

# **The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy**

## **Read Chapter 111 - 130**

### **Chapter 111**

#### **Chapter 111**

Chapter 0216

“I’m going to kill your brother,” dad says, shaking his head as he looks me over, frowning at the blood all over me and narrowing his eyes as he gives me a suspicious sniff. But if he smells Jackson or Luca, he doesn’t say anything.

“Go easy on Rafe, dad,” I murmur, raising a hand to run it fondly over his stubbled cheek. “It was all Jesse’s idea anyway.”

Mom and Cora laugh at this but dad continues frowning, not ready to joke. “I could have lost you, Ariel,” he whispers, his voice tight. “Do you – do you know what that would have done to me?”

“Don’t, dad,” I say, shaking my head, my lip trembling as tears start to threaten my eyes again. My dad – he’s so strong, so steady – seeing him emotional like this? God, I can’t handle it – not at all. “I’m perfectly fine – nothing happened

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“But it could have happened,” he whispers, devastated even by the thought of it. “It almost did – Ariel, from what Jesse said, you almost died

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The tears start to slip down my cheeks and my lips turn down in a desperate frown, because I hate that I did this to him hate that he was this worried.

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“Easy, Dominic,” mom murmurs, reaching out a hand and placing it softly on dad’s knee. Don’t make the girl feel guiltier than she already does. She’s had a rough day.”

Dad glances at mom for a moment and then heaves a deep sigh, forcing himself, I think, to move on from it.

“Well,” he says, giving me a steady nod as he takes a deep breath. “At least it’s all over, now.”

I nod, agreeing, likewise grateful that the Examination is done but then I go rigid in my dad’s arms, looking up at him with suspicion. “Dad,” I say slowly, “what do you mean by that?”

“I mean that we can bring you home now,” he says, giving me a steady nod. “Where you’ll be safe and sound —”

“What!?” I gasp, staring up at his face. Instantly I drop my arms from around his shoulders. “You’re you’re taking me home!?”

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“Well of course we’re taking you home, Ariel — the fuss with your ex-fiancé is all cleared you don’t have to be in hiding anymore —”

up,

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“No!” I protest, shaking my head vehemently and wiggling hard until dad lets me go, staring at me in shock. “Dad, I’m going back to the Academy! I mean, unless I didn’t the Examination? Were we too

late!?”

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Dad just stares at me in shock and confusion as I turn to the door, suddenly desperate to know. “Did I slow Jackson down too much?” I ask, my voice getting squeaky in my panic. Did they did they say I failed because he carried me across the finish line? I don’t know the rules —”

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“Jackson?” my dad asks, and then he leans towards me, sniffing suspiciously again. “Who the hell is Jackson? What happened, Ariel —”

“Was. I. Late?” I ask, my voice sharp as I turn to stare at my dad, my lips a thin line.

“What?” my dad asks again, completely baffled.

“Um,” Cora says, interjecting awkwardly. “Ariel, if you’re asking if you made it across the line within the top 60% of candidates...you did...”

I huge rush of air leaves my lungs and relief sweeps through me, because at least Jackson is getting through –

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But me? Are there rules about how healthy you have to be when you cross? Do you have to do it under your own power?

“Ariel,” my dad snaps, his voice harsh, “are you saying – my god, you can’t be serious you want to go back to the Academy!?”

“Of course I do!”

He stares at me for a long second before his face turns cold. “Absolutely not.

I gape at my father as he crosses his arms over his chest.

“Dominic,” my mother says, and I whip my head to see her frowning at him, clearly taking my side. “Ariel is at the Academy for more reasons than just to hide from that horrible fiancé – she’s been working really hard! She’s

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“It’s out of the question,” dad snaps, slicing a hand through the hair like that’s the end of it. “My daughter is not going back to an Academy of Alpha males who clearly want her dead

“Dad!” I protest.

“No!” he shouts, his voice booming out, carrying with it his Alpha command. “You were shot with a crossbow, Ariel! No daughter of mine is going to be at that school – it’s too

dangerous for you! It is male-only for a reason!”

My hands curl into fists in my side as I glare at my father, my jaw set.

## Chapter 112

### Chapter 112

My hands curl into fists in my side as I glare at my father, my jaw set.

Chapter 0217

I'm well, well aware that I'm supposed to quail under the look my father is leveling at me now – that it's sent many big tough Alphas running for the hills.

But, well, I'm my father's daughter, aren't I?

And I am not giving in that easily. No way in hell.

"I'm going back, dad," I growl, my voice matching his own even though it's several octaves higher. "You can't stop me."

"The hell I can't – "

"I have worked too hard!" I shout, getting up on my knees and leaning towards him now. "I have been busting my ass at that school, proving myself! I –"

"And it almost killed you, Ariel!" my dad shouts back, leaning in so that our faces are only inches apart.

"I survived, didn't I!?" I whip my finger up between us, a move I've seen my mom make a thousand times, but my dad just swats it away. "I'm proving myself, dad. I already beat

twenty percent of the candidate class getting into the school, and now I've beat forty percent of the men who have been training just as hard as me! You cannot discount me and say that I haven't earned my spot!"

"You were carried over the finish line bleeding and barely breathing, Ariel," dad says, and his anger snaps a little as he speaks the words. He groans again as he pictures it, straightening up and closing his eyes against the mental image. "I cannot, in good faith, send you to your death – you are not built, physically, for this world

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"So, the only people who are worthy of the education," I say, sitting back on my butt and crossing my arms as I glare at him, "are big guys, like you?"

His

eyes fly open to stare at me, and then they narrow. "You know that's not what I mean." "In this school I am not your daughter – I'm Ari Clark, who is a boy," I argue, knowing perhaps that it won't make as much sense but needing to make the point anyway. "He's

small, but he's smart. And he's earned his place there. You can't take this away from me not when I..." I hesitate now, biting my lip. "Not when it's the only life I think I've ever really wanted, dad!"

He groans again, pressing his eyes shut as he whips his head to the side. And despite his actions, I know he's hearing me – I know he's listening. He just really, really doesn't like it.

"She's not wrong, Dominic," my mom says softly, and a rush of joy runs through me when I hear her support, though I don't turn to look at her, keeping my eyes on him. "You're being if she was a boy; or, hell, if she was more of a dad than a military commander right now anyone else's girl...you'd let her go back."

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"Quite frankly, Dom, if you keep her out you're just being sexist." My eyes go wide as I turn to stare at Aunt Cora, and my dad and mom do the same. She just shrugs, her chin high as she stares him down. "I've said from the start that this school was on the wrong side of it to only let in boys. It's been running for more than twenty years now, and you finally have a girl Cadet who has genuinely proven that she's better than half the boys who showed up and tried."

Cora gestures to me here, and another rush of joy pulses through me.

"Again," my dad says, his teeth gritted. "She nearly died."

says

"But I didn't," I say, seeing my opportunity. "Dad, check the rulebooks. If there's a rule that

that you have to cross the finish line of your own power, then..." I bite my lip, not wanting to say it, but taking the gamble anyway, "then...I'll go back to the Palace with you. But if other cadets have passed the Examination when they were carried across the line...you have to let me stay."

Dad sighs, closing his eyes, and I clench my hands in hope because I know he sees the logic in that. I know that he's a fairer man than he's being right now that he is, as mom says, acting on his dad instincts more than anything else.

## Chapter 113

## Chapter 113

### Chapter 0218

“Let me talk to your brother,” dad growls, each word slow and distinct. “I need...more information about how the rest of the time at the Academy has been. Although, I’m going to put him through a meat grinder the moment I see him, so he’s not going to be able to get any words out.”

“You can ask Jesse, then,” I offer, more cheerful than I have a right to be, because I can see dad’s determination starting to crumble.

Dad just glares at me. “Don’t think he’s not dead too.”

“Please,” Cora says, her voice dry, “murder your own children. Leave mine to me. I’ve got special plans for that sneaky little rat a long, slow death, I think...”

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Dad glances towards Cora, opening his mouth to retort, but we all go silent and turn towards the second door in the room the moment it opens and Rafe reappears with a certain tall, freshly– showered Alpha by his side.

Rafe’s eyes go wide when he sees the collection of his loved–ones gathered on the poor over - burdened bed and he puts out a hand, smacking Jackson in the chest and stopping him in his tracks.

I can’t help it, though – Jackson, in a fresh cadet uniform, his hair all wet and slicked back? God, but he looks so good.

He grins, feeling my emotions down the bond, passing his own relief and joy back to me. But then his eyes flick to my dad, and he stills, realizing...

Well, realizing precisely who is sitting before him.

