

## Chapter 491 - Accidental Surrogate for Alpha

Ella

I go rigid at the idea of this dark god giving my daughter anything.

“No,” I gasp, attempting to push myself away from him – but I struggle to move –

“Fear not, moon daughter,” he says, the corner of his lip tilting up. “I do not give curses to those who are my chosen ones – only gifts.”

And with that shadows begin to swirl in his hand. My eyes go wide as they build and build into an orb of smoke and shade.

“No!” I protest again, my voice a little breathless this time.

“Careful, girl,” he growls, taking a step closer, bending over me now. “If you anger me, I will not be so eager to bestow my gift. You would not to incur my ire for your life, instead of a blessing for hers, would you?”

I cringe away from him, not knowing what to do – not knowing which will be worse –

The God of Darkness stretches out his hand over me and the shadows begin to spill down from his fingers, surrounding me.

“A blessing,” he murmurs, “for the first granddaughter of the moon – from her benefactor. Long may she live, dwelling in darkness as well as light.”

The shadows, when they touch me, are soft – gentler than I imagined they’d be, like velvet or mist. When I breathe, they flow into me through my nose and my mouth. I gasp, worried – but the smoke, it tastes faintly of...of mint, and cool mornings, and it soothes my aching throat...

I look up at the God in wonder, tilting my head at him.

“See?” he says softly. “Not all that dwells in darkness is wicked.”

And then he smiles at me - a wayward, vicious thing – and gives another short bow before –

Before he disappears.

And I blink, and the world – my room – it's real again.

“Ella?” Cora says, abruptly in front of me now, shining a light in my eyes.

“Ella!” Sinclair gasps at my side as I blink rapidly, trying to clear my thoughts. “Are you –“ he spins his head to Cora, “is she all right!?”

“I'm – um – I'm fine,” I murmur.

“Your eyes,” Cora says, dropping her flashlight and taking my face in her hands, studying me with horror on her features. “Ella, they went all black – you were frozen in place –“

I nod, taking a deep breath, the scent of mint still clinging to the back of my mouth. As I exhale I run my hands over my stomach and check on my bond with my daughter –

It's still there. She's just as strong – just as uncomfortable, ready to be born –

“It's okay,” I say, nodding to my sister, to my mate. “It – um –“ I hesitate for a moment, torn between wanting to explain and the feeling of the next contraction coming steadily on. “It was – it was really weird, all right, but right now?” I shake my head at them, a little frantic, “I think we need to push.”

Cora snaps immediately back into doctor mode, moving down on the bed to position herself between my knees, nodding. “All right, Ella,” she says, pulling me a little lower so that I'm flatter on my back now. “When you're ready, you push.”

“Ella,” Sinclair growls next to me, and even as the contraction takes hold I turn my face to him and press my eyes shut, passing all of my emotions down our bond – my fear, and my shock, but alongside it my conviction that...that I'm okay, right now, and so is the baby – but we've got to concentrate on this.

“All right,” he says, his voice low as he sits up and puts his hands on my shoulders. “Let's do this.”

And, with my mate behind me, and my sister ready to welcome my little girl, I push with all my might.

Half an hour later, our little baby girl is born.

I'm inconsolable as Cora places her in my arms, the tears dripping down my face as I peer at my baby, reaching out a finger to stroke her teeny tiny fingers, her perfect little nose. She shouts her unhappiness and shakes her little head, which only makes me laugh as I try to wipe my tears away.

“She's perfect,” Sinclair breathes, tucked close behind me, peering at our baby over my shoulder.

“She really is,” I say between gasping breaths. “Oh god, she’s so cute –“

Cora laughs, coming to sit next to me and stroke a hand over her little head. We’re quiet for a long moment as I press my child against the skin of my chest.

“She’s precious,” Cora murmurs, her voice almost reverent. “And I love her, and I’m going to be her favorite aunt.”

“Only aunt,” Sinclair murmurs, his voice a little dry.

“Even if she had sixty,” Cora coos, tapping the baby’s little belly with a single finger, “I’d be the best.” She leans forward, kissing me on the cheek. “I’ll give you two a couple of minute, all right? Go break the news to the drunk ones in there.”

I turn my face up and kiss my sister as well as she scrunches her nose at me and turns to the door, taking the team of nurses with her. Everyone did such a wonderful job – I’m so grateful to them –

But honestly, as much as I want to shout my thanks out after them, all I can do is stare down at my perfect little girl.

I lean back against Sinclair as I study her face and he wraps his arms around me, doing the same.

“She looks just like you, Ella,” he breathes, fascinated.

