

Chapter 496 - Accidental Surrogate for Alpha

Ella

I give Ariel one last kiss for luck and exhale a deep breath, focusing my eyes on Henry as I lean back against my mate, who wraps a supportive arm around me.

“Actually, Ella,” Cora says, and my eyes dart to her. She smiles at me from across the couch, her arms wrapped around her baby on her lap. “I’m the one who has news first.”

“Oh,” I say, my eyes going wide as I shift a little to direct my attention to her now. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know –“

She shakes her head, dismissing my apology as Roger comes to perch on the arm of the couch behind her. She reaches up a hand and he takes it, giving her a little squeeze.

“Um, we contacted mom this morning,” she says quietly, apology all over her face. “To...to ask about what the Dark God could have possibly been up to. I’m sorry we did it without you – I know you would have wanted to be there –“

“No,” I breathe, even though I am a little disappointed. “I mean, I wouldn’t have been able to see her anyway, right?”

“Yeah,” she says, cocking her head to the side. “Unless we go to the temple, it is sort of a...one-on-one experience, isn’t it?”

“But we can go,” Sinclair murmurs behind me, supportive, “if we don’t get the answers you need –“

“It’s okay,” I say, nodding to everyone around the room. “I get it – you don’t need to be so gentle with me. I was completely knocked out from giving birth and we needed information fast. It’s okay. So...” I flick my fingers at my sister, smiling at her. “Please, divulge. I’m dying to know.”

“Well,” Cora says, laughing a little and glancing up at Roger. “Mom was not happy to hear that her boyfriend visited you.”

“Really?” I gasp, a little delighted at the immortal gossip.

“Really,” Cora confirms, her eyes going wide as a grin overtakes her face. “She figured that he knew about you, but she had no idea that he’d go so far as to bestow a gift on the baby behind her back.”

“Behind her back,” I repeat, shaking my head. “Wow. So? Did she say it was...dangerous?”

“She said that he didn’t have the balls to go that far,” Cora says, laughing and giving a little shrug. “Or, well, those weren’t her precise words – but that was the sentiment. That he’s just trying to get her attention and let her know that he’s pissed – but that he knows better than to truly mess with her lineage.”

“So,” I say, looking down at little Ariel who lays cuddled in my arms, drowsy but idly kicking her little feet. “It really was a gift?”

“Mom doesn’t know what it was,” Cora says, shaking her head. “But she...she said she can’t make him take it back, Ells. That immortal gifts – they’re not like...presents you can return or regift. They become part of us.”

“That makes sense,” I sigh, hoisting my baby up closer. “Well, at least we know it’s not...bad.”

“Which doesn’t mean it’s good,” Sinclair grumbles behind me. Clearly, he wanted better news.

“There is some precedence,” Henry says, leaning forward in his chair and studying the baby as best he can. “The texts are old, but there are some that report on gifts given by both the Goddess and the Dark Lord. What is interesting is that they seem to be reliable – there is one text in particular that speaks of a Goddess-given gift of healing that sounds quite a bit like yours, Ella,” he says, raising his eyebrows at me.

“Oh,” I say, perking up a little. “Well, that’s interesting. Would I be able to read that?”

“I’ll have it translated,” Henry says nodding, “and sent to you as soon as possible.”

“And what were some of the ‘gifts’ the Dark God has given?” Sinclair asks, his voice heavy and dubious on the word “gift.”

“He doesn’t give everyday gifts like the Goddess does – her interests have always been more domestic, for lack of a better word. She deals with the heart and the home – assigning mates, healing the body, changing the weather to ensure good crops.” He nods to Cora and I as he lists our gifts and I turn my head, because he’s right – while Cora and I have used them in much different ways, they do seem to be gifts that could be used to build a family and keep it safe in hard times.

“And the dark god?” Sinclair presses, his voice a little annoyed in his anxiety now.

“He,” Henry says, shifting his eyes to his son now, “prefers...more sweeping magics. Not things that can or should be used every day. Things that...change the world.”

A shiver runs through me at this and I find myself holding my breath as I look down at my little girl.

“Change the world?” Sinclair asks, going tense behind me.

“The text reports that he once gave a man the gift of eclipse, allowing him to hold the moon’s shadow before the sun for days on end, only relenting when his enemies collapsed to his demands.”

We all go silent and still at this.

After a long moment, only Roger is bold enough to break the quiet of the room.

“What the hell, Ariel,” he breathes, leaning forward to stare at his niece.

A ridiculous little laugh bursts at me from this, and I shake my head as Cora and Sinclair and then Henry start to laugh as well. I shake my head at my brother-in-law, so grateful for him and his strange sense of humor, which revealed itself so late in the game.

“Seriously,” Roger says, sitting up straight and running his hand through his hair, looking at his niece with wide eyes. “She’s the littlest of all of us but it sounds like she’s going to have some serious power.”

“Well, we don’t know it’s going to be something like that,” I sigh, rolling my eyes and trying to shake the tension out of my shoulders. “It could be...something smaller. Maybe he’s just trying to get under mom’s skin.”

“Or up her skirt,” Roger murmurs, and I grin as Cora turns to smack him for speaking such blasphemy about our mother and a deity. Roger just wrinkles his nose at Cora as he grins and grabs his arm where she hit him, pretending that the blow stung when it clearly did not.

“So, Ariel is clearly the most powerful wolf amongst us,” I say with a sigh, propping her up a little in my arms so she can look around at the family. “So, she is the Alpha now.” Ariel, betraying my confidence, just gives a sleepy little mew, her eyelids fluttering shut as she snuggles back into my arm.

