

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy

Chapter 14

Unfortunately, my determination to take a little space from my mate and concentrate on raising my rank is immediately foiled when Luca comes sauntering over to our table with a tray full of food.

“Hey,” he says, grinning at Rafe and Jesse with the trademark stunning smile that flares his dimples. “I come with a peace offering.”

Rafe raises his eyebrow as Luca takes a plate off his tray, sliding it onto the table. I take a sharp breath as I focus on the pair of little raspberry pastries Luca brought us – the tray was completely empty by the time Jesse and I got through in line and it broke my heart –

But Luca? Luca got two.

“What for?” Rafe asks, smacking my hand when I immediately reach for one. I hiss, more in surprise than pain, and pull my hand back.

“I didn’t mean anything when I took Shrimp over to my bunk last night for a chat,” Luca says, his face more serious now as he gives a little shrug. “I didn’t realize it would piss you off. I was just trying to offer my support – I know he’s low on the rankings, and I’ve soft spot for the underdogs.”

got a

I narrow my eyes at Luca now, because he’s blatantly lying – but he’s also protecting my secret. Luca’s eyes flash to mine and the corner of his mouth quirks up in a grin.

“Ari is ours to protect,” Rafe says, looking Luca over from head to foot before picking up the plate and holding it out to him. Luca blinks in surprise and turns his eyes back to Rafe. I don’t think he’s used to rejection – not with that face and his fame.

“Ari,” I break in, rankling a little at the possession in Rafe’s voice, “is a full person who can make friends with whoever he wants,” I say, rolling my eyes at my brother and snatching the plate of pastries out of his hand. “This was nice, Luca – thanks. No harm done.”

Rafe grumbles a little next to me but I elbow him, trying to remind him silently that I still have to fit in here. It won't do us any good to make an enemy of Luca Grant by offending him.

Plus, I want pastries. And for my mate to stay close at my side for a few more moments – damn but his scent is amazing, almost better than these flaky little Danishes –

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“Want to sit?” Jesse asks, smiling at Luca and gesturing to the seat next to him. I pale a little

– because, I mean, accepting a peace offering is one thing –

But Luca, having breakfast with us? That's starting to cross a dangerous line.

Unfortunately, before I can think of a reason to protest, Luca cheerfully takes the seat and raises his eyes to mine, smiling at me a little deviously.

Shit. This was his plan. He still has questions for me, and he knows that he has to get on Rafe and Jesse's good side if he wants to ask them.

Clever boy.

I scowl at him and take a big bite of the pastry. Unfortunately for me it's delicious, which makes it very hard to be mad and wary of my st*pid mate, who's sitting across the table from me, smirking at his victory.

Jesse and Luca chat idly, introducing themselves even though they probably already know who each other are. Jesse ropes Rafe into the conversation too, though my brother only joins in begrudgingly. I concentrate on my pancakes, working very hard to ignore Luca.

It works for a while, until he ropes me into the conversation as well.

“So, what's your plan?” Luca asks. “For getting Shrimp's numbers up?”

My head snaps up. “Why?” I ask, my nose scrunching a little as I glare at him.

“I told you before, Shrimp,” Luca says, grinning at me. “I think you're funny. It's good for morale to keep the comic relief around.”

My glare deepens, because we both know that's not the truth, but I look away, not wanting Jesse to get suspicious about the connection between us. Frankly, I'm shocked Jesse hasn't figured it out already – Luca's making it so obvious.

"And how do you propose to help?" Rafe asks, his voice low and derisive, clearly suggesting that it's impossible, "on a day like this?"

"I know," Luca says, shaking his head a little bit and crossing his arms, studying me like I'm a lost cause. "It's a shame he came in so unprepared..."

"He was a last minute addition to the roster," Jesse says, his voice dry.

"Unprepared for what?" I ask, sitting up straighter and looking between them. "Wait, what's today? What am I unprepared for?"

"Today ends in another combat competition," Rafe says, glancing over at me. "It affects the rankings. One-on-one, though, not bracket style this time."

