

Accidental Surrogate for Alpha

Chapter 203

#Chapter 203 – Mother

Ella

After shopping with Cora and napping away the afternoon with the pups in the nursery, I find my way to Henry's rooms. The guards told me he just returned from the refugee camp, but when he opens the door for me he's all smiles. I give him a hug and a kiss on the cheek, and he welcomes me in. "You wouldn't happen to be in the mood for an afternoon snack, would you?" He inquires knowingly. "Because personally I'm starving."

I'm fairly certain this is a plot to make sure I'm feeding myself well, but my stomach growls loudly as I find a seat on the couch. Still, I try to sound demure as I shrug, "I could eat."

Henry laughs before calling down to the kitchens and ordering a small feast. As we eat he tells me all about his day at the refugee camp and I, in turn, share my frustration with my sudden celebrity and Cora's news about Roger. He can only shake his head. "That boy has made some bad choices in his life, but I've been very proud of him these last few months. I never thought I'd see the day that my sons would repair their relationship. You know that's down to you, don't you?" He asks warmly, an affectionate twinkle in his eye.

"Oh, don't say that. I'm so tired of getting credit for things that just so happened to occur in my general vicinity." I complain, slumping back and rubbing my full belly. "Not that I don't appreciate the compliments... I just... perfection is an impossible thing to live up to... and I am so far from perfect it's laughable. I don't want to end up with a reputation that I'm destined to fall short of – I'm only human after all." A moment after the words leave my mouth, I realize they aren't true. "I mean, not human, but I'm just a person like everyone else."

"No one said you were perfect, Ella." Henry reminds me pointedly. "I said that you brought Dominic and Roger back together – which is true. If you read more into that then I think you're projecting at best, and giving yourself too much credit at worst."

I can't help but laugh. "Fair enough. I suppose no one has said I'm perfect... I just... I can see the hope and the expectation in their eyes. The refugees, the servants, random people on the street... even my guards. Everyone is looking at me as though I'm the solution to this war, the ruined secrecy pact... but I'm the same person I was yesterday. I don't have the answers to these problems." Seeming to sense there's more, Henry stays silent, and I catch a rogue tear slipping from the corner of my eye. "I'm terrified that I'm going to fail them all, Henry."

Henry wheels around the coffee table, which bears the wreckage of our feast, and takes my hand in his. "Dearheart, that is part of being a pack leader. Every Alpha and every Luna has had the same fear, and I know it feels overwhelming, but it's also your strength. Duty to your people, the desire to do right by them will keep you centered, it's what will guide you forward through the hardest days of your reign. Now, I know the problems you're facing are a lot bigger than what most Luna's have to deal with, but I promise you aren't alone in feeling this way. That's why the responsibility is so grave."

His words ring true, especially as I think about Sinclair. I know my mate struggles with the incredible weight of caring for all those in his territory, of living up to his title and doing his best for his people, but it still feels different to me.

"But most Alpha's and Lunas have some idea what they're doing." I argue weakly. "They know this world, they've learned and prepared their whole lives from watching their predecessors. They know the history, the society and all of it's challenges. I'm not even a decent ambassador to human society because my experiences were pretty damn niche."

Henry smiles tenderly, "I'm going to give you some advice that will help you as both parent and pack leader. There are countless days ahead where you will feel uncertain, where you're overwhelmed and exhausted and all you can do is pray that you're not messing up your child or your people in some irreparable way."

"Is this supposed to be comforting?" I squeak, cradling my belly protectively and wishing I could keep my son in the safe haven of my womb until this wretched war is over.

Henry chuckles good-naturedly. "The advice is just to keep putting one foot in front of the other. If you step back and think about everything at once, the weight will crush you. Just take it one day at a time, and before you know it, you'll realize that you had what it takes all along. It won't be easy – but I promise you, nothing is more rewarding."

"Thank you." I profess tearily, reaching forward to hug him. "That isn't even what I came to talk to you about, but I guess I needed to get it out."

"Exactly." He purrs, patting my back. "Poor little mother, I'm sorry you're dealing with all this alone."