Cora laughs and I feel a little pulse of pride and pleasure down my bond with Sinclair.

“At least it means she’ll be able to stand up to her brother and her cousin,” Roger says, looking between the boys – Rafe toddling around on the floor and Jesse in Cora’s arms. “Though...none of them are very impressive just yet.”

“Do you think?” I ask, looking around at the group. “Does it...I mean, they all have gifts from mom, right? But will her being strong make the boys strong – through their bonds or something?”

“I don’t know,” Henry says, tilting his head and considering his grandchildren with interest.

“But,” Sinclair says, clearly thinking it through as he talks, “that’s not how bonds work, right? I mean, Cora and Ella are blessed with Goddess gifts, but Roger and I aren’t any stronger for it.”

I click my tongue, offended, and turn to glare at my mate over my shoulder. “Excuse me, Dominic, but you have benefited many times from my gift –“

“Yes, darling,” he says, rolling his eyes a little and shaking his head, “but you know what I mean. We aren’t physically stronger, or gifted ourselves.”

“True,” Cora says, looking between the two of them. “But...both of us did bond to extremely powerful Alpha wolves who just happen to be brothers –“

“Baby,” Roger says, interrupting and beaming down at her, pressing a hand to his heart. “That is...the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me –“

“It’s just a fact, Roger,” she sighs, rolling her eyes, making me laugh.

“You think I’m powerful, and tough,” he whispers, sliding down the couch’s arm to squeeze in behind her, wrapping his arms around her and Jesse both, rocking them back and forth. Jesse squeaks and laughs as Cora tries to hold her own laughter back. “You’re amazed with me –“

“Oh god,” she sighs, even though her grin. “I take it back –“

“Never, I’ll treasure this moment my whole life –“

I’m shaking with laughter even as Sinclair raises his voice to cut through it.

“As amazing as this breakthrough is for the two of you,” he says, his voice not without humor, “what’s your point, Cora?”

“I don’t know,” she sighs, leaning contentedly back against Roger, who sweetly presses a kiss to her neck. “Just that – perhaps there’s more to these bonds than just raw power being passed between them. I mean, I don’t think it’s really a chance that Ella and I figured out we’re sisters and ended up with brothers. We’re...kind of a powerful foursome, when we put our minds to it.”

I nod, considering that maybe Cora is right. That perhaps it’s less about the bonds themselves and instead what they create in combination.

“And those three,” Cora continues, gesturing between the children, “they’re already bonded to each other, each with a goddess gift. And then Ariel with a Dark gift as well?” She shrugs. “I think, in combination, they could be...formidable.”

“Future of our nation, right here,” I say quietly, leaning to again kiss my little girl and reach out a hand to my son, who I suddenly want quite close. “Whatever gifts they have, I hope they can be convinced to use them to protect themselves first, and then our people after that.”

Quietly, my family nods as we look around at each other. Because our family comes first – but our nation?

These children are going to have a huge role in it. I hold my breath a little, praying inwardly that we can raise them to be strong enough to use their gifts for good.

“Actually,” Henry says, making us all turn to him in surprise. “There’s some precedence there as well.”

And my eyebrows nearly shoot into my hairline. More news today?

I settle back against my mate, ready again to listen.

Chapter 497 – Family Lines

Chapter 497 - Accidental Surrogate for Alpha

Ella

Henry takes a deep breath then, looking between the children. “I have been very intrigued,” he begins, “by the idea that the children have bonds with each other – bonds like that between siblings and cousins, it’s unusual. Indeed, I thought it was unique, but it is not.”

My brows go up as I listen with interest.

“The children have created between them...something of a triangle,” Henry murmurs, looking between the three of them. “There have been rare examples of individuals having multiple fated mating bonds – my son, interestingly amongst them –“

I lean back against my mate, who wraps his arm more tightly around me.

“But this,” Henry says, gesturing between Ariel, Rafe, and Jesse, “three people bonded together naturally, each to the other two.” He shakes his head. “I have not yet found any examples of it happening naturally. Though there are those who have...forged such connections.”

“Really?” Roger asks, his eyebrows going up.

“Usually in religious ceremonies,” Henry says, folding his hands in his lap and looking around at us, “in the wilds of the north. Two people already bonded – either by fate or by choice, usually through a mating – would each either willingly or by obligation magically forge a bond with a third.”

“For what reason,” Cora asks, shaking her head. “Like...plural marriage? Or something?”

“No,” Henry replies, shaking his head at her. “This is usually done in communities where those who undergo the ceremony have long taken vows of chastity. No, they do it for the power that results from the bond, which is said to be...unique.”

“This is so weird,” I murmur, looking down at my kids. I mean, I’m very aware that my children and my nephew are special, but...

“The magics of the north are strange,” Henry says on a sigh, shaking his head and giving a shrug. “They are also closed-mouthed regarding what the results of such bonding actually are. But I do imagine it’s closer to the kinds of powers wielded by the dark priests we spent so much of our time defying last year. Spells cast at a price, rather than goddess-given gifts freely used with little effort.”

“But since the bond between the kids was...natural,” Sinclair murmurs, speaking his thoughts aloud, “can we assume that whatever power results from them would...be easier to wield?”

“I have no idea,” Henry says on a sigh, smiling down at his grandsons and granddaughter again. “Though I hope for their sake that it is. Those forged bonds and the resulting magic – they didn’t come without a price.”