"How do you know this shit," I breathe, shaking my head as I stare at him.

"Our dads made the school, Ari," Jesse says, rolling his eyes at me. "They told us. Nepotism for the win."

"Not like it's a big secret," Luca says, shrugging and finishing up a bowl of oatmeal. "There are all kinds of forums online where previous cadets spill the school's secrets, if you know where to find them. Anyone who did any kind of prep at all to be here knows the schedule of candidate exams."

He quirks an eyebrow at me, clearly implying that I failed to do that essential research, but duh – of course I didn't. I was busy planning my wedding.

"Well how the hell am I gonna get through this?" I ask, looking a little frantically between my brother and my cousin.

"Don't worry about it, Ari," Rafe says, taking a calm drink of his coffee. "They pit lowest against the highest for this one. So, you'll be facing me."

"So!?" I ask, my voice squeaky with anxiety. "How does that help me? I can't beat you're a gorilla – you're twice my size!"

you

GMS

"You don't have to beat me," Rafe snaps, turning to glare at me a little. "You just have to pretend to. I'm going to take the fall."

"What?" I breathe, shocked.

"Whoa, man," Luca says, his eyes wide as he stares at Rafe. "You're going to give up the number one spot? For your cousin?"

Rafe doesn't reply, just shrugs and turns back to his tray, finishing off his food.

"I don't like any of my cousins that much," Luca says, glancing up at the clock. "Shit, we've got to go –"

26

"Rafe," I say, putting my hand on his shoulder. "You can't do that – we have to figure something else out —"

"It's done, Ari," he says, glancing at the clock as well and starting to stand up. "It's not like it will knock me off the board – it will just drop me down a few spots and bring you up about

half way. It's worth it."

"Rafe!" I protest, standing up with him and gathering my tray.

"No time to debate," Jesse says, tugging me along with him and away from Rafe. "You have to let him do this, Ari. It's the only way."

I sigh, not fighting him on it as the four of us bus our trays and head for the door just as a bell sounds, signaling the end of breakfast and the start of training. But inwardly, my mind whirs – because there has to be something that I can do that doesn't put Rafe's spot at the Academy at risk just to save mine.

Unfortunately, as the day passes, I don't come up with anything. We all troop into the gym together and are run through the horrible obstacle course twice as some kind of warm-up. The entire time I run it, I push my mind to come up with something – anything –

I mean, can I fake sick and make Rafe go up against someone else? But I don't know what the results of that would be – would they just kick me out immediately? Or...is there any way I could subtly swap spots with another candidate so I'm fighting someone easier?

But what would that do? And who the hell would agree to that, even if it were allowed?

I'm panting and defeated in two ways at the end of the second run of the obstacle course, which just... really feels like a kick in the face. My time improves, but I'm still dead last. When we're finished the run, we're lined up in our ranking order and lead into a sparring gym next door, which has mats already laid out ready for our bouts. We're spread out at even distances and each handed a long wooden staff before we're taught a series of moves that it takes hours to perfect.

By the end of it, I have no idea what's going on, and I'm anxious as well as exhausted.

"You may have noticed," the Captain booms out when we're all standing quietly, "that the wooden staff is not a particularly high-tech or effective weapon in today's battle climate. That's why we chose it for this test. Our understanding is that very few people are proficient in staff work anymore. Today's examination tests not only your physical prowess, but your ability to learn an unfamiliar fighting technique quickly. Though your sparring partner will for many of you be a mismatch, the unfamiliarity of the weapons evens the playing field."

Bullshit, I think, glancing at the front of the room where Rafe stands with his staff like an extension of his damn arm. No matter how unfamiliar the weapon, he's still going to take me out with it.

Unless he really intends to go forward with his idiot plan to throw the bout in my favor?

I shake my head, realizing that the only acceptable plan is for me to throw it first. I nod to myself, decided. That's the plan.

"The bouts will be paired with highest taking on the lowest – though some small variations have been made in order to ensure fair play."