"But I'm not alone." I correct him with a watery smile. "I have a family for the first time in my life – and I don't mean the one who gave me up." I clarify, wiping my eyes. "I'm so grateful to you all. I admit, it's been one hell of a learning curve to figure out how to talk about my feelings, but I have to admit Dominic was right – it helps." I glance at my father-in-law. "Don't tell him I said he was right."

"I wouldn't dream of it." Henry promises, swiping his fingers over his lips and throwing away the key. "So what did you want to talk to me about?"

"Oh." I say, my face falling. I'm half tempted to brush it aside and save this conversation for another day. We've ended on such a lovely note, and I'm not eager to mess it all up. Still, when I glance up at Henry he's giving me an expectant look like he knows exactly what I'm thinking and won't let me get away with it. Not for the first time, I see where my mate gets his bossiness. Taking a deep breath, I forge ahead. "Dominic told me who my parents are."

Henry nods in understanding, "It must have been quite a shock... Are you disappointed, that you won't be able to meet your father?"

I shake my head fiercely, squeezing his hand as hard as I can. "I already have the only father I need." I proclaim, and suddenly I'm not the only one who has tears in my eyes. "But I'm horrified to think that my – that Xavier might have ripped your family apart." I confess, my tears returning. "That he stole your mate – Dominic and Roger's mother. I don't want to belong to his bloodline."

Henry clucks and brushes my hair back from my face. "None of us can change where we come from, Ella." He states softly. "But your upbringing taught you a lesson most of us don't learn until much later in life: the family you choose can be a thousand times better than the one you were born into. Blood may be thicker than water – but so are a lot of things... mayonnaise, frosting, gravy..."

A giggle breaks through my heavy emotions, and Henry smiles in return. "The point is that your father doesn't have to define who you are – you have more power to decide that than most." He continues, turning my chin up to look into my face. "I knew your parents fairly well, and I can tell you right now that I don't see any of Xavier in you – I never have."

"And my mother?" I inquire shakily, not sure whether I truly want the answer to this question.

"Your mother was one of the kindest women I've ever met." Henry shares. "She was unlucky in her fated mate, but like you, she loved her pack, and she dreamed of children. It can't have been easy for her to give you up."

"Do you think he knew – Xavier, I mean?" I ask. "The Goddess said he wanted an heir... would he have even cared about a girl? Would she have just told him the child died and kept the secret for herself?"

"Xavier was much like Aimon." Henry reveals, referring to Damon's father. "He was a ruthless king, though his bloodline was much older and stronger than the Tyrant's. He was willing to sacrifice a few for what he believed was the good of the pack, but he wasn't without a conscience. He wasn't mad. If he knew the Goddess had ordained it that you be taken into hiding, he never would have disobeyed her. If anything it would have given him great pride to think his child would be so important down the line."

I nod, grappling with so much knew information. "Dominic also said... he said my mother is alive."

"She devoted herself to the Goddess once Xavier died." Henry confirms, "Which makes a lot of sense now that we know about you. I'm not sure where she went. But the Goddess's temples tend to be in very remote, sacred places."

"Do I look like her?" I inquire, feeling strangely vulnerable now.

Henry purses his lips. "I have a feeling that the parent you take after most is the one you've already met."

It takes me a moment to realize he's referring to the Goddess, and I have to blink a few times, trying to recall the memory. I want to say I disagree – after all, my hair isn't made of starlight and my eyes are not the endless cosmos. But the more I think about it, the more I can see similarities – albeit very dulled and downplayed ones. My pearly white skin, eyes and hair in shades of gold I've never seen on another person, my light, willowy limbs...

Still, the Goddess wasn't the one who wanted me. She might have needed me, in the same way Xavier needed a son to carry his legacy. But my mother, the one who carried and birthed me... she's the one who wanted me.

"I want to find her." I tell Henry suddenly. "Do you think we can track down the temple where my mother became a devotee?"

His warm gaze observes me with more understanding than I can bear. "We can try. And we'll keep trying until we succeed."