My dad slowly gets to his feet, scenting the air, a vicious growl building in the back of his throat as he recognizes the scent of this cadet as the scent that is all over me.

“Dad,” I say, my voice worried as I shoot a glance between him and Jackson, grabbing for his sleeve. But my dad just brushes me off, moving slowly as he stands, his eyes moving between Rafe and Jackson. “Dad, don’t –”

“Who the hell are you?” dad asks, his voice very, very dangerous. “And why is your scent all over my injured daughter?”

“Dad,” Rafe says, stepping in front of Jackson, his

eyes wide.

“Enough!” dad snaps at my brother, glaring daggers at him. “Step aside, Rafe, let this man speak for himself.”

Rafe sets his jaw and stays still for a moment, clearly deciding what to do. But then, to my surprise, he steps to the side, letting Jackson handle this himself – some Alpha instinct letting him know that this is between my dad and Jacks.

To my surprise, unlike the vast majority of men who would fall back a few steps and beg forgiveness or start spouting an explanation in the face of my father like this, Jackson stands his ground. He sets his jaw and curls his hands into determined fists. His shoulders slump forward, just a little, in what I think is a sign of non-aggression, letting my dad know that he does not want to fight. But he doesn't give up a single step of the space between

them.

Instead, Jackson just flicks his eyes to me, asking silently what I want him to do. Letting everyone in the room know that his next actions are at my command, not Dominic Sinclair's.

“Oh,” Cora says, her voice a little breathless with awe and surprise next to me. “Oh, so this is ...the one you were talking about, Ella...”

“Dominic,” my mom snaps, and from the corner of my eye I see her rise to her feet.

My dad stills just a second before turning towards her. Slowly, she shakes her head. “You're making the wrong assumptions, Dominic,” she says, her words cold and filled with warning. “That boy did not hurt Ariel, he saved her. Jackson is the one who carried her across the finish line – he's her mate.”

My dad goes absolutely rigid with shock as I turn to stare at my mom.

Because as my father's growl fills the air and he turns his murderous gaze back to Jackson, I am desperately, deeply unsure that that was the right thing to reveal in this moment.

## **Chapter 114**

### **Chapter 114**

Chapter 0219

Jackson's eyes go wide for a second with worry as my dad focuses singularly on him and takes one single, dangerous step in his direction.

"Dominic!" my mother snaps, and then she's moving quickly between my dad and my mate, turning and holding a hand up in front of my father's face. "Think about what you're doing right now, let alone the impression you're making!"

The growl dies in my father's throat as he blinks, hard and refocuses on my mom. "The...the impression? Ella, this man's scent is all over our child, he's claiming her as his mate, and you want me to worry about first impressions!?"

"Dominic," mom murmurs, stepping closer and shocking me by laughing a little bit. Slowly she stands on her tiptoes and takes his face in her hands. "Don't you get it? He didn't claim her as his mate – the Goddess fated them. And if I know my daughter as well as I think I do, then I'd be willing to bet a lot of money that Ariel had more to do with this than poor Jackson did."

Dad stares at mom for a long moment before turning to look at me.

I just shrug, feeling awkward and...well, old. Because my entire life I've been dad's little girl, and now here I am...introducing him to my mate.

Suddenly overwhelmed, my eyes fill with tears. "Yeah," I say, shrugging again, not knowing what to do. "I've...I've known since the first day as a candidate, dad. I told Jackson... yesterday."

My lip trembles as my dad stares at me, shocked, and I can't help the tears that start to slip down my cheeks. I also don't miss the three steps forward that Jackson takes towards me before Rafe grabs his arm, hauling him back.

"Be nice to him, dad," I squeak out. "He's...he's really nice, okay?"

Dad stares at me for a long, long moment before he lets out a long, long groan, covering his face with his hands and tilting his head back towards the ceiling. Aunt Cora scooches closer to me, giving me a quick hug and then wiping the tears from my cheeks, whispering that it's all right.

I nod to her, understanding, but still feeling overwhelmed. I keep my eyes on the four people standing in the room.

Jackson and Rafe stand still, waiting for my dad to decide what he's going to do next. Mom

steps close to dad, wrapping an arm around his waist and waiting patiently until he drops his hands from his face, folding his arms around her and sighing deeply before looking



down at her.

“I wasn’t ready for this today, Ella,” he murmurs, glancing back at me. “I wasn’t ready for our little girl to grow up.”

“Well, we’ve still got the meatball,” she murmurs, pointing at Rafe. I laugh, unable to help it, as Rafe scowls. He hates his nickname. “He hasn’t left us yet. And Markie and Juniper. Or Ariel – not really.” She smiles at him. “Kids grow. It’s what they do.” She stands on her toes. “It’s a good day, Dominic.”

Dad presses a kiss to her mouth and then nods once, sighing again. “A good day.” Then he turns to me and holds a hand out. Cora helps me stand and then I wheel my little IV over to my dad’s side, slipping my hand in his as the three of us turn to face Jackson, who suddenly looks completely freaked out.

I smirk, a little tickled by the idea that he was ready to take on my dad when dad was about to slash him to pieces. But meeting my father in a calm, pleasant way? He looks ready to bolt.

“All right, Ariel,” dad murmurs, his voice grumbling as he squeezes my hand in his. “Introduce me to your young man.”

And so I do.

Introductions are quick, largely formal, and a little awkward, with dad shaking Jackson’s hand and asking him some questions about who he is, what he’s studying, how we met. Jackson’s face gets redder and redder as he stumbles through the interrogation, and I’m basically melting with second-hand embarrassment, but Rafe saves me.

One look at Rafe’s wide grin, at the way he watches Jackson with a little bit of good-humored delight at how horribly awkward he’s being, and I burst into laughter.

Mom and Rafe start laughing too, and dad looks down at me with surprise as I shake my head at him and move to Jackson’s side, slipping my hand into my mate’s and giving it a squeeze. “Dad, please, you’re killing him, all right?”

## Chapter 115

### Chapter 115

Chapter 0220

Dad stares at me and then up at Jackson again. “What?” he asks. “I was just being polite

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“Jacks is...not great with polite,” I say, pressing myself warmly to his side. “Actually, I think he’d probably rather fight you than do the small talk thing.”

Jackson scowls, already coming back to himself a little. “Ari, I don’t want to fight him –”

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“I know,” I say, nodding and smiling up into his face. “Just can we all maybe take a bit of space? Try this again over midwinter, maybe over dinner?”

“Or an activity,” Rafe suggests, knowing that even a dinner might be a bit much for Jacks. “Or a great, great deal of whiskey – barrels of it.”

“Enough,” dad snaps good-heartedly at Rafe, waving a dismissive hand at all of us as he turns away. “Fine, fine! We’ll do it all later! I need much more information anyway.”

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I grin after him as he walks to the bed with mom at his side, and then I grin between Jacks and Rafe.

“You did great, Jacks,” I whisper, supportive.

“I didn’t...say anything,” he murmurs, glancing after my parents. “Besides, like, my name –”

“But you did that so well,” Rafe says with humorous condescension, patting him on his shoulder with a laugh. I laugh too and Jackson gives a tentative smile, I think giving into it.

Jacks opens his mouth, I think to ask a question, but the door opens again – suddenly, I long for a lock on it – and a professor I don’t recognize comes into the room.

“Um,” he says, looking around, a clipboard in his hand. “I’m looking for Cadets Sinclair, McClintock, and Clark?”

Rafe steps hastily in front of me, asking whether the professor is looking for Jesse or Rafe Sinclair, and in the intervening moment Jackson hands me his cap, which was apparently tucked into his back pocket. Hastily, I loop my hair up onto my head and whip the cap on top. It’s too big, but, in a pinch, it works.

When the professor reveals that he’s looking for Rafe Sinclair, Rafe glances back at me and then nods to him, letting him know that we’re all here.

“Oh, good,” the professor says, looking anxiously over at the King, Queen, and Duchess standing quietly together by the bed, perhaps wondering what the hell is going on. But he doesn’t say anything about that, instead clearing his throat and consulting his paper.

“Well,” he says with a sigh, “the three of you have been marked as passing the Examination

I squeal suddenly with delight, throwing myself into Jackson’s arms. He laughs with me, turning me in a circle, giving me a big hug. When we go all the way around before we see the professor at the door giving us a strange look. Jackson just clears his throat and awkwardly lowers me to the floor.

“So,” my mother says, interrupting as the professor starts speaking again. “It’s not an issue that Cadet...Clark...” here she glances at me, and inwardly I cringe at how obvious she’s being, “was carried wounded over the finish line?”