“What!?” I protest, honestly a little shocked. “Dominic, she’s all scrunchy –“

He laughs at this, and I can feel him shaking his head. “Newborn scrunch aside – her features? And the shape of her face? Rafe is all me, but Ella...this one is you.”

“Little baby girl,” I murmur, rocking her a little and passing love and comfort down our bond so that she settles, just a bit. I can feel the tumult of her emotions down our bond – she’s happy to be close to me, but cold, and a little frightened. She cries the sweetest little mewling sounds, and I cuddle her close, thinking that it must be so hard, being brand new to the world. I do my best to let her know that she’s all right, that I’m still right here. I press a kiss to her forehead, loving her so much already that I can hardly bear it.

Outside the windows of the palace we can hear the crowd start to cheer as the announcement goes out – their Princess has been born, safe and sound. They started to gather late last night, wanting to be the first ones to lay eyes on her. And today? I had peeked out the front window earlier as I paced the halls, trying to ease the bangs of labor, and was shocked to see the masses of people waiting out there, eager to lay eyes on her.

“I can’t say their enthusiasm is misplaced,” Sinclair sighs. “She’s a really good baby.”

“Hear that, baby?” I murmur, smiling at her. “They’re cheering for you!”

We take a long, quiet moment together before Sinclair reaches a hand out and strokes my hair. “Ella,” he says quietly, and I hear the worry come back into his voice. “What...what happened? Earlier, when you –“

But I shake my head, because of course I know precisely the moment he’s talking about. I turn a little so that I can see him and quickly, briefly, give him the fast version of what happened, because I know that we only have a few minutes before the doctors come back in, and Rafe comes to meet his sister, and we have a great deal to do.

My mate goes pale as I tell him how the Dark God took me away into the pocket realm, how he gave our daughter some kind of gift, how he ensured me it was a blessing and not a curse.

“But from the Dark God,” Sinclair murmurs, shaking his head, his voice heavy with dread, “who knows what a blessing is to him.”

“I know,” I say, my voice soft, a little mournful. “But honestly, Sinclair, as it...came to me, the gift – it didn’t feel bad. He was angry at mom for keeping secrets from him for all of these years – but I did not get the impression, from the gift itself, that he wanted to hurt the baby or use it as vengeance.”

“Then what did it feel like?” he asks, confused.

“I don’t know,” I say with a shrug. “It felt...a great deal like an open door.” As the words fall from my mouth I have no idea where they came from, and that they make absolutely no sense. But, somehow, they’re right.

But still, as I look down at my baby girl, my stomach twists with anxiety for all the things it can mean for her future.

Chapter 492 - Princess

## Chapter 492 - Accidental Surrogate for Alpha

Ella

“So you’re all right? You’re both all right?” My mate asks, pressing his forehead to mine, still reeling from the strange news of the Dark God’s gift.

“We are,” I say, nodding, sure of it. And then I shift again, passing the baby to him. “See for yourself, new papa,” I sigh, placing the little girl in her father’s arms.

On Sinclair's face, and through our bond, I see his heart absolutely melt. "Oh god," he sighs, shaking his head as he stares down at his little girl. "I'm a gonner, Ella. This one – she's already got me in the palm of her hands, even as I hold her in mine."

"Don't worry," I sigh, curling up next to him, indulging in the sight of my mate – the one I love most in the world – falling in love with our tiny daughter, as I've already done. "I won't tell her the power she wields."

"It will be our secret," he says with a nod and a little smirk on his lips.

We're quiet for a moment, studying her, when suddenly I realize that she doesn't have a name.

"What do you think?" I ask quietly, resting my head on his shoulder. "Is she an Emma? Or an Eloise?"

My mate's smile deepens as he looks up at me, and I already know his answer before he says it, because it's precisely the same as mine.

Those names are great – but they're not hers.

"Nah," Sinclair says, grinning at me before turning back to his little girl. "She's totally, completely an Ariel."

"I know," I sigh, tracing a finger down her cheek. "Welcome to the world, Ariel Sinclair. You are already so, so loved."

And Ariel stretches her mouth in a wide yawn before snuggling down in her father's arms, happy and content. Sinclair and I both laugh to see it, and I know that his heart, like mine, is so very full. I pass my joy and love down the bond to both of them, and am totally thrilled when Ariel gives a little tentative pulse of love back as she gets used to her new surroundings.

The next hour or so is busier than I'd like, with the doctors returning to the room so that I can finish the after-business of labor and ensure that our sweet Ariel is healthy and happy. But even as I feed her for the first time, and deliver the placenta, and take a shower, and am completely exhausted through it all, I can't stop smiling and turning towards Ariel in the room, eager to keep my eyes on her.