“Oh geeze,” I murmur, sighing and looking down at my precious new baby. She can barely stay awake, let alone wield great and powerful magics. “What are you going to get up to, little girl?”

“All sorts of good things,” Sinclair murmurs to me, though I can hear the worry on in his voice.

“I’m sorry I don’t have more definitive answers,” Henry says on a sigh, his face truly apologetic.

“That’s all right, dad,” Roger says, smiling at him. “It’s more than we knew before. Besides – these kids, they’re going to have to learn how to figure it out.”

“And the Goddess said to trust them,” Cora says, shrugging and standing, hoisting Jesse up in her arms and smiling at him. “So, I’m just going to let them worry about it.”

I grin at my sister, realizing that this honestly is probably the best method. I mean – we’re moms, there’s definitely no way we’re not going to worry. But what can we do? Cora and Roger are right – we just have to raise them well, and trust them to figure it out.

“You’re not leaving, are you?” I ask, sitting up straight as I see Roger get to his feet as well. “Don’t, stay! We can get food!” But I yawn even as I finish my sentence.

“We’re leaving,” Cora says, with a gentle smile, “because Jesse needs a nap, and so do you. And lil miss Princess over there is already asleep.”

I look down in my arms and realize that Cora’s right – Ariel’s drifted off without me noticing.

“Oh shoot,” I mutter. “I wanted to feed her...”

“We’ll leave you to it,” Cora says, leaning down and kissing me on the cheek. “I’m just a phone call away – anything you need, sis.”

“Thanks, Cor,” I murmur, smiling at her and giving Roger a hug as well when he dips down to say goodbye to the baby. I wave to them as they pass out the door, Henry looking after them as they go.

“Will you stay at least, Henry?” I ask, leaning back against Sinclair.

“I’m afraid I should take my leave too,” he says as Rafe pushes to his feet and totters over him, reaching out his chubby arms and begging to be picked up. Henry laughs and obliges, lifting my little meatball into his lap. “That is, if this one will let me.”

“If he just sits on you,” I say dryly, “you’ll be too heavy to roll out of here.”

“A fate I will happily accept,” Henry murmurs, turning Rafe on his lap and hugging him close, pressing his cheek to Rafe’s dark hair. “He is so like his father at this age. It’s like having my little boy back.”

My heart fills to hear Henry talk about Rafe that way, and I feel Sinclair’s own swell of emotion down our bond.

“That one, though,” Henry says, looking over at Ariel asleep in my arms. “She is very precious to me as well, because she is so unfamiliar.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, tilting my head in curiosity.

“I never had a daughter,” he sighs, staring at my little girl with her little fuzz of golden-white hair. Then he flicks his eyes to Sinclair. “Your mother and I tried for another – she wanted a little girl very badly, you know. But the Goddess decided that two was enough.”

“I didn’t know that,” Sinclair says, his voice a little thick with his emotion.

“Yes,” Henry says, raising his eyebrows as his gaze again falls to Ariel. “So, this one is the fulfilment of a wish made long ago for a little girl Sinclair. I always wondered what she looked like.”

I clench my teeth against the pricking of tears against my eyes, not wanting Henry to think that I'm sad or that I pity him. It's just – I never knew he wanted that, never knew my sweet daughter would mean so much to him.

“Do you know,” Henry says, cocking his head, and I lean forward, listening intently. “I never thought she'd be a blonde.”

I burst into laughter at this, and so does my mate, and I wipe away the little tears that spill out from my eyes. “Well, we don't know if she's going to stay blonde,” I say, grinning and shaking my head. “Her hair could get darker –“

“No, Ella,” Henry says, raising his eyes to me. “It is clear that this one is your daughter. She'll have her mother's beauty, which includes your unique hair. She's a Sinclair in name...but she's her mother born again.”

“She's got to have some part of me,” Sinclair murmurs, a little jealous, leaning forward to peer at her.

“Time will tell,” Henry says, leaning back in his chair. Rafe burbles something, looking up at his grandfather, who grins down at him and runs a hand over his head. “Either way, I am very glad to be their grandfather. I'm so pleased I'll get to see them grow, Goddess willing.”

I nod, agreeing to the sentiment, thinking that the children are lucky to have such an eager and dedicated grandfather.

“I do wish,” Henry says, I think a little lost in his thoughts now, “that I were more able to play with them – could participate more in helping you raise them by getting down on the floor, running, walking. But,” he shrugs, “when the children are big enough to stand on the back of the chair, at least they'll always have someone to cart them around –“

“Oh my god,” I say, the words spilling out of my mouth. “Oh my god,” I sit up straight, staring at Henry, my eyes flicking to his legs – because honestly, I don't even notice his chair anymore, or think of him at all as someone whose abilities are hindered.

Or of me as someone who is able to do anything about it.

Henry looks at me, his eyebrows going up in surprise as I hastily – but carefully – pass Ariel into Sinclair's arms, my mate looking at me curiously too.

“Henry,” I breathe, reaching for him, taking his hand. “Why didn't you say anything sooner? Why didn't – I'm so sorry – why didn't I think of it –“

“What are you talking about, Ella?” he asks, frowning at me a little. Even Rafe gives a curious little squeak.

“I’m so stupid,” I say, closing my eyes, frantically seeking my gift. “If I can heal you, why didn’t anyone –“

“Oh, Ella,” Henry says, drawing his hand out of mine. Shocked, I open my eyes, looking into his own. “Ella, my dear, I don’t think it works like that.”

“What?” I ask, surprised.