“No, highness,” the professor says, giving her a deferential bow. “The rules are to cross the finish line, full stop. I think,” he glances at my dad here, “they were written that way with this express situation in mind.”

My mouth falls open a bit as I realize that my dad knew this all along because he wrote the rule book – that it’s not a surprise to him, at all, that I’ve passed.

Dad catches my glare and just gives me a little shrug, telling me to deal with it. I roll my eyes

at him but let it pass – he’s had a stressful day too.

The professor continues. “Sinclair and McClintock have been given orders to return to the Academy tonight,” he says, lowering the clipboard to his side. “Though Clark has been given special permission to stay overnight to ensure that there are no complications to his injuries. Though...”

He hesitates, not finishing and looking at me strangely because obviously I’m standing before him perfectly hale. I just shrug, not explaining anything.

“Absolutely not,” Jackson growls, stepping forward towards the professor. “I am not leaving Clark here alone.”

The professor steps back, shocked by the defiance and the aggression in Jackson’s eyes.

## Chapter 116

## Chapter 116

"Well, that's enough of that," my mother says with perfect calm, standing and catching Jackson's eye. He freezes for a moment and then steps back, sta

Mom, ever-charming, turns a smile on the professor and thanks him for the news, ensuring him that Sinclair and McClintock will follow in a few minutes to be transported back. When the professor leaves, mom turns back to Jacks with an eyebrow raised

"You're going to have to get better at that," she says quietly, gesturing towards the door. "If Ari is going to return to the Academy, you're going to have to not acing all mate-y whenever someone comes to deliver perfectly normal news

"She's not going back," my dad says, stepping towards my mom with a glare.

Mom's mouth pops open in surprise but then they begin to fight, the way they always do with a great deal of heat and talking over each other. But Rafe a

"Ooooookay," Aunt Cora says, stepping away from the bed and coming over to us. "Why don't I walk the two of you out," she says, nodding to the big Alph either side of me. "Ariel will – "

"I'm not leaving," Jackson says, frowning at Cora and reaching a possessive hand for me.

"Oh, sweetheart," she says, grinning up at him and reaching a hand out to pat him fondly on the cheek, an action which I think shocks Jackson to the cor still, staring at Cora as she beams at him. "Yes, baby," she sighs, "you are. Kiss your mate and come along."

She takes his hand then, tugging on it, and Jackson looks at me a bit helplessly – I think as shocked at being bossed by a woman as he is at having someone call him sweetheart and baby. I step close, reaching for him, and Jacks quic

"I'll be fine – I'll see you tomorrow," I nod at him, eager.

"Ari," he says, hesitating, looking at me like I'm going to die or disappear if he leaves the room.

"Jacks," I say, taking his face in my hands, sending all the faith and assurance I can down our bond. "We have to be normal, all right? Just... just for a little bit? I'll see you at school."

He sighs, shaking his head, but Cora tugs his hand again and he goes along with her,

sending me looks over his shoulder as he heads for the door.

“Take care of him,” I say to Rafe, catching at his hand as he, too, goes.

Rafe nods his assurance to me, but as Jackson and Cora slip through the door dad calls out his name. “Where do you think you’re going?” he asks, crossing his arms over his chest, breaking the argument with my mother to apparently start one with Rafe.

“Um,” Rafe says, going stock–still in the middle of the room. “To...school?”

“Think again, young man,” my dad says, striding for the door and slamming it shut. “Royal dispensation – you, too, are staying overnight. Because we as a family?” he levels his gaze at both of us in turn. “We need to talk.”

Rafe heaves a big sigh, closing the door after Cora takes an unhappy Jackson away.

As the next few hours pass, I’m very willing to let Rafe take the majority of the blame as well as dad’s anger. Food is brought, which I eat ravenously, and

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## Chapter 117

### Chapter 117

Chapter 0222

And so I just curl up against mom at the head of the bed, listening to my dad and my brother fight about whether or not I should be at the school, and wh

“Come on, baby,” I hear mom murmur from my half daze. I blink into consciousness, realizing that dad and Rafe are still going at it, and then I look up at

I nod, following her to the second door in the room, yawning as we pass through it and a few more doors before we enter a pretty utilitarian private bathin dyed her hair black, too, in a fit of rebellion.

I smirk, thinking fondly of my taciturn little sister, missing her with a sudden intensity that surprises me. But I dry off with a scratchy towel and then pull on the supplied one–size–fits–all–Alpha pajamas – which, obviously, swim on me. But mom laughs and helps me pull the drawstring of the pants tight before leading me out into the hospital room again an

Dad and Rafe, I’m interested to see, have fallen silent and aren’t looking at each other.

“So,” mom says, overly cheerful. “Did we men come to any decisions about Ariel’s fate in the world without consulting her?”

Rafe balks a little bit, staring at my mom, because he has been fighting for me for the past few hours. She just winks at him, because the critique was mo

“Enough, Ella,” dad murmurs, massaging his temple with his left hand. “We decided to pick it up again tomorrow, after we’ve all slept on it. We’re not get

“Wow, you’re kidding me, I thought you were making such progress,” mom murmurs with over-cheerful sarcasm as she tucks me into bed. Dad just glares at her half-heartedly before turning to me, leaning down to give me a k\*ss on the cheek and then run his hand over my

hair.

“I love you, Ariel,” he says, and I look up at him, hoping he can see in my face all the love I

so much that it aches. His face falls a little then, and I smile, have for him in my heart because I think he sees it. “I just want what’s best for you.”

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“I know, pops,” I murmur, reaching for him, wanting a hug. Dad obliges me, wrapping me up tight for a long, long moment. And then he lets me lay back

“We’ll see you for breakfast, baby,” mom whispers, also leaning down to give me a k\*ss. “You just sleep tight for now.”

I murmur my assent, and then I’m asleep, the last thing I hear three sets of footsteps leaving the room, my brother’s whispered goodnight as he switches

## Chapter 118

### Chapter 118

Chapter 0223

When I wake up the next morning or, at least, I think it’s morning – it’s not like this weird mountainous hospital room has windows – I smile, because I smell Jackson.

But then I frown, rubbing at my eyes, because...

I mean, I took a shower. His scent wouldn't be all over me anymore, so why...

But then, when I follow my nose and peer over the side of my bed, I burst into a smile because I have my answer.

Jackson's laying there, on a way-too- small mattress of all things, dead asleep. I grin, looking at him, wondering how the hell he got here and why he's not back at the Academy yet, but...

Well, also, I just look at him. Because he's so damn handsome, even with his mouth hanging open and his arm splayed out to the side, and so incredibly precious to me, even though we've only been bonded for less than two days.

Before I can stop myself, I crawl out of bed and drop down onto his mattress, curling up at his side with my head on his chest. Jackson jumps the mome

I laugh. "Good morning to you too."

"Yeah yeah," he mutters, and I can almost feel him rolling his eyes at my insistence on a greeting. "How are you? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I say, though my stomach instantly growls in response. "Starving, but fine." Jackson frowns down at me and starts to sit up, like he's going to g

My mate lays back down and exhales like he's exhausted, but also like everything, in this moment, is... completely fine. Which, honestly, is precisely how I feel.

After a few long minutes of just holding each other, our breathing slowly coming to match, our heartbeats synching up, I raise my chin to look up at him. "

He laughs a little. "I'm not at school because I refused to go."

"What!?" I squeak, sitting up to stare at him. He tightens his arms, making me lay back down and relax.

"I wouldn't go," he says, as if it's simple. "I wouldn't leave without you. The professors got pissed, but what are they going to do, carry me? I'm bigger tha

"Jackson," I breathe, staring at him. "One night with me in the hospital is not worth getting

kicked out of school

"I'm not getting kicked out," he says, his voice completely unworried. "I'm just getting at demerit on my record."

“What’s a demerit?” I ask, fascinated, worried.

“Who knows. Who cares.” He peers at me for a second. “Ari, I’m like... very good at this military stuff. They’re not going to kick me out and lose everything I can offer just because I slept in the wrong facility one night. I haven

“I don’t like you arrogant,” I murmur, giving him a little smack on his chest that makes him laugh. “You have to follow the rules, Jacks you don’t get a free

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“Oh, look who’s talking about rule breaking, little girl,” he mutters, his voice dry. And I go still but then burst out laughing.

“Okay, I’m properly shamed on that one,” I sigh, putting my head back on his chest. “But, where did you get the mattress?”

“Your mom did that,” he says, and I can hear the smile in his voice. “She found me curled up outside your locked door — ”

“Jackson!” I gasp. He just grins down at me.

“She pulled me to my feet and yelled at me a little-”

“Which you deserved —” I say, my brow furrowed.