My baby – my little girl. I'm so filled with excitement that she's here, that she's mine. God – her whole life is out there in front of her, and I just can't wait to see her live it.

Once the doctors have given us the final okay – at least for now, the nurses, of course, will be on hand all night in case we need help with anything – we settle in together as a family. Roger comes into the room with a tearful Rafe on his hip as Cora finishes bundling Ariel into a swaddle and hands her off to Sinclair. Henry wheels into the room after Roger with a sleeping Jesse in his lap, looking excitedly for his first granddaughter as he closes the door behind him.

## Family vacation packages

“Mama!” Rafe shouts, his voice so terribly sad it breaks my heart.

“Ohhh, baby,” I murmur, rushing over to Roger and taking my eldest baby up into my arms. “It’s all right, we missed you!”

“It’s probably the longest he’s gone from your side in...months, Ella,” Roger murmurs, smiling at me and giving me a little hug as Rafe rests his head against my chest. Henry and Cora come close, Cora wrapping her arm around Roger’s and resting her head on his shoulder.

“Maybe ever,” I sigh, shaking my head. He really is my little Velcro baby – pretty much always with me. But, then again, it’s not entirely his fault – I’m could be accused of being an overly-attached parent.

But I don’t know if I mind that. I just...like being around my kid. Kids, now.

“Poor little guy,” I murmur, stroking Rafe’s sweet head and turning to where Sinclair walks over with the baby. “He missed us.”

Rafe sits up with a little cry and reaches a hand out to Sinclair, wanting him close too.

“We’re sorry, kiddo,” Sinclair murmurs, smiling at his son and taking Rafe’s hand, leaning over to kiss it. “But we were busy! Mom was doing all the work to bring you a new little sister.”

Sinclair turns a little then, showing Rafe the baby, and Rafe sits up straight to peer down at Ariel –

We all stay very still for a moment, watching the siblings meet for the first time, but suddenly Rafe gives a little cry of disgust and turns his head away, pressing his eyes shut and gripping my robe tight in his fists, not wanting to let me go.

We all burst out laughing at Rafe’s tiny jealousy and I stroke his head some more, murmuring sweet things to him as I carry him over to our freshly-made bed, the rubbered sheets and soiled linens thankfully already changed. I sigh a little with gratitude, thinking that it’s perhaps a little nice to be queen for things like this. And then I sink down against my pillows, taking Rafe with me and waving to my family to come close.

“You have to be nice to sissy, Rafe,” I whisper to him as he peers at his father, clearly allowing his curiosity about his baby sister win out over his jealousy. Sinclair sinks down on his side of the bed and moves so that his side is pressed against mine. Henry wheels close, handing Jesse up to Cora as she and Roger likewise move near.

I turn Rafe in my lap so that he can see into Sinclair’s arms more completely. Rafe turns his head, peering at his sister like she’s a little alien or a completely foreign species, which makes me smile.

“Her name is Ariel,” Sinclair whispers to his son, and I look up to my other side when I hear Cora gasp. I grin when I see her pressing her hand to her chest, her eyes squeezed nearly shut with joy.

“Perfect name,” she mouths to me, and I laugh and nod eagerly, turning back to my son.

“What do you think, little Rafey?” I murmur, rubbing his back while he leans out to touch his sister. “Will she do?”

Rafe bumbles something to Ariel, which makes me smile, but the moment his fingers press against her cheek I give a gasp. Sinclair does too, his eyes whipping up to meet mine.

“Did you feel it too?” I breathe, suddenly very excited.

“I did,” he replies, laughing and nodding. Both of us whip our heads back to Rafe, who smiles at his sister for the first time. Ariel squirms a little in her swaddle, smacking her lips and turning her head to the side, clearly getting sleepy.

“Wait, what is it?” Cora asks, leaning over.

“A bond,” I say, turning to her and grinning, “just like with Rafe and Jesse.”

“Oh,” she says, standing up straight and looking down into her arms at her son.

“Cool,” Roger breathes, looking between the babies. “What do you think that means?”

“Still in the dark, brother,” Sinclair murmurs, peering curiously at Jesse now. “Should we...”

“Is it too much?” I ask, suddenly anxious, looking down at my fresh new baby. “Is it enough to be born and then get a new bond in one day?”

“In this family?” Sinclair asks, his voice dry. “She’s going to have to get used to being overwhelmed.”

I laugh a little, nodding, and then when my mate peers at me, clearly seeking to know what I think, I just shrug – because frankly, I’m curious too, and really what could it hurt?