“I don’t think your gift can heal what has already healed,” he says, shaking his head at me. “A disability like this – it is not an injury. Your gift, from what I’ve learned from your using it, heals what is wrong with my body. But what happened to me so long ago – I’ve healed from it. My body is just different now - I’m not sick.”

“Oh,” I say, the logic of that hitting me like a slap in the face. I bite my lip though, dropping my eyes. “Well, would you let me try?”

“Of course, my dear,” he murmurs, giving me back his hand.

And so I close my eyes, and access my gift, and breathe softly as it sweeps through Henry. It knits up a few little things that I think are natural with age, but as it moves through him...

He’s right.

There’s nothing sick or injured about Henry’s legs or his spine. The wounds – they healed long ago – perhaps not in the way we would have liked but...his body already did the work my gift would have done, as best it could.

Disappointment must be all over my face, because when I open my eyes Henry clucks his tongue and moves his chair closer, cupping my cheek in his palm. “Thank you for wanting to try, Ella. But really – I am not unhappy with my life in this chair. I am a blessed man – and as much as I would have liked to run with my grandchildren...well, I’m a bit old for that anymore anyway, aren’t I?”

“You are not,” I say, scrunching my nose at him.

“Well,” Henry laughs, grinning at me as Sinclair sits forward, pressing himself close to my side. “At least I can roll with them, which is probably just as good.”

I smile at him, nodding and leaning back to rest my head on Sinclair’s shoulder as I do.

“You’re going to be the best grandfather, Henry,” I say, sighing a little as I smile at him. “They’re lucky to have you.”

“And I them,” he says, grinning down at Rafe and giving my son a wink. “What do you think, little boy? Should we roll to the kitchens? Get a snack?”

In response to his fifth favorite word – only behind Mama, Papa, Jesse, and breakfast – Rafe’s little face lights up and he throws his hands in the air, giving an excited squeak. We all laugh and Henry raises an eyebrow at us. When Sinclair nods his assent, Rafe and his grandfather roll away, off on a little adventure.

And I lean back against my mate, holding my lucky little girl tight in my arms.

Chapter 498 – Baptizing the Princess

Chapter 498 - Accidental Surrogate for Alpha

Ella

Three weeks later – Ariel was born under a waning quarter moon, not a new moon like her brother and her cousin – I stand anxiously in the woods, my little girl held tight in my arms.

“I’m sensing some anxiety,” Cora says, grinning at me with a little too much glee as she comes up to my side, dressed in a gorgeous silver gown, Jesse awake and interested on her hip.

“I wasn’t anxious like this when Rafe went in,” I sigh, reaching out to touch Jesse’s nose with my fingertip, making him giggle. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, I was anxious – but it’s this one’s complicated little portent that has me all worked up.”

“I know,” Cora says, wrinkling her nose at me wickedly. “I can’t wait – the payback is real –“

“Don’t you dare,” I say, glaring at her and pointing a finger at her. “You’re trying to deliberately jinx my daughter just because your Jesse has some weird shadow magic coming his way –“

“I would never!” Cora says, laughing and swatting my finger away. “I just like teasing you, Ella. Hear that, Ariel?” she says, leaning over to grin at her goddaughter. “I hope that your future comes out nice and safe and boring, for your mother’s sake.”

“Oh, hold your tongue,” I mutter, scowling and moving Ariel away from her aunt. “I don’t want her life to be boring, I just want...” I sigh, looking down at the little girl who has my whole heart. “I just want it all to be very good, and for her to be safe...but also to have some adventures along the way.”

“A big ask,” Sinclair says, ambling over to my side with a glass of champagne in one hand, Rafe perched on his hip. “Especially for a little girl named Baby Trouble.”

I grin when I hear the nickname, considering that...well, it's a little bit true, even if the name so far has been a bit of a joke.

Honestly, we've called her Ariel very little – she's baby trouble, most of the time. Or Princess Trouble. Or Princess Baby Bubble Trouble. Or whatever combination thereof inspires us at the moment. And, well, she hasn't really lived up to it – not yet. Rafe – he was a tough newborn, at least for the first two weeks. But Ariel?

God, she's been a little bit of a dream.

I can only hope that her nickname continues to be ironic for the rest of her days, but I know that's too much to hope for.

Rafe eagerly leans forward from his father's hip, reaching for his sister, spitting out an excited series of syllables that all start with "ba!"

"You like your sister, little guy?" Cora says, laughing and putting a hand on Rafe's chest to keep him from excitedly spilling out of his father's arms.

"We think he's trying to say baby," I say, grinning at my boy, pleasure and pride filling me from head to toe. I mean – I know every mom is proud of her children. But Rafe – he really is such a sweet baby and a clever boy, always wanting to be close to me, close to Ariel.

And his dad too, of course – but Rafe and me? We've really got a special bond.

"All right," Roger says, his own baby on his arm and glass of champagne in his hand, just like his brother. "Almost time! Are we ready to do this?"

"Don't talk about it like a sports match, Roger," I say, raising my chin at him jokingly. "It's a sacred ritual. Please act with the gravity it deserves."

"It's our third one, Ella," Roger says, playfully rolling his eyes at me. "It's getting old –"

"You're fated to be the father of like six kids, Roger," I say, rolling my eyes at him right back. "Tell me that when we get to your sixth baptism –"

"At that point we're just going to wander into the back yard in our pajamas," he murmurs, nodding first towards the baby in my arms and then to Cora, silently indicating that I should hand her over. "We're going to drink beer and hold the baby out to the moon on a dish towel, use a plastic baby pool instead of the sacred pond –"

"We are not," Cora scoffs, gently taking Ariel into her arms as Sinclair and I laugh. Roger grins, leaning forward to kiss me on the cheek before passing Jesse to me.