“Yes, she looked just like that,” he murmurs, raising a hand— to cup my cheek and making me grin. “But then, while she yelled at me, she dragged me off to where they keep the spare furniture and helped me carry

## Chapter 119

### Chapter 119

Chapter 0224

He points to the end of my bed and I see my black Cadet uniform there, along with some folded pieces of paper. I grin, encouraged by the sight of my Academy Black, hoping to hell this means my dad will let me go.

I mean, I’m an adult now – my

my decisions are mine. But, if he really doesn’t want me to go he can absolutely blow my cover and just let the school know that I’m a girl. I scowl, hating



“Are you coming to breakfast?” I ask, looking down at Jackson.

“Hell no,” he says, shaking his head like I’m crazy. I laugh, grinning at him.

“One conversation with my dad was enough?”

“I need... a great deal of prep before the next time that I sit down with your father,” he murmurs, covering his face with his hand and taking a deep breath. “That wa

“He was being nice to you!” I laugh.

“Ari,” Jackson murmurs, shaking his head even as he refuses to look at me, “I have a very different relationship with men in positions of authority- yester

“But it’s my dad,” I say, frowning down at him.

“Yeah,” he says, taking his hand away with a sigh and looking up at me. “We don’t have those.”

“Oh, Jackson,” I sigh, lowering myself to his side and curling up with him again. “We’ll get Rafe to have some chats with you to teach you how to handle

“Tell the king to be nice,” he mutters, shaking his head in disbelief. “And he’ll just...listen to you.”

“Obey my orders, more like,” I mutter, smug, and he just laughs.

We lay still for a long time after that, chatting about nothing, when suddenly the door opens. I sit up straight with a gasp, but then relax when I see that it’s just my mom.

“Oh,” she says, coming around the bed and peering at us with her hands on her hips. “Well, this is very chaste. You’re just... laying next to each other. Honestly, Ariel, I’m a little

disappointed in you –”

“Mom!” I gasp, horrified at her implications that Jackson and I would be, like, tearing into

each other.

“Well, you’re my daughter, Ariel!” She says with a big sigh.

I shriek, covering my ears. “Far too much information, mother!” I shout, pressing my eyes shut, wishing to erase that information from my brain.

But before I can complete the task, my mom comes close and swats me on the head, laughing, before offering a hand out to Jackson.

“Come on, you,” she says, smiling at him, and when I look up at her I can see that she’s already welcomed Jacks into her heart completely and is deeply mate. ” King’s up. You have to run off to school before he finds out where you slept tonight.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Jackson says, taking her hand but not really using it to get up, instead pulling

himself to his own feet.

“Why aren’t the rest of you this polite?” mom asks, grinning at me as Jackson stands.

“Can you just yell at her or something?” I say to Jackson, turning my face up to his. “This is going to get old real fast.”

Jackson just looks at me, horrified at the idea. Mom laughs and stands on her toes to pat him on the cheek. “Off you go. Ariel will be along later today.”

—

Jackson says his goodbyes to my shock and after I get to my feet he leans down to k\*ss me chastely on the cheek before he goes from the room, again

“Seriously, Ari,” mom says when he closes the door behind him. “I kinda thought I’d be interrupting a major romantic scene this morning.”

“Well, you sort of were,” I sigh, looking over at her, and she smiles at me, tugging me close. “Just...the tamer sort.”

“Go on, baby trouble,” she murmurs, pressing a k\*ss to my other cheek. “Get dressed. We need to talk before breakfast, and we don’t have a lot of time.”

## Chapter 120

### Chapter 120

Chapter 0225

As mom sits down on the bed with a bounce as I quickly read through my notes – one from Daphne, apologizing profusely for her betrayal, and the other from Luca – just a

quick scrawl saying he's glad I'm alive and he'll see me soon. Smiling, grateful for both of them, I move towards my clothes.

"So!" Mom says, grinning devilishly at me. "Are you sleeping with both of your mates, or just Luca?"

I freeze, turning to her, shocked.

Mom bursts out laughing and I scowl, picking up the hat on the top of my clothing pile and throwing it at her. "Mom! Stop doing that just to shock me!"

"Oh, come on," she sighs, laying back against my pillows. "What's the point of having a daughter if you can't embarrass her about her love life. So?" She

And, well, because I have been wanting to talk to her about this, I sigh and nod. But I have trouble looking at her as we broach this awkward topic, so I catch me any flack about it.

"I'm not sleeping with either of them," I say quietly. "Though, with Luca, things are... progressing."

"Oh realllly," she says, dragging out the word with interest. "But not with Jackson?" "Well, considering that he's known for like, thirty– six hours..." I say on a sigh, pulling on my pants. My mom laughs, understanding.

"But..." I hesitate as I buckle the button of my pants. "Things with Jackson are... intense." "Intense?" my mom asks, "what does that mean?" Her voice is gossipy – I think to put me at ease. Because if she were worried, or scolding, I'd definitely be too embarrassed to go on. "I mean like... I am very attracted to him, different." I look up at her before I turn my back, tugging off the pajama – I very shirt and reaching for the black sports bra that Daphne made me. I smirk, wondering how she arranged to send this all in secret.

"Well," mom says, her voice considering, "I think that's kind of... cool, honestly. It sounds like things are different between you and your mates because they're very different people. I

spicy.

I scoff and turn to glare at my mom as I pull the sports bra down over my chest. "Oh, come on, mom, I sincerely doubt that the Goddess is paying attent

"I wouldn't doubt her," mom says, raising her eyebrows and cocking her head. "But I think Cora was right – your dad is actually the one to be talking to about this."

I groan, shaking my head. “Mom, I can’t talk to him about which of his fated mates he was more into physically.”

“Well,” she says, primly squaring her shoulders. “We already know the answer to that.”

I burst out laughing and she joins me.

“But seriously, baby,” she says, her face falling into more considered lines. “Your dad is more empathetic about this stuff than you give him credit for. You

I sigh, nodding, and then look down at my feet as I bite my l\*p.

“Don’t worry,” mom says with a sigh. “I’ll tell him before you get home.”

I gasp, wondering if she, too, can read my mind. “You will!?”

“I’ll keep it secret through your finals so that he’ll let you stay to take them,” she says, pointing a warning finger at me. “But you bring those boys home f especially after all this deception.”

I bite my l\*p, knowing that this conversation could go in two different directions, and not wanting to take either of them. Luckily, mom picks for me.

“Yes, Ari,” she says slowly. “This means you have to tell both of your mates too. I don’t know how you’ve been justifying it to yourself, keeping this secret to everyone you love.”

I nod, ashamed of myself, and my little wolf rubs herself up against my heart, warming it, supporting me. “I know,” I say, my voice soft. “It was just... very hard to find a time that made sense. But I’ll...I’ll tell them. And bring them home for winter break.”

“Both of them?”

“Well, Rafe might have to tie Jackson up and throw him on the train,” I say, lifting my head to meet her gaze. She grins, but holds back her laugh. “But, y

“Good!” mom says, hopping up off the bed as I pull my shirt on and do up all the buttons.. She comes to my side and gives me a k\*ss on the cheek. “Now

## Chapter 121

### Chapter 121

Chapter 0221

“Well, that’s enough of that,” my mother says with perfect calm, standing and catching Jackson’s eye. He freezes for a moment and then steps back, standing up straight again.

Mom, ever-charming, turns a smile on the professor and thanks him for the news, ensuring him that Sinclair and McClintock will follow in a few minutes to be transported back. When the professor leaves, mom turns back to Jacks with an eyebrow raised.

“You’re going to have to get better at that,” she says quietly, gesturing towards the door. “If Ari is going to return to the Academy, you’re going to have to keep her secret, which means not aching all mate-y whenever someone comes to deliver perfectly normal news

“She’s not going back,” my dad says, stepping towards my mom with a glare.

Mom’s mouth pops open in surprise but then they begin to fight, the way they always do with a great deal of heat and talking over each other. But Rafe and I just look away from them and towards each other, used to it, because it all turns out right in the end.

“Ooooookay,” Aunt Cora says, stepping away from the bed and coming over to us. “Why don’t I walk the two of you out,” she says, nodding to the big Alphas on either side of me.” Ariel will – ”

“I’m not leaving,” Jackson says, frowning at Cora and reaching a possessive hand for me.

“Oh, sweetheart,” she says, grinning up at him and reaching a hand out to pat him fondly on the cheek, an action which I think shocks Jackson to the core. He stands stock-still, staring at Cora as she beams at him. “Yes, baby,” she sighs, “you are. Kiss your mate and come along.”