“Come on,” Sinclair murmurs, placing the sleepy Ariel down on the bed and gesturing for Cora to lay her baby down too. “Let’s...just give it a try.”

So, quite gingerly, Cora lays Jesse down next to his new cousin, whispering a sweet little introduction as she does. As soon as the babies are laid side-by-side, Jesse blinks and frowns for a minute, turning towards Ariel as if he’s quite suddenly noticed that she’s there. And then I burst into a smile to see that he actually reaches for her – seeking her.

The moment his little hand touches her face, it happens again, making me jump a bit this time. The bond – so tiny, so faint! – snaps into place, and my grin deepens.

“Wow,” Sinclair says, shaking his head. “That is amazing. I’ve never heard of anything like that happening before.”

And then all four of us parents laugh as I move to lay Rafe down next to his tiny cousins, careful to place him next to Jesse, who is a bit sturdier. I don’t want my precious little meatball to roll over on my baby girl in her first hours of being alive.

“Someone’s going to have to fill me in here,” Henry murmurs as he alternates between smiling at his three grandchildren and looking curiously between his sons and their mates.

“The kids have bonds, dad,” Sinclair says, smiling up at his father and running an amazed hand through his hair. “Between each other, separate from us, their parents.”

“Really,” Henry says, his eyebrows going up and his face breaking into a smile of pleasure and curiosity. “Well. I mean, I knew they were special children. But I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Have you ever heard of anything like that happening before?” Roger asks, peering down at his dad.

“I have...heard of something like it,” Henry murmurs quietly before looking around at us. “Though it wasn’t between siblings and cousins, and I’m not fully sure it applies.”

“Really,” Sinclair says, looking at his father eagerly, wanting to know more.

## Chapter 493 – Three Cousins

# Chapter 493 - Accidental Surrogate for Alpha

Henry nods and looks consideringly at the kids. “Will you let me do a bit of research, son?” he asks, smiling at them, “and get back to you on it? I hate to be cryptic, but I want very much to make sure that I’m right before I send you on a wild goose chase.”

“I think that’s just fine,” I sigh, reaching down and gathering my daughter up into my arms as Rafe rolls over and starts to burble at Jesse, who gives a little squeak of happiness and starts to laugh, reaching to grab at his cousin’s shirt. “I don’t think I have the energy to hear anything new just now.”



“You’re right,” Cora sighs. “We should let you get some rest. But...could I just...”

And I look up to see my sister clutching her hands against her chest, biting her lip, clearly dying to hold the baby but not wanting to make me give her up if I don’t want to.

“Cora!” I laugh, holding Ariel up, “of course you can!”

Cora sighs happily as she gathers Ariel into her arms, murmuring sweet things to her. Of course, she was holding Ariel before – but this time it’s as an aunt, not a doctor. “Hey, sweet baby Ariel,” Cora coos, smiling down at her first niece as tears gather in her eyes. “I’m so excited to meet you!” She leans forward and kisses Ariel on her head. “I’m going to be your favorite,” she whispers.

“No way,” Roger counters, leaning close to study our little girl. “She’s going to be a daddy’s girl, so favorite clearly transfers to nearest uncle.”

Cora just rolls her eyes at him but I smile, loving it to see my family play-fight over who is going to love our daughter the most.

#### Family vacation packages

Cora and Roger take a few more minutes with Ariel before passing her to Henry, who rocks her gently as I lean my head against Sinclair.

“She’s very beautiful, Dominic, Ella,” Henry says, looking up at us with moist eyes. “How lucky you are.”

“We are lucky,” Sinclair agrees, leaning forward to scoop Rafe into his arms, as he’s getting a little rambunctious with Jesse. “Little family of four. Sounds familiar, dad?”

Henry grins at Sinclair but Roger just laughs, scooping up his own happy baby. “You know that makes you the girl in that scenario, right little brother?”

“And is that a bad thing?” I ask, raising my eyebrows at my brother-in-law as Henry hands Ariel back into my arms.

Roger laughs and blushes, instantly realizing his mistake.

“All of that ends right now,” I say, pointing my finger at the men in the family. “Ariel is going to have enough trouble growing up as the youngest girl cousin with Rafe and Jesse – I’m not going to tolerate any comments about what she can and can’t do because she’s a girl.”

Roger nods, smiling at me, on board with the plan. Sinclair surprises me, though, by sighing and turning towards the windows. “As progressive as we’d like to be,” he says quietly, “I do wonder how pigeon-holed she’s going to be by dint of being a Princess. The world will enjoy a tomboy

Princess for a couple of years, if that's how Ariel turns out to be, but eventually...I think our dear girl is going to face a lot of expectations regarding pretty smiles and silk dresses and tiaras."