"You know I'm kidding, right, Ells?" he whispers.

I smile at my brother-in-law and gently pat his cheek. “When in doubt, Roger,” I sigh, “I always assume you’re kidding.”

“This is why you’re my favorite sister-in-law,” he says, ruffling Jesse’s hair before turning towards the Goddess’ priestess, who begins to call everyone to order. “Now, let’s get this party started!”

Cora

I smile down at my perfect little niece, who is looking around the dark forest with interest. “Ready to meet your granny, little girl?” I whisper to her, holding her close and kissing her forehead. “She’s excited to meet you, she told me so.”

Ariel gives a little squeak, which sounds so much like a response that it makes me laugh.

Roger laughs too, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. “Remember the last time we were out here?” he murmurs, and I look up at him.

“Yup,” I say, grinning. “We fought the whole time. I was completely ready to shove you into that pond.”

“Oh, right back at you,” he says, nodding fervently. “It was either that, or grab you and kiss you – I didn’t know which I wanted more. Maybe both – shove you into the pond, dive in after you, grab you, kiss you until we both drowned...”

I laugh, shaking my head. “Well, we know which one you settled on, in the end.”

“Well you were crying so much,” he says, rolling his eyes in pretend exhaustion, “I didn’t know how else to get you to stop –“

“Oh, you idiot,” I sigh, laughing and stopping for a second, wrapping my hand around the lapel of his suit jacket and pulling him to me. “Can’t you just for once say something nice?”

“What do you want to hear, Cora?” he asks, smirking down at me and taking my face between his hands. “That it was the happiest moment of my life to that point? That I’d been waiting to kiss you for months, and that afterwards I had to actively stop myself from grabbing you and kissing you every time you walked into a room?”

My smile grows. “Something like that,” I murmur, and I tug on his coat just a little, pulling him down for our second kiss in this forest – which is just as good as the first.

“I love you so much, Cora,” he sighs when he pulls away, his eyelids heavy as he stares down into my face.

“I love you too, Roger,” I say, smiling up at him, passing every ounce of love I feel down our bond so he knows I mean it. Because we tease – but god, do I love this man.

Roger leans in for another kiss, but a silver light flares at the edge of my vision.

“Oh,” I say, my eyebrows going up as I adjust the baby in my arms and turn towards the light. “I think mom is getting impatient.”

“Well then,” Roger says, his arm still around my shoulder, “let’s not keep the Goddess waiting.”

So together, my mate and I carry our little goddaughter forward to the edge of the pool that forms through the trees. I smile to see that this one is different – surrounded by rocks this time, a tiny waterfall splashing into it at the edge. Secretive and peaceful, like a hidden hot spring.

Roger nods to me and I step forward, holding unwrapping the baby and holding her out into the moonlight that floods into the grove from above. And then he and I say the sacred words, dedicating our sweet Ariel to her grandmother the Goddess, pledging to love and protect her all our lives.

The moonlight grows brighter as we speak, and I feel a warmth and contentment fill me that I know comes from my mother, who is truly pleased with her granddaughter.

When the words are done, our attention shifts, because – as it did before – the premonition starts to take shape in the air above the water. And as we watch, Roger and my eyes go wide.

Chapter 499 – A Story to Come

Chapter 499 - Accidental Surrogate for Alpha

Cora

The images of Ariel’s future come in quick flashes, and somehow I get the impression that the Goddess is eager to share these glimpses of her life.

The ones that come first are what I sort of expected, especially after seeing some images of Rafe’s childhood and hearing about the ones that Ella and Sinclair saw during Jesse’s baptism. But these ones focus on an angelic little girl with rose-gold hair who is just...ridiculously happy.

My ears fill almost instantly with tears to see her running and playing with the boys who are so clearly Rafe and Jesse. Ariel – she’s always at the center of their games, always laughing so heartily her eyes are barely open above her rosy cheeks. In one flash, Jesse’s climbed up onto the branch of a tree and is reaching a hand down for her as Rafe boosts her up from below. In another, Ariel is cuddled between her brother and her cousin, all wrapped up in a big blanket as

the three sit around a campfire, their eyes wide and bright as they roast marshmallows and look with awe up at Roger, who is clearly in the midst of telling a scary story.

Roger laughs beside me at the sight and I press myself close to them as we get more insight into her life as she grows older, her teenager years as she becomes the Nation's princess, as she grows into a beautiful, graceful young woman – but still one full of pranks, running through the halls of the palace with her brother and Jesse chasing behind.

And then I gasp, a little, to see our little girl dressed as a bride –

My hand goes to my mouth – because she looks so young – and so afraid –

My stomach drops when I see her what looks like a moment later, her back pressed to a door as she sobs in her wedding gown as two young men who are so clearly my son and my nephew jump to her side.

The images move faster than I can truly process them next, but my hand falls from my mouth, and my jaw drops in awe as I realize that –

That she didn't get married after all, but instead that she ran, that she's...

She's with Jesse and Rafe, as they attend some kind of military school – dressed up in fatigues, her hair tucked up beneath a cap, looking for anything like...like a boy...