She takes his hand then, tugging on it, and Jackson looks at me a bit helplessly – I think as shocked at being bossed by a woman as he is at having someone call him sweetheart and baby. I

step close, reaching for him, and Jacks quickly lowers his head, pressing a quick kiss to my mouth. “I don’t want to go,” he murmurs.

“I’ll be fine – I’ll see you tomorrow,” I nod at him, eager.

“Ari,” he says, hesitating, looking at me like I’m going to die or disappear if he leaves the room.

“Jacks,” I say, taking his face in my hands, sending all the faith and assurance I can down our bond. “We have to be normal, all right? Just...just for a little bit? I’ll see you at school.”

He sighs, shaking his head, but Cora tugs his hand again and he goes along with her, sending me looks over his shoulder as he heads for the door.

“Take care of him,” I say to Rafe, catching at his hand as he, too, goes.

Rafe nods his assurance to me, but as Jackson and Cora slip through the door dad calls out his name. “Where do you think you’re going?” he asks, crossing his arms over his chest, breaking the argument with my mother to apparently start one with Rafe.

“Um,” Rafe says, going stock–still in the middle of the room. “To...school?”

“Think again, young man,” my dad says, striding for the door and slamming it shut. “Royal dispensation – you, too, are staying overnight. Because we as a family?” he levels his gaze at both of us in turn. “We need to talk.”

Rafe heaves a big sigh, closing the door after Cora takes an unhappy Jackson away.

As the next few hours pass, I’m very willing to let Rafe take the majority of the blame as well as dad’s anger. Food is brought, which I eat ravenously, and Rafe sends me a few chagrined looks as

the interrogation passes, but overall I know he takes it willingly that he knows that I’m exhausted, and that it’s already been a lot for me, today, to stand up to dad and introduce him to my mate.

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## **Chapter 122**

### **Chapter 122**

Chapter 0222

And so I just curl up against mom at the head of the bed, listening to my dad and my brother fight about whether or not I should be at the school, and what the hell Rafe was thinking taking me there, and how I’ve survived so far. I can hear Rafe supplying information that Jackson told when they were away at the shower, apparently, about the identity of the cadet who shot me with a crossbow and whether or not he has a further vendetta against me, but I quickly find myself slipping into sleep as I lean against mom.

“Come on, baby,” I hear mom murmur from my half daze. I blink into consciousness, realizing that dad and Rafe are still going at it, and then I look up at mom next to me. “Let’s get you cleaned up,” she says, unhooking me from the IV and tugging me away.

I nod, following her to the second door in the room, yawning as we pass through it and a few more doors before we enter a pretty utilitarian private bathing chamber. She helps me strip down and then I shower as mom fills me in, quietly and calmly, on the gossip from home. Markie is fine he doesn’t like school, loves sports, wants a pet squirrel more than anything in the world. Juniper hates everything, apparently, and won’t wear anything but black dyed her hair black, too, in a fit of rebellion.

I smirk, thinking fondly of my taciturn little sister, missing her with a sudden intensity that surprises me. But I dry off with a scratchy towel and then pull on the supplied one-size-fits-all-Alpha pajamas – which, obviously, swim on me. But mom laughs and helps me pull the drawstring of the pants tight before leading me out into the hospital room again and back to the bed.

Dad and Rafe, I’m interested to see, have fallen silent and aren’t looking at each other.

“So,” mom says, overly cheerful. “Did we men come to any decisions about Ariel’s fate in the world without consulting her?”

Rafe balks a little bit, staring at my mom, because he has been fighting for me for the past few hours. She just winks at him, because the critique was mostly for my dad.

“Enough, Ella,” dad murmurs, massaging his temple with his left hand. “We decided to pick it up again tomorrow, after we’ve all slept on it. We’re not getting anything done here anyway.”

“Wow, you’re kidding me, I thought you were making such progress,” mom murmurs with over-cheerful sarcasm as she tucks me into bed. Dad just glares at her half-heartedly before turning to me, leaning down to give me a kiss on the cheek and then run his hand over my

hair.

“I love you, Ariel,” he says, and I look up at him, hoping he can see in my face all the love I

so much that it aches. His face falls a little then, and I smile, have for him in my heart because I think he sees it. “I just want what’s best for you.”

—

"I know, pops," I murmur, reaching for him, wanting a hug. Dad obliges me, wrapping me up tight for a long, long moment. And then he lets me lay back down in the bed, standing up. As soon as my head hits the pillow, my eyes start to drift shut.

"We'll see you for breakfast, baby," mom whispers, also leaning down to give me a kiss. "You just sleep tight for now."

I murmur my assent, and then I'm asleep, the last thing I hear three sets of footsteps leaving the room, my brother's whispered goodnight as he switches off the light.

## Chapter 123

### Chapter 123

Chapter 0223

When I wake up the next morning or, at least, I think it's morning – it's not like this weird mountainous hospital room has windows – I smile, because I smell Jackson.

But then I frown, rubbing at my eyes, because...

I mean, I took a shower. His scent wouldn't be all over me anymore, so why...

But then, when I follow my nose and peer over the side of my bed, I burst into a smile because I have my answer.

Jackson's laying there, on a way-too-small mattress of all things, dead asleep. I grin, looking at him, wondering how the hell he got here and why he's not back at the Academy yet, but...

Well, also, I just look at him. Because he's so damn handsome, even with his mouth hanging open and his arm splayed out to the side, and so incredibly precious to me, even though we've only been bonded for less than two days.

Before I can stop myself, I crawl out of bed and drop down onto his mattress, curling up at his side with my head on his chest. Jackson jumps the moment I touch him, but he instantly calms when he realizes what happened. "Don't scare me like that," he murmurs, instantly wrapping his arms around me and pulling me tight.

I laugh. "Good morning to you too."

"Yeah yeah," he mutters, and I can almost feel him rolling his eyes at my insistence on a greeting. "How are you? Are you okay?"



"I'm fine," I say, though my stomach instantly growls in response. "Starving, but fine." Jackson frowns down at me and starts to sit up, like he's going to go get me some food immediately, but I laugh and stop him with a hand on his chest. "Just stay still with me for a moment, Jacks," I whisper, wanting nothing more than to have a peaceful few minutes with him before the rest of the world catches up with us.

My mate lays back down and exhales like he's exhausted, but also like everything, in this moment, is...completely fine. Which, honestly, is precisely how I feel.

After a few long minutes of just holding each other, our breathing slowly coming to match, our heartbeats synching up, I raise my chin to look up at him. "Jacks," I whisper, curious. "Why aren't you at school? And where did you get a mattress?"

He laughs a little. "I'm not at school because I refused to go."

"What!?" I squeak, sitting up to stare at him. He tightens his arms, making me lay back down and relax.

"I wouldn't go," he says, as if it's simple. "I wouldn't leave without you. The professors got pissed, but what are they going to do, carry me? I'm bigger than they are."

"Jackson," I breathe, staring at him. "One night with me in the hospital is not worth getting

kicked out of school

"I'm not getting kicked out," he says, his voice completely unworried. "I'm just getting at demerit on my record."

"What's a demerit?" I ask, fascinated, worried.

"Who knows. Who cares." He peers at me for a second. "Ari, I'm like...very good at this military stuff. They're not going to kick me out and lose everything I can offer just because I slept in the wrong facility one night. I haven't done anything bad."

"I don't like you arrogant," I murmur, giving him a little smack on his chest that makes him laugh. "You have to follow the rules, Jacks you don't get a free pass just because you're big and nobody can boss you around."

—

"Oh, look who's talking about rule breaking, little girl," he mutters, his voice dry. And I go still but then burst out laughing.

"Okay, I'm properly shamed on that one," I sigh, putting my head back on his chest. "But, where did you get the mattress?"

“Your mom did that,” he says, and I can hear the smile in his voice. “She found me curled up outside your locked door – ”

“Jackson!” I gasp. He just grins down at me.

“She pulled me to my feet and yelled at me a little-”

“Which you deserved –” I say, my brow furrowed.

“Yes, she looked just like that,” he murmurs, raising a hand—to cup my cheek and making me grin. “But then, while she yelled at me, she dragged me off to where they keep the spare furniture and helped me carry this in here. And then she left your clothes and your notes and she left.”

## Chapter 124

### Chapter 124

Chapter 0224

He points to the end of my bed and I see my black Cadet uniform there, along with some folded pieces of paper. I grin, encouraged by the sight of my Academy Black, hoping to hell this means my dad will let me go.

I mean, I’m an adult now – my

my decisions are mine. But, if he really doesn’t want me to go he can absolutely blow my cover and just let the school know that I’m a girl. I scowl, hating it, but also trusting, deep down, that my dad will listen.