I sigh and lean closer to him as I realize that he's right. Our family can only do so much – Ariel's going to get all sorts of messages about who she's supposed to be from the rest of the world as well as her family, just like the rest of us.

"We'll just have to do our very best," Cora says with a firm nod, and I turn to smile up at her.

"Actually," Henry says, his voice considering. "Before you take your rest, Ella..."

"Hmm?" I ask, turning towards him, curious.

"Well," he says, hesitating, looking me up and down and clearly assessing how presentable I am, "they have been waiting out there for hours."

"Oh," I say, my eyebrows going up as I turn towards the windows again, realizing that Henry is right. Our people – they've been gathered for a long time, hoping for a glimpse of her.

"She just gave birth," Cora protests, putting her hands out, "Ella should be allowed to rest."

"No, Henry's right," I say, working to sit up and swinging my feet over the edge of the bed. "They've all been so nice, wanting to see the baby –"

"Ella," Cora hesitates, her voice worried. "As your doctor –"

"As a magical self-healer," I say, my voice dry as I get to my feet, "I'm good, Cora, to go step onto the terrace for a moment. Will you help me put on something nice?"

"Something nice?" she gasps, her eyes going wide at the idea.

"Like a nice robe," I say, rolling my eyes at her and handing the baby off to Sinclair. "Honestly, this whole thing will take four minutes, and then I'll be back to bed!"

My sister rolls her eyes at me, clearly objecting to the plan, but three minutes later I'm dressed in a very pretty white robe, my hair neatly tied back, my crown perched on my head honestly as a practical afterthought rather than a serious accessory. My hair is not the neatest it's ever been, and the crown functions as a very useful headband.

Sinclair passes the baby to me and wraps an arm around my waist, Rafe on his hip as we leave our bedroom. As we walk down the hall with Cora, Roger, Jesse, and Henry following close behind, I frown a bit at Sinclair's crown and then Rafe's – which he amazingly consents to wear.

"Ariel's going to need a crown too," I murmur, jealous for her sake. "She can have six, if she wants them," my mate replies, smirking at me a little bit. "But if she's as much of a tomboy as you're projecting she'll be, I don't know if she'll wear them."

“True,” I sigh, smiling down at my little girl and dropping yet another kiss to her perfect little head. “You be as girly as you want, little Princess,” I murmur to her, and she gives a fussy little scrunch of her face that makes me laugh as she passes sleepy vibes down our bond. “But yes, you’re going to get some pretty crowns. And mama will get more, all matching –“

“All right,” Sinclair says, his voice dry. “This is starting to get expensive.”

“Don’t get cheap on us now, Sinclair,” I reply, bumping my shoulder into him as we reach the front of the palace, where the crowds are starting to shout. Guards have already started to line the terrace, so they know something is up.

“I would never,” Sinclair sighs, moving his hand from my waist to my shoulder and leaning down to press a quick kiss to my mouth. “Ready?” he asks, looking from me, to Ariel, to Rafe – our whole little family.

“Ready,” I say with a nod, reaching out to swipe a quick finger down the length of Rafe’s perfect, chubby little cheek. He squeaks happily and bounces in his dad’s arm, waving at me. I blow him a quick kiss before turning towards the doors.

Sinclair gives a quick glance over his shoulder at his father, and the Duke and the Duchess with their son, and then, smiling, pushes the double doors open. Together, we all step outside.

Chapter 494 – People’s Princess

## Chapter 494 - Accidental Surrogate for Alpha

Ella

The crowds go absolutely wild as we walk into the sunlight and a huge smile bursts onto my face. Honestly, it was a little touch-and-go for a few months there, with the media continually debating if I was a good or a bad Queen after the murder on the front steps. But I laid low, and continued doing my best, and things have continually turned towards the people seeing that I only have their best interests at heart, and that I really do want to fight for the little guy.

Plus, I don’t think it hurts that I’m the mother of a super adorable little Prince, and that I’ve just given our nation its first Princess.

The crowd calls her name and I smile out at them, pleased and baffled about how they already know it. I look up at Sinclair, confused, but he just shrugs and smiles down at me.

Together, my little family and I step forward to the edge of the terrace and I boost the baby a little in my arms so that the crowd can see her. They go mad the moment their Princess's face comes into sight, shouting that she's beautiful and how glad they are to meet her.

### Family vacation packages

I can't help but laugh, a few tears coming to my eyes as I see my entire nation feeling precisely the way I do about my little girl. Just so, so thrilled that she's finally here.

