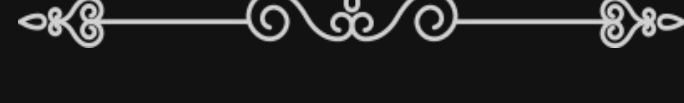


Accidental Surrogate

Chapter 293: A Gift



Sinclair

Agony.

It's agony for me – obviously, more for my mate, I'm sure – but watching her survive this is ripping me apart.

I struggle against Roger's grip – he shouldn't be stronger than me, he's never stronger than me, I should be able to break away – but something about all of this has just taken it out of me. I am weak, now, watching my mate struggle for her life, watching my son take his first breaths, that rips the energy from me. I gasp for breath, panicked, looking between my Ella and the baby in the doctor's hands.

"Relax," Roger commands, his voice low behind me as he holds me back with a hand on each of my arms. "Let them work. You can't do anything right now. They'll call you when they need you."

I know he's right, but the impulse – I have to do something –

Still, I stand with my brother, letting him take control as I watch Hank and Cora moving, blessing them in my mind with every breath that pants from my lips. Ella lays back against the pillows, pale, breathing faintly, apparently half conscious and half out.

The pair of doctors move fast. Hank glances over the crying child and then quickly hands him to Cora, reaching for the medical bag that sits on the bed between them. Cora does a quick inspection of the baby and then hastily cuts the umbilical cord. Then, she meets my eyes.

"Come and take your child, Dominic," she demands, wrapping him hastily in the scrap of a pillowcase that I tore to pieces not long ago. "He's fine – but Ella needs both Hank and I right now." Roger releases my arms and I move forward, my eyes half on my beautiful Ella as I take the baby from Cora's hands. I can't – how can I greet my son when his mother –

"The child," Cora says, holding my gaze for a brief moment before turning back to Ella. "Concentrate on the baby, Sinclair. We've got Ella for now."

And so I do. I look down at my infant son, crying his lusty little heart out, waving his little tiny fists in the air. Something in me takes over something I'm not sure I knew was there – as I begin to shush my child, to rock him, to try to bring him to a peaceful state in this scary new world. Slowly, softly, I raise my hand to wipe at the liquid on his face, to clear it, marveling at the fact that his entire head is completely dwarfed by the size of my palm

And then, following an impulse that's totally new to me, I lean forward and bring my face close to my sons, pressing a kiss to his head and taking a deep breath of his new baby scent, totally new and, somehow, already totally his own. "Welcome, baby," I murmur.

From the corners of my vision I can see Cora and Hank working swiftly with their medical supplies, Hank sewing quickly while Cora crouches by Ella's head, taking her pulse and smacking her cheeks a little.

When I hear Cora call Ella's name, my attention snaps away from Rafe and to the sisters on the bed. "Ella," Cora says, and I see my mate – oh, thank god – I see her blink, and focus on her sister, her face ashen and white. Unbidden, I come to Ella's side, determined to be with her – to give her everything I can.

Cora ignores me as I take my mate's hand, the baby curled in the curve of my other arm.

"Ella," Cora demands, steady. "It's time to access the gift. You need it. Ask her to heal you."

Slowly, Ella nods her head and closes her eyes. But I don't know if that's because....because she's accessing the gift? Or something else...

Something much much worse. I open my mouth, panicked, to call her name, but Cora snaps her attention to me and shakes her head.

And so I close my mouth, and squeeze my mate's hand, and let her do her work.

Ella

It's terribly hard to do anything right now to think, to concentrate, to communicate – let alone enter the calm meditative state I need to access my mother's gift.

My body is wracked with pain, and I don't know whether it's blood loss from Hank's medical cut, or some sort of tear within me, or...something else. But my vision fades in and out from a hazy view of the palace bedroom and utter blackness.

But still, in the brief moments when I can concentrate, I see Sinclair standing by my side, feel his hand in my own, and see our little baby wrapped up in a sheet in his arm –

Just as he was in the dream state

And I find new determination within me. So, working hard to steady my breathing, to not slip into oblivion, I close my eyes and work to access that state.

It's harder than it's ever been but, eventually, I get there. I watch the insides of my eyelids fade from black and red to that cool lavender, and I feel the balm of my mother's gift begin to wash over me from the inside. Passively, I wonder what my family is seeing –

I wonder if I'm glowing, as Cora was, that day by the temple steps.

Or if, perhaps, they can't see anything at all – if the gift is working inside me, and they're just holding their breaths, hoping that I'm not...I'm not slipping away...

I feel it take hold of me, though, like a mother's welcoming arms. I feel cradled within its warmth, and can almost hear her – the Goddess, my mother whispering to me that she will make it right.

– That for all I've given the world, I have earned this, and that she will make it right.

The magic runs slowly through me like rainwater through grass, seeking the roots of me, wanting to refresh but taking its time getting there. But as it seeps through every inch of me, I feel slowly renewed. I feel an ease return to me.

When I open my eyes, everyone is standing around me, staring at me, their faces shocked. I take a deep breath and look around at the four of them. But I ignore them all, focusing only on the bundle of white blankets resting on my mate's arm.

The little baby. Who is not crying.

"Rafe," I cry, working hard to sit up, a little rill of pain shooting through me. I grimace at it – apparently, whatever the goddess' gift did, it didn't fix me completely – but mostly I ignore it, reaching for my son.

"It's all right, Ella," Sinclair says, quickly kneeling by my side and offering my son to me. Tears slip down my cheeks and I'm surprised to find that I'm suddenly sobbing as I take my baby into my arms for the first time.

As I lay my eyes on my child's face.

"Baby," I whisper–cry, my chest heaving as relief floods through me to see that he is fussy and unhappy, but not sad, not hurt – just....adjusting to his new world. He flinches angrily as my tears fall onto his perfect little face, making me laugh. "Sorry, baby," I murmur, brushing them away. Sorry about that. Mama's not always like this."

"It's all right, Ella," Sinclair whispers quietly behind me. "He's safe – you're safe a few tears on his face are not the worst part of his day –"

"Poor little baby," I sob, a smile breaking out on my face even as I cry, my whole body a mix of emotions happiness, and guilt, and worry, and joy – all mixing together so that I don't know who or how I am anymore.

Except, I know that I'm a mother. I'm his mother.

That, finally, I know is true.

"Let's give them a minute," Roger whispers. "Would that be all right?"

I hear Hank murmur his medical assent and look up, suddenly, to see the three of them moving away Cora climbing off the bed and beaming at me.

"We'll be back soon," she whispers to me. "You're fine, Ella – the gift did its work. You just....take a minute. Say hello to your child."

I nod, smiling back at her and wiping away my tears. And then, the three of them troop out of the room together.

And I'm left alone, with my perfect little family.

My mate, my son, and me. Complete.