“Are you coming to breakfast?” I ask, looking down at Jackson.

“Hell no,” he says, shaking his head like I’m crazy. I laugh, grinning at him.

“One conversation with my dad was enough?”

“I need...a great deal of prep before the next time that I sit down with your father,” he murmurs, covering his face with his hand and taking a deep breath. “That was terrifying.”

“He was being nice to you!” I laugh.

“Ari,” Jackson murmurs, shaking his head even as he refuses to look at me, “I have a very different relationship with men in positions of authority- yesterday I almost had a

heart attack when I saw you yell at the King. Where I come from, you'd have been killed for that –"

"But it's my dad," I say, frowning down at him.

"Yeah," he says, taking his hand away with a sigh and looking up at me. "We don't have those."

"Oh, Jackson," I sigh, lowering myself to his side and curling up with him again. "We'll get Rafe to have some chats with you to teach you how to handle parents, and I'll tell dad to be nice."

"Tell the king to be nice," he mutters, shaking his head in disbelief. "And he'll just...listen to you."

"Obey my orders, more like," I mutter, smug, and he just laughs.

We lay still for a long time after that, chatting about nothing, when suddenly the door opens. I sit up straight with a gasp, but then relax when I see that it's just my mom.

"Oh," she says, coming around the bed and peering at us with her hands on her hips. "Well, this is very chaste. You're just...laying next to each other. Honestly, Ariel, I'm a little

disappointed in you –"

"Mom!" I gasp, horrified at her implications that Jackson and I would be, like, tearing into each other.

"Well, you're my daughter, Ariel!" She says with a big sigh.

I shriek, covering my ears. "Far too much information, mother!" I shout, pressing my eyes shut, wishing to erase that information from my brain.

But before I can complete the task, my mom comes close and swats me on the head, laughing, before offering a hand out to Jackson.

"Come on, you," she says, smiling at him, and when I look up at her I can see that she's already welcomed Jacks into her heart completely and is deeply, deeply fond of my mate. "King's up. You have to run off to school before he finds out where you slept tonight."

"Yes, ma'am," Jackson says, taking her hand but not really using it to get up, instead pulling

himself to his own feet.

“Why aren’t the rest of you this polite?” mom asks, grinning at me as Jackson stands.

“Can you just yell at her or something?” I say to Jackson, turning my face up to his.  
“This is going to get old real fast.”

Jackson just looks at me, horrified at the idea. Mom laughs and stands on her toes to pat him on the cheek. “Off you go. Ariel will be along later today.”

—

Jackson says his goodbyes to my shock and after I get to my feet he leans down to kiss me chastely on the cheek before he goes from the room, again shooting looks over his shoulder at me like he desperately doesn’t want to leave my side.

“Seriously, Ari,” mom says when he closes the door behind him. “I kinda thought I’d be interrupting a major romantic scene this morning.”

“Well, you sort of were,” I sigh, looking over at her, and she smiles at me, tugging me close. “Just... the tamer sort.”

“Go on, baby trouble,” she murmurs, pressing a kiss to my other cheek. “Get dressed. We need to talk before breakfast, and we don’t have a lot of time.”

## Chapter 125

### Chapter 125

Chapter 0225

As mom sits down on the bed with a bounce as I quickly read through my notes – one from Daphne, apologizing profusely for her betrayal, and the other from Luca – just a quick scrawl saying he’s glad I’m alive and he’ll see me soon. Smiling, grateful for both of them, I move towards my clothes.

“So!” Mom says, grinning devilishly at me. “Are you sleeping with both of your mates, or just Luca?”

I freeze, turning to her, shocked.

Mom bursts out laughing and I scowl, picking up the hat on the top of my clothing pile and throwing it at her. “Mom! Stop doing that just to shock me!”

“Oh, come on,” she sighs, laying back against my pillows. “What’s the point of having a daughter if you can’t embarrass her about her love life. So?” She raises her eyebrows at me, clearly wanting an answer.

And, well, because I have been wanting to talk to her about this, I sigh and nod. But I have trouble looking at her as we broach this awkward topic, so I concentrate, mostly, on getting dressed as we talk. Mom, perhaps sensing the delicate nature of this conversation, doesn’t give me any flack about it.

“I’m not sleeping with either of them,” I say quietly. “Though, with Luca, things are... progressing.”

“Oh realllly,” she says, dragging out the word with interest. “But not with Jackson?” “Well, considering that he’s known for like, thirty–six hours...” I say on a sigh, pulling on my pants. My mom laughs, understanding.

“But...” I hesitate as I buckle the button of my pants. “Things with Jackson are...intense.” “Intense?” my mom asks, “what does that mean?” Her voice is gossipy – I think to put me at ease. Because if

she were worried, or scolding, I’d definitely be too embarrassed to go on. “I mean like... I am very attracted to him, mom. And it’s not that I’m not into Luca much am. It’s just...different.” I look up at her before I turn my back, tugging off the pajama – I very shirt and reaching for the black sports bra that Daphne made me. I smirk, wondering how she arranged to send this all in secret.

“Well,” mom says, her voice considering, “I think that’s kind of...cool, honestly. It sounds like things are different between you and your mates because they’re very different people. I

spicy.

I scoff and turn to glare at my mom as I pull the sports bra down over my chest. “Oh, come on, mom, I sincerely doubt that the Goddess is paying attention, with all she has on her plate.”

“I wouldn’t doubt her,” mom says, raising her eyebrows and cocking her head. “But I think Cora was right – your dad is actually the one to be talking to about this.”

I groan, shaking my head. “Mom, I can’t talk to him about which of his fated mates he was more into physically.”

“Well,” she says, primly squaring her shoulders. “We already know the answer to that.”

I burst out laughing and she joins me.

“But seriously, baby,” she says, her face falling into more considered lines. “Your dad is more empathetic about this stuff than you give him credit for. You should try. He’ll have a better perspective than literally anyone else on earth.”

I sigh, nodding, and then look down at my feet as I bite my lip.

“Don’t worry,” mom says with a sigh. “I’ll tell him before you get home.”

I gasp, wondering if she, too, can read my mind. “You will!?”

“I’ll keep it secret through your finals so that he’ll let you stay to take them,” she says, pointing a warning finger at me. “But you bring those boys home for winter break, both of them. And your dad will be prepared to meet them. But you owe him that truth – especially after all this deception.”

I bite my lip, knowing that this conversation could go in two different directions, and not wanting to take either of them. Luckily, mom picks for me.

“Yes, Ari,” she says slowly. “This means you have to tell both of your mates too. I don’t know how you’ve been justifying it to yourself, keeping this secret all along. But it’s time to come out with it – to everyone you love.”

I nod, ashamed of myself, and my little wolf rubs herself up against my heart, warming it, supporting me. “I know,” I say, my voice soft. “It was just...very hard to find a time that made sense. But I’ll...I’ll tell them. And bring them home for winter break.”

“Both of them?”

“Well, Rafe might have to tie Jackson up and throw him on the train,” I say, lifting my head to meet her gaze. She grins, but holds back her laugh. “But, yes. I’ll get them there.”

“Good!” mom says, hopping up off the bed as I pull my shirt on and do up all the buttons.. She comes to my side and gives me a kiss on the cheek. “Now, let’s go to breakfast and break it do your dad that you’re going back to the murder school where you’ve almost died like three times.”

## Chapter 126

### Chapter 126

Chapter 0226

“Mom,” I say, catching her arm and stopping her before she heads to the door. “Are you... are you mad at me?” My voice breaks a little on my question, my eyes smarting with tears as I look at her, worried.

“Oh, baby,” she murmurs, shock and concern suddenly on her face. “Why would you think that?”

“Because,” I say, heaving a little shrug. “We we lied to you for months. And I did something really dangerous. And I almost died, and showed up all bloody with two mates and it must be so weird –”

Mom laughs a little, taking my face between her hands and shaking her head at me. “Oh, sweetheart,” she murmurs, and then she nods. “If I’m being honest, I could have done without the blood and the near-death. But I’m not mad at you – sweetie, I’m proud of you.”

My mouth twists in sudden surprise, and my eyes fill with unexpected tears. “You’re – you’re what?”

“Baby,” she wraps me in a hug as she speaks, “you are doing something difficult that nobody has done before. And it’s kind of kicking your ass!” I laugh, tears slipping down my cheeks as I nod and hug her back.

“Yeah,” I reply, my voice shaking. “It kind of is.”