"And you thought Ariel wasn't going to get as much of a fuss as Rafe," Cora murmurs with a smirk, coming to my side. The crowd shouts when they see Jesse come forward too – the Little Duke is also a favorite.

"I know," I laugh, turning to smile at my sister. "Poor Rafe got none of this."

"But look at him now," Cora says, leaning forward and pointing to my son. I turn to see my mate smiling down at Rafe, who is actually waving out at the people. I burst into laughter, because it's so very Rafe. He loves to wave and say hello – he just has no idea that he's saying hello to the thousands of people gathered on the streets.

Sinclair raise his hand and waves too, but I just smile and hold my baby close, peering down into her face. She scrunches and frowns for a moment before opening her eyes just a little bit, turning towards the noise of her people.

I laugh in delight, because even though I know she can't see anything, it looks for all things like she's trying to look and catch sight of them as much as they are of her. I hold her a little higher, murmuring into her ear all the things she could see if her eye were a little bit more developed, but she just gives a little baby sigh and closes her eyes again, pressing her face against me.

I grin but look up at my husband, because I know baby needs to get inside now. Her Princess duties are done and she's hungry and needs some sleep. Sinclair nods to me, leaning forward to kiss me on the forehead, and then we give one last wave to the people before we turn inside.

"Come on, Roger," Cora laughs, and I look over my shoulder to see her tugging him inside.

"No, this is fun," he replies, his voice cheerful. "Give Jesse to me, we're staying out –"

"Ridiculous," she sighs, but I can tell she thinks he's funny. "Did you not get enough attention as a child?"

"Not nearly," Roger sighs dramatically, "Dominic took it all from me when he was born it was very traumatic –"

I grin and look up into Sinclair's face in time to see him roll his eyes, but he doesn't retort, and Henry just laughs behind us.

“You got plenty of attention, Roger,” Henry sighs as we head back to our living quarters. “Your mother couldn’t get enough of you – thought you were very funny.”

“Just like I can’t get enough of you,” I murmur to our sweet little Ariel, “Or you!” I say, reaching out to ruffle Rafe’s hair.

“What about me?” Sinclair asks as we reach our door, smiling at me as he pushes it open.

“Oh, now that you’ve given me two children, I’m totally done with you,” I say, looking up at him with wide earnest eyes, but not completely able to keep a straight face.

“Liar,” he laughs, tugging me close to his side with his free hand.

“All right, Ells,” Cora says, coming to my side and pressing a kiss to my cheek. “We’ll be just down the hall, yes? In case you need me?”

“Thank you, Cora,” I say, stepping away from Sinclair’s side as he says goodnight to his brother and father. While I don’t anticipate that I’ll need Cora tonight, it’s good to know I’ve got a doctor and a sister nearby.

She gives me an extra squeeze as I call goodbye to the rest of the Sinclairs and step into the room with my mate and my children. My children. Plural! I laugh in wonder for the joy of it.

“Happy?” Sinclair asks, smiling at me as he presses the door shut.

“Ecstatic,” I sigh, grinning at him before looking to the kids. “But also exhausted. And busy. Do you think you can get Rafe down, or at least distracted, while I get ready to feed Ariel?”

My mate smiles at me, taking a step closer and cupping my chin in his hand. “Did you hear that?” he asks.

“What?” I ask, confused.

“You just said the most beautiful sentence in the world,” he laughs, shaking his head down at me. “Asking me to take care of our son while you got ready to feed our daughter. Our family, Ella – not that it wasn’t before. But it’s growing – which is what we’ve always wanted.”

“I know,” I coo, pressing closer to him and biting my lip as I look up into his gorgeous face, my eyes shining. “You’re right. It’s perfect.”

And my perfect mate smiles at me before dipping down and pressing a kiss to my mouth – so long that I sink into it, losing myself a little. So long that Rafe squeaks in protest, giving Sinclair’s chest a playful smack because he’s bored.

I burst into laughter again and pull away, murmuring my apologies to Rafe as I snatch the crown off his head. “So sorry, prince,” I say, wrinkling my nose at him as he giggles and reaches for the little circlet. “But you’re going to have to get used to sharing mommy and daddy.”

I move into the closet, pulling out a set of newborn pajamas and a sleep sack for Ariel, who I know is going to want a snooze very soon. She gives a few little fussy cries now, clearly hungry and not yet knowing how to communicate that desire down the bond.

“Poor daughter,” I sigh, changing her as fast as I can and then laying her down into Rafe’s old wheeled bassinet as I quickly change into something a little more comfortable and convenient for breastfeeding. “Just a minute, then we’ll get you settled.”

I do my very best to keep my word, making my way out of the closet in record time. I grin when I see that Sinclair is thanking one of the kitchen workers as they make their way out the door, having just delivered a cart full of food.