"Oh my god," I mutter, and then I laugh because it just gets stranger after that –

Ariel, mixing potions in a chemistry class, her eyes going wide as one goes awry and explodes in front of her –

Ariel, an expert sniper, crouching on top of a tower and hitting the bullseye of a target that must be half a mile away –

Ariel, curled up in a chair by the fire, sitting in the lap of a very handsome young man whose jaw could cut glass and whose adorable dimples are –

And joy swells in me, because I know it instantly, that that boy – he's her mate –

But then I gasp again because the image changes – and Ariel is looking up at another young man – powerfully built, scowling down at her in some hallway made of stone, but she shoves him, hard, and whips a finger up to point in his face, a defiant snarl on her lips, looking so much like her mother –

And even as a shocked little laugh spills from my mouth, anxiety twists in my stomach, because I know...

I know just as much as I did with the first boy, that this one – he's her mate too.

I can't help it then, I look down at my little baby niece, who burbles and looks up at the moon –

Two fated mates, just like her father...

And suddenly, what the Goddess said to me in my living room that day so many months ago...

It makes...so much sense.

My eyes move back to the images, which fly by even faster now – too swift to catch them all – and I see of our children training hard, laughing together, working to build their lives and help each other and serve our nation –

The last image, though, lingers.

Ariel, with Rafe and Jesse on either side – as they always are – and her two mates behind her. All standing together on a battlefield with Ariel at the center, magic welling between her hands and passing to her brother, to her cousin.

Their faces are serious as they look at something gathering above them – some force I cannot see.

And then...

The image disperses. It disappears.

Roger and I stay still for a long moment, and I'm only shaken out of it by a little mewling cry from Ariel's tiny mouth.

"Poor baby, you must be cold," I murmur, pulling her close and wrapping her up in her blanket. Ariel tucks her little head against me, closing her eyes and opening her mouth in a wide yawn.

"Wow," Roger murmurs as he stares down at our niece. "Wow, I was not expecting that..."

I laugh a little, looking up at him and shaking my head. "Neither was I."

"Damn, Ariel," he says, laughing and running a shocked hand through his hair. "Looks like you've got one hell of a story to tell."

"Come on, baby," I say, laughing and shaking my head at her. "Let's go tell your mom...only the things she absolutely needs to know."

"Really?" Roger asks, raising his eyebrows at me.

"What are aunties for?" I say, shrugging and smirking at him. "A girl's got to have someone to keep her secrets."

He laughs, wrapping an arm around me as we turn back. But before we go I cast one more look over my shoulder, smiling up at the moon and sending a mental thank-you to my mother for her gift, for this glimpse of the future.

And the moonlight flares, just once, and I smile. Because I know she heard.

Ella

“Oh, they’re back, they’re back!” I gasp, shoving my half-drunk glass of champagne onto a table and rushing forward when I see Cora and Roger emerging from the dark of the woods with Ariel sleeping in Cora’s arms. Our gathered family and friends shout a cheer, welcoming them back.

Cora smiles at me, her expression warm and rich as I hurry to her.

“Tell me everything,” I gasp, taking my baby back and cooing to her as I rest her little head in the crook of my elbow, gazing down at her perfect, sleeping face.

“Well wait for me,” Sinclair says, laughing as he comes to join our little circle with Jesse on one hip and Rafe on the other. “Honestly, Ella, I’m her parent too –“

“You should have been faster then,” I say, rolling my eyes at him.

“I’m carrying two kids –“

But I just ignore him and turning back to Cora. “Go! Spill!”

“I don’t know, Ells,” she says, smiling at me and reaching to take Jesse from Sinclair. “Honestly, as a mother? I’m not sure you want to know.”

My face goes pale with shock and terror and Roger scowls at his mate.

“Cora, don’t say it like that,” he says, giving her a half-hearted glare before reaching out a hand and placing it on my shoulder. “Seriously, Ella, it was all fine – there’s nothing bad. I mean, both Jesse and Rafe showed us that there’s a war coming – and that affects Ariel’s life, as it will all of ours. But seriously – all good news from the Goddess. She’s going to have an incredible life.”

“Really?” I gasp, holding my daughter tight, and looking between my sister and her mate. “You wouldn’t lie to me? It’s really all okay?”

“It is,” Cora says, laughing and reaching out to gently touch my cheek.

I exhale a huge sigh of relief, looking down at my little girl. “You had me scared, baby trouble,” I murmur, tracing a finger over her soft little cheek. But then my mind traces back to what Cora said. “Wait,” I say, my head whipping back up. “What wouldn’t I want to know as a mother!?”

“I mean, I’ll tell you sis – but aren’t there some things a mom should be in the dark about?” Cora asks.

I tilt my head back and groan, honestly not knowing. “I don’t know, Cora – are there!?”

She laughs and I look first at Sinclair, who shrugs, and then back at my sister.

“Come on,” Roger says, nodding at the crowds of people waiting to congratulate us and at the small table of refreshments. “Let’s decide this over some champagne.”

Sinclair nods at me and I sigh, moving with my family and pondering my choices as we accept the congratulations of our friends and let Henry hold the baby for a while, filling him in on the good omens that the Goddess has given us about her future.

“All right,” I say, sidling up to Cora, my eyes on the baby in her grandfather’s arms. “If you think it’s going to stress me out...don’t tell me. But...give me a hint. Is it...like, illness? Or is she lonely? Oh, I really don’t want her to be lonely. Or –“

“It’s none of that, Ella,” Cora says, her eyes sparkling as she smiles at me. “She’s a really happy kid, and her early life – she really loves it. She and Jesse and Rafe are all best friends and they stay together through their twenties, at least.”

“So,” I say, cocking my head and studying her. “What...”