“But look at you,” she says, pulling back and beaming into my face. “Look at you, baby! You’re kicking its ass too! You are finding your way, doing something you’re passionate about, and you’re succeeding. Ariel, my love,” her own eyes fill with tears now, “I’m so proud of you. I’d scream it from the rooftops for everyone to hear if it wouldn’t get you instantly kicked out.”

mu taare away

I laugh, and hug my mom again, and then we take a few moments to wipe before we head off to breakfast. Before we go, I tuck the little notes left on my bed into the back pocket of my Cadet uniform and prepare to go negotiate with my dad, the King.

Breakfast goes better than I thought it would, right from the start. It’s a short, unfrilled affair – just the four of us gathered around for coffee, and some toast and fruit, at a little folding table in the back hall. Cora isn’t here, unfortunately she headed home after patching up some minorly-wounded cadets and sending Jesse off with a kiss.

As I pour my coffee, I realize that my mom has probably been up all night – that after I fell asleep she probably spent every minute rushing around from room to room, healing all the

cadets who were injured in the Examination. I see the signs of it now that I look for them the slight circles under her eyes, the yawn she hides with her hand.

But I just smile, and don't call her out – because even though mom is full of jokes and would just brush it off, I know that she has the biggest heart of anyone in the world.

I resolve, again – for the thousandth time to try to be more like her.

“So,” dad says, his voice all business as he offers me the basket of toast, which I grab perhaps too eagerly, loading up my plate with a serving size that is more like Rafe's usual breakfast than mine. “We're going to strike a deal.”

“We are?” I ask, crumbs spilling from my mouth as I speak with my mouth full.

Rafe just smirks at me, and I give him a little glare before I chew and swallow, focusing on

our dad.

“Despite what you all think,” dad says, looking evenly around the table at us, “I do listen to you, and I am reasonable. I am not pleased with the fact that we were lied to, and that Ariel was put into an unnecessarily risky situation.” He levels his gaze at me now, and I sit up straighter, as I always do when I'm in trouble with dad.

“But,” he continues, and I go very still, hope beginning to swell in me. Dad folds his hands, continuing to look at me evenly. “I am aware that yourself at this Academy,

you have prov Ariel. You have...passed the tests that weeded out other candidates, tests that were as much about cleverness as they were physical prowess – about finding out how to pass, even if your physical makeup didn't make that easy for you.”

I frown a little bit here, my mind wandering to consider that I wouldn't have been highly ranked enough to enter the academy or to pass the Examination if it hadn't been for

Jackson. That Jackson really did pull me through.

no wrong with th

Is there though? Is there a rule that every Cadet at the Academy must be a lone island of physical strength? Is there nothing useful about having good friends, and the right friends?

My dad continues talking, though, and so I push the question aside to mull over later, uncomfortable with it but needing to concentrate.



“So here’s what we’re going to do,” dad says, reaching out for an orange and beginning to peel it as he begins to lay out our plan.

## Chapter 127

### Chapter 127

Chapter 0227

“There’s one last trial before you’re fully enrolled,” dad says slowly, peeling his orange in one long strip. “And that is your academic finals. If you pass those, then I won’t fight you on returning to the Academy.”

I gasp, thrilled, leaning forward to thank my dad with all of my heart.

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you

“But!” dad says, holding up a finger. “I won’t have it a secret anymore. not from the officials, and not from your professors. At least, those you work with. If you pass your finals, we will have a word with each of your professors. And if they refuse to work with ...” he shrugs, meeting my eyes. “I’m not going to force them, Ariel. And you shouldn’t seek to either. It is...too dangerous a world, to not be working with people who are betting against you.”

I bite my lip, considering it quickly, my mind sweeping over the Captain, and Neumann, and Alvez. The last of the three, obviously rather indecently, if I’m being honest – does not have a problem with working with a young woman. But the other two...

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“And,” dad continues, focusing on the fruit, “the boy who shot you – Wright? He has not yet gone through his tribunal for attempted murder —”

My eyes go wide as I consider that...well, yeah. That Wright broke the rules when he shot me in the stomach.

“So,” dad continues, flicking his eyes to me. “I want you taking no risks, Ariel. Your tests, and the room. Those are the only places I want you until we get that boy out of that school.”

”

“Okay,” I say suddenly, giving a terse nod. “Okay, I accept it.”

“All right,” dad says, nodding seriously and looking down at his fruit and fighting his smile.

I take a second to look around at Rafe and mom, who are both beaming at me with excitement, but then I can’t help it I’m up out of my seat with a shout joy and throwing myself at my dad, wrapping my arms around his neck.

“Thank you, daddy,” I whisper, and a rush of warmth and joy runs through me when my dad wraps his big arms around me, hugging me back. “I love you so much.”

“I believe in you, baby,” he says, pulling back to smile at my face, his own filled with a thousand emotions I couldn’t even begin to name. “I always knew you were tough, that you’d do big things. We’re...we’re very proud. You know that, right?”

“Yeah, dad,” I say, grinning at him feeling so, so incredibly lucky to have him as my dad, and my mom as my mom, and my brother as my brother. “Don’t worry. I know.”

“Good,” he says, setting me on my feet and gesturing towards the table. “Then eat up, because your marksmanship final is today, and you’ll need your strength.”

“Today?” I gasp, my eyes going wide. “Wh–what!?”

“Yup,” dad says, his mouth twisting up at the corner. “Part of the joy of Examination is the

second surprise that immediately after it, your finals begin. Hope you studied, trouble.”

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I look over at Rafe to see that his face is likewise pale.

“Holy crap,” he says, his eyes meeting mine. “We – we have

– we have to go.”

I throw myself back into my seat and begin eating as fast as I can. Rafe matches my pace as I slurp down my coffee and stuff toast into my mouth along with strawberries, melon –

whatever will fit.

My parents just grin at each other over their plates, eating at a leisurely pace.

I haul my butt up the final two flights of stairs to our level, my head hanging back on my neck, my eyes almost shut in my exhaustion. The past thirty-six hours...

—

I mean, honestly, the past ninety-six hours if we're counting the examination —

Or, wait

is it seventy-six? Or one-twenty? I groan again, hating my brain for trying to do more math as I slog towards our bedroom door. God, I feel like my brain has gone through a meat grinder.

The past day and a half has been insane with finals. Rafe and I barely showed up, via helicopter, in time for our afternoon tests. I burst into the marksmanship final panting, but on time, and the Captain shook his head at me but let me participate. I passed, of course — it's my stronger of the my two examined subjects, and the Captain patted me on the back with a proud smile after it was done.

I almost passed out, though, when I was told that my Chemistry examination was twenty-four hours later. That night I was a mess, trying to cram the entire textbook into my head. Jackson came by the room, of course, worried — but Rafe and I managed to convince him to go away, to let me study. I think it was only the sheer anxiety in my eyes that made him agree to it. And thank god Jesse wasn't there when Jackson came — because I could not absolutely could not — manage any more revelations with this exam looming.

## Chapter 128

### Chapter 128

Chapter 0228

I was similarly frantic that night in the dream state with Luca. He clasped me in his arms, desperate to hear my story, to know that I was safe. I told him, briefly, what happened, and then begged him to let me go, to sleep, because I absolutely could not turn my mind away from the Chemistry test I knew was waiting for me the next day.

Luca kissed me so softly, so sweetly, and said of course that he's rooting for me, and he can't wait to see how well I do. And then we ended the dream with him wishing me the best of luck, though he assured me I didn't need it.

So, of course, I woke up just riddled with guilt. Because Luca – he's been so, so sweet to me, and I am keeping a very real secret from him now. Somehow it was different when Jackson was just a mate a vague, unreal connection. But now that Jackson knows, and that we've acknowledged each other, and we've bonded?

God, but it's different.

All of these thoughts and memories weigh me down as I head down the hallway to my door, as I twist the handle and push my way inside.

Both Rafe and Jesse cheer the moment I step into the room, but their cheers fade awkwardly when they see how wrecked I am.

"Oh, jeeze," Jesse says, striding across the room and immediately shutting the door and wrapping an arm around my shoulders. "Honestly, Ariel, you looked better post-examination when you were all covered in blood."

"That's because I had hope," I moan, letting him lead me over to the couch, where Rafe is waiting with my favorite green blanket. As soon as I sit down he lays it over me, tucking it in at the sides. I smile up at my big brother, loving him.

"Was it that bad?" Rafe asks, anxious, looking down as he stands next to me. "Did you fail?"

"I don't know," I sigh, shaking my head. Because it certainly feels like I did. The test was... insane. But what happened before it?

"I got...spooked," I sigh, shaking my head.

"What?" Jesse asks, confused as he sits down on the coffee table.

"Well," I say, looking between them and hesitating, because this news

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they're not going

to be very happy about it. "The other cadets – they wouldn't give me a test booklet, at first. Kept passing them to each other around me."