“Ah, Rafe’s favorite distraction,” I say, smiling at my mate and my son as I move to my nest and settle down in it, Ariel bundled cozily in my arms. “Food!”

“He’s a hungry boy,” Sinclair says, smiling as Rafe does indeed reach for the tray, almost wiggling out of his dad’s arms as he does. “But half of this is for you!”

“Oh!” I say, genuinely surprised, and then I laugh and shake my head at myself, because of course I would forget to eat, so distracted am I by my love for my family. But I lean back against the pillows and tug my shirt up, getting a fussy Ariel ready for her second feeding before I think about feeding myself.

“Yes,” Sinclair murmurs, handing Rafe his favorite – a slice of apple – and wheeling the cart over to me. “I figured you would forget to eat.”

“I’m going to be forgetting a lot of stuff over the next week or so,” I murmur, relaxing back as Ariel latches and smiling down at her. “You’re going to be on overdrive, monitoring the nation as well as me.”

“Best duty I ever had,” he sighs, getting Rafe set up in the little pop-up highchair that we keep in the corner of the room, moving it close to me and setting some snacks out before him. I turn my head to smile at my son, glad that he’s close too.

“Do you think Ariel’s going to keep Rafe up all night?” I ask, suddenly curious. “She’s going to be up every couple of hours –“

“Ella,” Sinclair says, interrupting my train of thought as he sits on the side of the bed and places a hand on my knee. “I want to talk about all of that, of course. But you really, really need to tell me more about what happened when you were visited by the Dark God.”

“Oh,” I say, looking up at him with a little sadness in my face. Because it’s not that it’s left my mind precisely – I just...was really enjoying ignoring that and basking in the happiness of this moment.

“I know,” he sighs, leaning forward to stroke my face with his palm. “But it’s been killing me, my love. Please.”

“All right,” I reply, nodding, knowing that he needs to hear it all. And so I take a deep breath and launch into the tale.

Chapter 495 – First Night

## Chapter 495 - Accidental Surrogate for Alpha

My mate listens carefully as I tell him, in full detail, everything that happened when the Dark God took me outside of time and gave our little daughter our gift. I mostly look down at her while I tell the story, wondering how this perfect, tiny little angel being could have an ounce of darkness in her.

But even as I wonder that, I consider what the Dark God told me: that not everything that is in darkness is bad.

But is that just something he said to distract me, to make me more compliant to accept his “gift?”

Was it, as I suspected, a curse?

“And then I was back,” I say, looking up into Sinclair’s face as he listens closely. “And, obviously, distracted by the insane pain of childbirth.”

A smirk pulls at his lips then, but I can tell that my attempt at humor didn’t go very far towards distracting him. He’s quiet for a long moment, looking towards Rafe but really staring into space as he sorts through his thoughts.

I give him a second to work through it, but I interrupt when I can’t stand it any longer. “So?” I ask quietly. “What do you...think?”

“Well,” Sinclair sighs, turning his attention back to me and to our little girl, who eats hungrily, clearly not having lost her appetite after such a dramatic early encounter. “I certainly wish that the Dark God had simply sent a flower arrangement or a toy. But...I honestly don’t know. We need much more information before we can plan any sort of action.”

“Action?” I ask, a little confused. “What on earth can we do? It’s done, Dominic. Whatever the gift is,” I say, gesturing down at her, “she’s got it.”

“Yes,” Sinclair says, nodding as he sighs and lays himself down a bit on the bed so that he can rest his head against my knee, looking up at my face. “But there’s certainly more we can know. We can ask dad to do some research, see if there’s any precedent for this, if you’re all right with him knowing? And ask Cora to contact your mother, see if she has any insights?”

“Of course Henry can know,” I reply quietly. “And that’s a good idea, with Cora.” I sigh, frustrated with myself for not thinking it first, but Sinclair just sends a pulse of peace down the bond, encouraging me to forgive myself for being scatter-brained on this of all days. I’ve been through a lot, and even though I’m already healed thanks to mom’s gift, I’m still exhausted.

“We’ll work it through, though, Ella,” Sinclair says quietly, reaching his long arm up to tuck my hair behind my ear.

“My instinct still does tell me it’s not all wicked, Dominic,” I say sincerely, looking down into his face. “And with these gods, gut feelings...they tend to be important.”

“I believe you,” he says, his eyebrows going up. “I’d just like all the intel we can get.”

“Me too,” I say, giving him a little smile. But then, even despite my desire to keep pushing on this, my eyelids start to flutter. I blink hard, shaking my head, working to stay up.