“Let’s just say,” Cora says, her grin widening, “that your little girl? Her love life is...tumultuous.”

“Oh my god,” I groan, but I’m laughing as I cover my face with my hands and tilt it back to the sky. Because that? A little heartbreak, a little drama? I mean, Cora’s right – I’m not sure I want to know the details. But that I can handle.

As I pull my hands away from my face, I look upwards through the trees where the moon peeks through the leaves. “Oh mom,” I say, shaking my head a little. “What do you have in store for my little girl?”

“A lot,” Cora says, laughing and sipping at her champagne, Jesse leaning his sleepy head against her shoulder.

“So...” I say, stepping close and whispering – not really wanting Sinclair to hear because something in me tells me that this Alpha dad is not ready to hear about his three-week-old daughter’s future love life – “is she...did you see? Does she have a mate?”

Cora’s smile is bright, but a little wicked. I turn my head, curious. “Yes, Ella,” she says, nodding happily, “your little girl...she’s mated.”

I give a little squeak of joy, my face bursting into a grin as I step closer. “Is he...is he cute?!”

“Really cute,” Cora says, stepping close to share the secret and wrinkling her nose as she dishes. “Like really cute, Ella – big time –“

I squeak again, turning in a happy little circle. “So, did you get to see...I mean, like a timeline for when she meets him!?”

Cora just shakes her head, though. “I don’t think I should say anymore,” she says, giving a shrug. “I mean, I will if you want me to, Ella, but...” she turns her smile now on our little girl. “I think...maybe just let her live her life. Don’t you want to be surprised?”

“Yes,” I sigh, leaning against my sister’s other shoulder with a scowl, even though happiness races through me. “I hate it when you’re all wise.”

“It’s the burden I bear,” she sighs, resting her head against mine. “Because if you don’t know, that means you don’t have to keep the secret from Sinclair. Because if he knows?” she blows out a breath. “Ella, if he knew what I know, he’d lock her up in a tower. Like a princess in a fairytale.”

“Damn,” I say, pursing my lips, even though I can’t help being excited for my girl’s future – even if I’m also very willing to save all of that drama for twenty years. “Baby trouble is right.”

“Baby trouble,” Cora says with a sigh, nodding, “is absolutely right.”

Chapter 500 – Happily Ever

Chapter 500 - Accidental Surrogate for Alpha

Ella

“Nope,” Sinclair says, heaving himself out of [bed](#) and grabbing his phone off the bedside table as he does. “I can’t live like this, Ella – I’m calling Roger, I’ve got to know –“

“Dominic!” I say, laughing and grabbing for him, trying to catch the edge of his pajamas and failing because I’ve got a sleeping baby in my arms and another pressed warmly to my side. “Don’t, come back!”

“I just!” he says, pressing the phone to his ear and running a frantic hand through his hair. “You tell me that there’s drama in her life, but that it’s no big deal, and that it’s girl stuff? What the hell am I supposed to do with that for the next twenty years!?”

“You’re supposed to sit down,” I say, laughing harder now and patting the mattress on his side of the bed, still warm from his delicious body heat. “Honestly, if this is the way you react after all of our daughters’ baptisms, we’re not having them anymore –“

Sinclair sighs and pulls the phone from his face, slumping back down on the bed. “Fine,” he sighs. “Just boys, after this.”

“Mmkay, sweetie,” I murmur, even though my mind flashes back to the vision my mother’s priests gave me so long ago. We’ve got two more coming I think – a boy and a girl. But who knows what their own futures hold.

“I’m glad you came to your senses and hung up the phone,” I murmur, scooting myself and my two children closer to him, my voice a little smug.

“I didn’t,” Sinclair mutters, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. “Roger just didn’t pick up.”

I grin at him, shaking my head. “Why can’t you just take good news for what it is? Human families don’t get any insight when their children are born, and Roger and Cora told us that Ariel has an incredible life. The drama – it’s going to happen whether or not you know what it is.”

Family vacation packages

“Well, you know what it is,” he says, sending me a rueful little glare.

“I do not,” I say, laughing and resting my head on his shoulder. “Cora knows, and she has sworn Roger to secrecy. Ariel’s life – it’s her business. I think we should be just grateful that we know our two children are going to grow to be healthy and happy.”

“I know,” Sinclair sighs, pulling me closer, relaxing and letting himself feel his exhaustion, finally, as the morning light streams around the curtains that we’ve pulled shut so we can get some sleep. He turns his head and kisses my hair after a moment, which makes me smile as I look down at my baby girl, my thumb tracing long strokes along my beautiful son’s cheek.

We stay that way for a long moment, peace and contentment radiating through the four of us and along our bonds.

“Dominic,” I say quietly, my mind turning softly. “What do you think? If you had the chance...would you want to know? What your godmother saw, what was all laid out for you by the Goddess?”

“What do you mean?” he murmurs, and I turn my head to look at him, smiling when I see that his eyes are moving between our two perfect kids.

“I mean,” I say after a long moment, and his green eyes shift to me. “If you...had a chance. To know that...your first mating was going to eventually fail. But that there was me, on the other

end of it. And all the confusion at the start when we met and I was already pregnant with your kid, and everything we went through, and the two beautiful children at the end –“

“Alongside a wonderful partnership,” he murmurs, tugging me close and kissing my cheek, “which, honestly, is my favorite part –“

“Even more than the kids!?” I gasp, my mouth falling open a bit.