"What?" Rafe hisses, going still.

I nod, looking down as I continue. "Neumann asked what was going on and one of the other cadets spoke up, saying that I failed the Examination and shouldn't get to sit the exam."

Rafe and Jesse gape at me, appalled. I take their silence as the invitation it is, nodding and moving on. "They said I was carried over the line, that I rely on my...my royal connections. to get through, and apparently now on Jackson, and that I don't belong here."

"What the fuck did Neumann say?" Jesse asks, already livid.

"He took my side," I say, raising my eyes and looking between them. "He slapped a test booklet onto my desk and said that I didn't break a single rule and just because none of them was clever enough to convince a bigger cadet to build them a chair, and declare them governor, and carry them over the finish line, it didn't mean it was wrong for me to use my resources wisely."

I take a deep breath, carrying on. "And then, when they insisted it wasn't fair, Neumann called them out. He said that if Jesse Sinclair," I say, looking at my cousin significantly and letting him know that Neumann really did call him out by name, "had been carried bleeding across the finish line by the crown Prince that nobody would have countered it. That everyone would have called it noble, and applauded, and happily mark both of you as passing with flying colors"

Rafe and Jesse go still, looking at each other before returning their gazes to me. "He's right," Rafe said, nodding solidly. "That's exactly what would have happened. What happened next?"

I sigh, shaking my head, wondering if I should even get into it.

## Chapter 129

### Chapter 129

Chapter 0229

I sigh, shaking my head and moving on with it. "Neumann told all of my classmates that they were all being shitty people, that they were jealous, and that they were kidding themselves if they thought that trying to knock me out of the running because I'm physically the smallest and weakest was ever going to do them any favors, because they're next on that list."

Rafe works hard to keep from bursting into laughter, so I do it for him. My brother and cousin join in, even as I shake my head.

my

"I mean," I say with a shrug, "it was good to have him stand up for me but it's all stuff I've been thinking this whole time, isn't it? That I don't belong here, that I'm too small, that I've literally only passed both the candidacy test and the examination because Jackson helped me with both. And it sucked to have my classmates say it out loud, to suggest that I shouldn't even be allowed to take the Chem final."

"They just knew you were going to kick their ass in that too," Jesse says, leaning forward to put a hand on my knee. "They are just jealous, Ari. This whole time they've been patting themselves on the back, telling themselves that they're tougher than you, sneering at you saying you'd be the first to go. And here you fucking are, thriving."

"I know," I sigh, looking between them. "But...I mean, I wouldn't be thriving without Jackson. Or you two. I'd be dead."

"Neumann's right," Rafe says, sitting down in his chair and considering it. "There's nothing in the rulebook that says you can't rely on your friends to help you. Everyone just assumes you have to muscle through it all alone. When in fact, the best plan is probably to gather a strong group of

people with a lot of broad skills." He smirks at Jesse and me." Which is...kind of what we did. Which is cool, I think."

"Oh yeah, I've been so helpful to you two," I say, sitting back with a sigh, still feeling kind

crap about it all.

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"You did help, Ari," Jesse says, leaning forward with a warm smile. "You are the reason we met Daphne, the love of my life, who is obsessed with Rafe. So, thank you for my burgeoning heartbreak."

I laugh at my cousin, sensing his joke and his sarcasm. "Yeah, I introduced her, and then she poisoned us," I groan, covering my face with my hands.

"Yeah, we're going to have to...see what else you can bring to the group, Ari," Rafe says,

obviously kidding and laughing along with us.

The door opens, and Ben comes through, moaning in the same way I was. “I’m dead,” he mutters, shaking his head and leaving the door open behind him as he comes and slumps down on the couch next to me. “I am death, and I’ve departed my body, and now I’m a ghost. Can you see me? Am I corporeal?”

Jesse grins at Ben and pats his knee too. “Your finals go as bad as Ari’s did?”

Ben frowns and turns to look at me, considering. “Worse, by the looks of it.”

“Did you fail?” I ask, anxious. He barely skirted through the Examination, I know, and my mom had to wound a broken wrist and a twisted ankle before sending him back here. That, combined with a failure...

God, it could be close.

“No way of knowing,” Ben sighs, resting his head back on the couch. “Hey, do we have any more of that wine that knocks you out for twenty-four hours? I could really use some of that

now.”

“Yes, can we get Daphne back up here?” I ask, looking longingly at the door, kind of wishing that she would come. I haven’t seen her yet since I’ve been back and I know she’s upset about her role in the Examination, that she thinks I’m mad at her. The two of us really need to take a minute to chat and renew our friendship.

“Why don’t you go get her, Ari?” Rafe says, stretching his hands over his head. “Bring her up – tell her to bring real wine this time. Finals are over, after all, and it’s our last night here. We could use a little celebration.”

“Go and get her,” I murmur in confusion, frowning at my big brother. And then my mind flashes to the fact that I just walked back from my Chemistry final alone. Though it didn’t bother me at the time...I mean, why was I allowed to do that, when my brother and my cousin have basically been flanking me the entire time we’ve been here? And considering that someone just tried really hard to murder me in the Examination? “Wait, what’s going on?” I ask, looking around at them. “Why is... why am I suddenly allowed to walk around alone?”

## Chapter 130

### Chapter 130

## Chapter 0230

"Because," Jesse says, patting my knee and then getting up, "you're safe now, Ari. Nobody's going to mess with you."

"What?" I ask, my eyes following him as he moves over to his desk, writing something down on a piece of paper. "What are you talking about?"

"You don't have to worry about Wright anymore," Rafe murmurs, flicking his eyes up to me and then down to his notebook he pulls onto his lap, where he's started making a packing list so that we can go home for winter break. "He's under full guard until his trial. Plus, everyone's scared shitless of Jackson now after his display at the bridge, which we've all heard about. So, we don't have to stalk you so much."

"What these two are leaving out," Ben stage-whispers to me, loud enough so that Jesse and Rafe can hear, "is that they also kicked the shit out of Wright at the warrior finals."

"What!?" I gasp, appalled.

"We only kicked the shit out of him a little bit," Rafe says, holding up two fingers held very close together in front of his face. "Just...a teeny tiny amount."

"Rafe!" I shout, grabbing a pillow and hurling it at him. "You shouldn't have done that – you should have just le

dad and the authorities handle it! This could get in the way of the

investigation!"

"I don't know why you're surprised," Jesse calls on his way to the dumbwaiter with a note, blasé. "Did you think we were just going to let him get away with it?"

"It's not your job to administer justice!" I shout, throwing out my hands.

"Well, whatever," Rafe sighs, completely ignoring my outrage. "We weren't even the first ones to do it, by the looks of things."

"What?" I gasp.

"He had bruises everywhere," Ben says, nodding and gesturing to his face. "Looks like Luca got to him, used him as a punching bag to practice his left hook."

"Luca," Rafe says, lifting his head and looking at Ben with a frown. "Why would he have done that? It was Jackson, obviously."



“Why would Jackson have done it?” Ben asks, frowning back. “He did us enough of a solid carrying Ari across that field and up the mountain. Why would he do more?”

“Because,” Rafe says, frowning at him, confused. “He’s –”

“So!” I shout as I jump to my feet, trying to cause as much disruption as possible as I see that this is getting into dangerous territory that I absolutely do not want to touch. “We’re... we’re packing!? Winter break starts tomorrow? How are we getting back to the Capital?”

Ben just watches me carefully, but Rafe looks up at me with a frown. “By train, Ari. Why do you never know these things?”

“Why do you know them?” I ask, putting my hands on my hips and frowning at him. “Seriously, are you getting like, text messages from the rail lines? Updates from mom and dad?”

“Ari, you know I don’t have my phone back yet –”

I’m pleased, honestly, that Rafe and Ben are so sufficiently distracted. But it’s all a waste, because the moment I get Ben talking about his own winter plans he’s coming to the Palace with us, I’m pleased to hear a sharp knock comes at the door followed by the sound of it opening.

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I barely – barely! – have time to turn before Jackson is halfway across the room. And I only have a half second to gasp before I’m up in his arms, held close to him as he presses a swift set of kisses first to my cheek, and then to my lips. “How are you?” he murmurs, staring into my eyes, and I can feel his joy at holding me in his arms again thrumming through him. “How did Chemistry go- did you pass? You passed – of course you passed.”

His joy and the very physical pleasure of being swept up in his arms would be infectious, irresistible, even...if I wasn’t aware of every eye in the room currently on us.

“What...” Jesse barks out, and Jackson and I both turn our heads towards him. My mate makes no move to put me down. “What the hell is going on here!?”