“Oh, baby,” Sinclair murmurs, sitting up and leaning in to kiss me on my forehead. “You’re asleep on your feet. Or, well, your ass – but what’s the difference.”

I laugh and shake my head at him. “I need to stay awake till she’s done feeding,” I say with a yawn. “But then, yes, after that...we’re both going to need a nap. Right baby girl?”

Ariel ignores me, of course, continuing to eat. But I grin at her, stroking a hand over her perfect tiny head, loving the way her little fuzz of blonde hair tickles my palm.

“Well, you concentrate on that,” Sinclair says, moving a plate with a simple panini and a bottle of water to the bedside table next to me. “And eat if you can, yes? While you do that, I’ll get Rafe settled.”

I nod, finally starting to feel completely drained as the adrenaline of the day starts to slip from me. I take a lazy bite of my sandwich, barely tasting it as I switch breasts and let Ariel finish up. I’m hardly able to keep my eyes open about fifteen minutes later after Sinclair’s done moving around the room, getting Rafe settled in his playpen with some quiet toys and books and pulling Ariel’s basinet closet to my side.

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I give a little squeak of protest when he takes her from my arms, not wanting to let her go, but Sinclair just laughs softly at me and murmurs that she'll be right here at my side. I take one last peek at Ariel's face and see that she, like me, is already basically asleep.

And then I yawn, and settle down, and finally completely pass out.

Of course, I barely sleep, because the baby gets me up every couple of hours needing to be fed again. The next day passes pretty much in a blur, with me catching sleep when I can and attending to Ariel when she needs it. I'm not in a total fog the whole time – I still spend time with my son and talk to my mate and admire my baby – but most of the time? Most of the time Ariel and I sleep.

Sinclair is a dream throughout that first crucial night, taking complete charge of my baby boy and allowing Ariel and I the space we need to get used to our new patterns. He spends time with her as well, of course, holding and talking to her while she's awake and not eating, but I can tell that he's exhausted too.

Not as exhausted as me – I definitely get to keep that title. But that first night – it's not precisely easy on dads either, is it? Especially when you've got another little one, barely over a year old.

Which is why I'm surprised, frankly, when Cora, and Roger, and Jesse, and Henry all come trooping in the evening after Ariel was born.

“Oh!” I say, blinking at them and laughing, pleased. “Did – did I know you were coming?”

“Oh my god,” Sinclair says, turning to me and cocking his head to the side. “Did I – did I seriously forget to tell you?”

I burst into laughter as he slaps a hand to his face, and Roger and Henry join in.

“Always a rare pleasure to see you mess up, brother,” Roger says, wrapping an arm around his brother's shoulders and giving him a squeeze. “Though I guess you're forgiven for this one – that first night is...a lot.”

“It certainly is,” Henry says, accepting a hug from his son as Cora comes over to give me a kiss, a perky Jesse sitting up in her arms and babbling with excitement as he looks around the room.

“Hey Cora,” I say, grinning at her. “Hey, chatty!” I laugh, poking Jesse in the belly, Ariel in my arms. Rafe totters over and wraps an arm around her leg, smiling and reaching up for her or for Jesse – it's not precisely clear which.

The greetings finished, I look around curiously at my family. “So, what did I miss?” I ask. “Why are we all here?”

“To talk about your new weird God encounter,” Roger says, grinning at me. “And our kids’ weird bond. Life’s been so fun since you joined the family, Ella – seriously, I don’t think I express my gratitude enough.”

“Always happy to keep it spicy, precisely for you, Roger,” I say, giving him a wink as I pull the covers of my nest aside, getting to my feet with Ariel cozy in my arms. Roger grins and gives me a nod. “Do we have...new information or something?” I ask, pushing my hair back over my shoulders.

“We do,” Henry says, nodding to me. “Shall we go into the living room, where there’s room for us all to sit? It’s none of it bad news, but I think it would be best for us to have a chat.”

Anxiety rolls in me as I nod and gesture towards the door to the living room, looking to Sinclair with my apprehension pulsing down our bond.

“He’s not placating you,” Sinclair says, coming close to kiss me on the cheek and grab Rafe off of Cora’s leg, tossing him into the air as we make our way to the living room with our family. Rafe squeals with joy and I can’t help grinning at him. My little boy – already such a thrill seeker.

“All right,” I sigh, holding baby Ariel close to my chest as I follow my family through the door and shut it behind me. Then I curl up on my favorite place on the couch, Dominic in the corner behind me, and turn my attention to Henry.

Because he, I’m coming to realize, has been up all night as well gathering information. And he wouldn’t be here if he wasn’t ready to share.