark between my neck and shoulder, suddenly glad that wolves don’t do wedding rings. I’m not sure I could leave this memory of my mate behind, even to lay myself bare before the Goddess. My fingers move again to my stomach, and I look down again to the swell of my child.

“Will it matter?” I ask, suddenly looking up at Regina. “That my child is a boy? Like, if there are no boys allowed on this trip

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Regina smiles slightly, coming forward and laying a hand on my cheek. I stop mid–sentence, surprised to see her express any positive emotion at all.

“While he is within you, he is part of you, and part of the sacred cycle of womanhood. He will be safe, child, have no fear.” Her eyes crinkle a little as her smile deepens. “A boy, then? How wonderful. A blessing for the kingdom.”

I join her in smiling and give a little nod. A blessing indeed, though I admit I hadn’t really thought about his role in the kingdom. But if Sinclair did win this war, then he would be King, and his son...

Well. Questions for another day. My wolf yips within me, somehow sensing in a way that I do not our need to get moving.

“The sun is falling,” Regina declares, taking her hand from my face and walking towards another door on the far side of the room. “It is time to go.” With that, she opens the door wide, revealing the golden desert beyond. “Let us begin.”

Cora and I give each other a glance and then, together, head through the door.

Cora, Regina, and I walk through the white sands of the desert, which now glow orange in the light of the setting sun. It’s an incredible sight, the way the entire landscape seems to take on the nature of the sun, glowing and hot and alive. I look out over it admiringly, wondering if this is the sun putting on a last show before the moon takes its place as queen of the night.

I walk at the head of the group. Regina is, technically, our leader, but I’m the one with the soul bond to the Goddess now, to my mother. I shake my head, still marveling over that fact. I had always wondered who my mother was and never, ever, had this possibility come into my mind. As we walk and the sun takes its final dip below the horizon, my hand again drifts to my stomach.

Will it make a difference in my son’s life, having a goddess as a grandmother?

Will he, too, have powers?

And what were mine?

I sigh, knowing that I’ll have answers soon enough, but wanting them now now now so I can get out of this scratchy potato sack, away from this place, and back to Sinclair. My wolf gives a restless little stir inside of me, wanting to be with him, in his arms, smelling his delicious scent...

“Ella,” Regina warns, her voice low. “Pay attention.”

I give her a little apologetic grimace and look around, realizing that we’ve reached the crest of a dune and that the desert is spread out below us. Night fell without my noticing and above us, stretching huge above the sky, a full moon hangs.

“We are lucky,” Regina murmurs, looking up at it. Cora and I follow her gaze. “The full moon will make the connection stronger.”

“This is it,” I declare, nodding with certainty. I don’t know how I know, but I know. I feel it, in my bones and my stomach. Inside me, my wolf turns in a circle and curls up, alert but content. We have reached the place we’re supposed to be. I do a little turn, marveling out at the silvery desert spread around us, the shadows of the dunes purple and blue to match the richness of the velvet sky. It’s an incredible sight. I wonder, passingly, how many have had the chance to see it. For a brief moment, I feel myself blessed.

“What do we do now?” Cora asks, likewise looking all around. As beautiful as it is, we are in an empty place. There is nothing here to with any script regarding what to do next.

“Sit,” Regina instructs, pulling her garment over her head in a single graceful movement and spreading it out on the ground. Then, she folds her legs beneath her and sits patiently upon it. Wait.”

I wrinkle my nose at the idea of waiting. Though I know this is where I need to be, and my wolf is calm inside of me, I still want to be home in his arms

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“Ella,” Regina warns again, giving me a stern look. I frown at her. How did she know what I was thinking about? “Concentrate.”

I sigh and nod, knowing that I have a job to do. Then, I pull my potato sack over my head and spread it on the stand before sink to my knees on top of it. I place my hands on my thighs, sitting my butt back on my heels. Cora sits down next to me on her own bit of fabric, staring up at the moon, and I close my eyes, slowing my breathing. I’m not really someone who meditates – who has time for that? – but I know, somehow, that this is what I need to do.

“Breathe,” Regina instructs, and I start taking deep breaths, letting my mind wind down to its basest state, trying to clear all my thoughts and make space for the Goddess to do her work.

It takes a minute before I notice a change. But then, slowly, in the darkness of my closed eyes, as if on the back of my eyelids, a small purple light begins to glow. I barely notice it, register it as strange, until it begins to pulse lightly and then spread. The growth is slow, just—a minute bit at a time, but, eventually, the purple light takes over the space of my entire internal vision.

And then, I gasp.

Inside my head, my mind, my body, I feel the shuddering warmth of my mother’s love. And it’s an incredible thing, because it’s a love for me, specifically, but also, somehow, a love for everyone. I am filled with it, with my mother’s ceaseless love, with the love of a mother for her child, with the dedication of a moon for the earth around which it orbits.

And then, very suddenly, I know. I understand. I have everything I need, inside of me.

When I open my eyes, I see Regina still sitting quietly with her eyes closed. Cora, however, is starting at me dumbfounded.

“Ella,” she whispers. “You’re...you’re glowing.”

I give her a smile and look down at my arms, somehow not surprised to see that I am glowing – or shimmering, or something. With a glorious silver–white light.

“Cool,” I murmur, admiring it. Then, I look back to my sister. “Are you ready to go?”

“Is...is that it?” she asks, hesitant. “Do you know like...what to do?”

I nod, my smile growing. “Yeah, it’s way simpler than I thought it would be.” Then, I push myself to my feet, shaking out my sack and pulling it again over my head.

I take a few steps towards Cora, then, but a sudden wave of dizziness overtakes me the moment I do. Cora is on her feet in an instant, Regina next to her, and I stumble into Cora’s arms, feeling my breath come short.

“Oh my god,” I murmur, looking up at Regina. “I feel like...why am I so weak?”

“The ceremony has taxed you,” Regina warns, “you must take care.” Then, she turns to Cora. “Come, we must get her back to your ship. The time is short.”

With that, Regina stoops under my arm, wrapping it around her shoulder, supporting my weight. Cora, on my other side, does the same. Together, we begin the journey back, and I’m horrified to find that every step is a struggle for me.

Worse, as much as I search for it...I can’t feel my bond to Rafe. Not anywhere.

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