“I mean, the kids,” he says, shrugging as if they’re not much, which makes me laugh. But then he goes a little rigid as he realizes something, raising his eyes to glare at me a bit. “Wait, are you saying you like the kids more than me!?”

My laughter bursts from me now as I shake my head at him. “No, Dominic. I think – I mean, I think we both mean the same thing. It’s our little family that results from all of it, and each part of it is individually wonderful, and of course you are at the center of all of it for me. You’re – you’re my mate, my love.” I shake my head, smiling at him. “The center of my universe. But the whole universe we’ve built, Dominic – it’s all wonderful.”

“That’s precisely what I mean, and how I feel,” he says with a steady sigh, tilting my face up to press a soft kiss to my mouth. “You just say it way better than me.”

“Well,” I say, shaking my hair back over my shoulders haughtily. “I have a way with words.”

“Mmhmm,” he hums, dropping his head a little to press a kiss to the underside of my jaw and then to my neck, sending a shiver through me. “Amongst other things.”

I smile and wait for him to lift his head again, bringing his gaze back to mine. “So?” I say, pushing, truly wanting his answer. “What do you think? If your godmother saw all of this – would you have wanted to know?”

He takes a deep breath, thinking it through. “Well,” he says, contemplative, “on one hand, it would have saved me a great deal of stress and sadness at some points in my life, to know that this was waiting for me – that this was the true, wonderful hand the Goddess was waiting to deal for me.”

He passes some memories down the bond to me in a flash of explanation for what he means when he says a great deal of stress and sadness. I see the loss of his mother, the years he spent tortured, pining for his first mate when she was with Roger, and then their tumultuous marriage, the wanting a child and never being blessed with one, the mating bond he eventually rejected. Then the years after that of just feeling...empty. And then of meeting me, and wanting me, and wanting our child – but not knowing what it meant, to have a child with a woman he thought was human...

I nod, truly understanding. “It would have helped me to,” I say. And then I do the same, passing my own memories to him. The horrible years with only Cora by my side, when we each had to play mother and sister to each other. The horrible unknowing years when I was at my darkest

point, and then my terrible ex-boyfriend, who I had truly thought I loved – but who betrayed me so deeply. The terrible longing for a child I thought I would never have...

“But,” Sinclair says, staring deep into my eyes and passing the warm balm of his love down our bond to me, wiping away those terrible memories. “As much as it would have been good to know what was waiting, Ella...it’s important to me that we chose this, and we fought for it – every step of the way. That it wasn’t just some fate that the Goddess gave to us. That even if it was fated...we wanted it, we wanted each other. We’d have picked this life anyway, even if it wasn’t fate.”

Tears slip down my cheeks as I nod at him, because now he’s the one saying it just right.

“I’d pick you, Dominic,” I say, my voice shaking with my love for him. “In a thousand lifetimes, a thousand chances to make the same choices – I’d do it all again.”

He shakes his head at me as tears fill his own eyes and he leans forward, pulling me against him while somehow miraculously managing not to crush our children between us as he holds me tight in his arms.

“So, I guess it wouldn’t matter,” he murmurs against my hair as I sniff back my tears and nod. “Knowing or not? I’ve got you now, and our wonderful life, and it’s worth everything we paid to get here. You’re my everything, trouble.”

And I laugh, pulling back a little and shaking my head at him and giving him a smile even. “I think we’re obliged now,” I say, nodding down at our little girl, “to pass the ‘trouble’ nickname fully down to Ariel.”

“Nah,” Sinclair says, smirking at me as he moves his thumbs over my cheeks, wiping away all of my tears. “She might be baby trouble, but you’ll always be my trouble. And you’ll always be mine.”

And I nod, and smile softly at him, because...well, because that feels just right.

“And what about this one?” I say, running my hand over Rafe’s soft hair, smiling down at his little body pressed close to me, his mouth just lightly open, his long lashes dark against his chubby cheeks. “He’s not trouble?”

“This little guy?” Sinclair says, grinning as he reaches out a hand to rub his son’s back. “No way – he’s too sweet to be much trouble. He’s going to be the best kid.”

“You’re going to have to teach him to act tough,” I say with a little laugh, “or everyone’s going to see right through him and take advantage of his soft heart.”

“No problem,” Sinclair says with a grin. “We’ll build him some steely armor to protect that sweet heart of his.”

I smile too as I look at my son, but my mind is on his father, who is so much the same. My sweetheart Alpha – the scariest and most powerful man in the world, probably, but also the kindest person I’ve ever met. A good King, a better mate – a wonderful father.

God, how did I get to be so lucky?

“I love you, Dominic,” I sigh, resting my head against him and closing my eyes.

“I love you too, Ella,” he murmurs in reply, his arm still holding me tight as we both drift off into a doze, our much-loved, long-desired perfect son sleeping between us. Our wonderful, brand new baby girl still curled against the crook of my arm.

And, even though I know I shouldn’t let myself doze like this – that I should put Rafe in his crib, and Ariel in her bassinet –

That Dominic and I should lay down and get some proper sleep stretched out so we don’t wake up with aching necks –

That I’m going to be up in twenty minutes anyway when Ariel cries, needing to be fed or changed –

Well. I just let myself fall into the doze anyway. Because everything is just so perfect right now in this moment that not a single part of me wants to disturb it.

And so, curled warm against my mate with my arms wrapped around the children I always dreamed I’d have but thought I never could, I sleep in complete peace, content in the knowledge that when I do wake up?

It’s going to be the start of the rest of my wonderful life - one I’m so thrilled I get to live with my Alpha by my side.

THE END