My eyebrows raise at this announcement.

Wait wait what?

—

What does that mean?

“When your number is called, pair up in your designated circle,” the Captain continues, sounding a little bored as panic flares in my chest. “In Circle 1 we have #1 against #119,” the captain says, pointing towards it.

Rafe spins to look back at me, his eyes wide. My eyes snap to the candidate next to me, a small guy named Ben Ternicki, whose dark hair that falls into his face. He exhales a long breath, pushing his hair back under his cap as he looks over at me and shrugs.

“In Circle 2,” the Captain snaps, “#2 will face #120.”

The breath leaves me in a rush as I figure out, immediately, what they’re up to.

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They know Rafe is related to me my cousin, we reported it on the intake form. So they rearranged the pairings so that he can’t face me in the bout.

Which means...

My eyes fall immediately on my opponent as he moves towards our circle, taller than the staff that’s in his hand.

Jackson McClintock.

My bout is against Jackson, my second mate.

“Good luck with that,” Ben murmurs to me as he looks between Jackson and Rafe. “Honestly, we’re both f**ked either way, but at least Sinclair probably won’t beat me to a pulp in the process,” he says, giving me a shrug as the Captain continues to call out names and the candidates start to move around the room.

“Oh god,” I moan, leaning into Ben’s hand a little as he pats my shoulder consolingly. “I’m

so screwed.”

“Come on,” he says, heaving a little sigh. “Let’s go get the shit kicked out of ourselves.”

Chapter 15

“Ari,” Rafe hisses, trying to get my attention in the sparring circle next to me.

But I can’t take my eyes off of Jackson, who stares at the floor in front of us, rolling his shoulders back. God why is he even stretching – it’s not like he’s going to have to expend any energy at all to push me out of this circle – he could probably just growl at me and I’ll run screaming out of it myself –

“Ari!” Rafe hisses, and I snap my attention to him. “You can’t forfeit,” he whispers hastily, searching my face to ensure I understand. “If you do, you’ll be disqualified. Just try not to fall, all right? Just engage once, stay on your feet, and let him push you out –”

“Begin!” the Captain shouts at the front of the room.

—

Rafe hesitates, glancing between me and Ben, who steps into the ring, his staff clutched in his hands.

I nod hastily to Rafe, letting him know that I understand.

Then I look at Jackson – or, more correctly, up at Jackson, whose eyes are on me now. God, he just seems to keep going up, like a mountain – did he get like, taller? Since the last time I saw him?

Did I shrink?

“Come on,” Jackson grumbles, his voice flat as he nods towards the center of the circle, telling me to get inside. “Let’s get this over with.”

I stare at him, my legs locking in fear – or in something –

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Because, as much as I need to concentrate on surviving this getting out of this ring as fast as I can – I just can't stop wondering...

– on doing what Rafe

says and

...what the hell my grandmother the Goddess was thinking when she picked this guy as my

mate.

My eyes sweep over him again, and while he is obviously an impressive physical specimen, he's just so brutal. There's absolutely nothing about Jackson McClintock that looks capable of being soft, or kind, or making me laugh. Everything about him looks built for violence and cruelty- there is nothing there that's sweet.

When I think about fated mates, I think about mom and dad, or Aunt Cora and Uncle Roger, whose personalities seem to have been made for each other. Mom's soft side evens out dad's harsh edges, but still deep down, they're both fierce, dedicated, and loving. They even have the same weird sense of humor.

This guy? He's...he's supposed to match me?

I just stare at him, shaking my head in disbelief when he snaps his eyes up to mine.

"Would you get in here!?" he snarls, the blue of his eyes flashing in demand, his words harsh enough to make me almost literally jump. My palms are sweaty as I take a single step forward, gripping the staff.

His eyes sweep over me, his lip rising a little in distaste. "Are you even going to raise that?" he asks, nodding towards my staff. "Or should I just come...push you over?"

And something in the way he says that, the complete derision in his eyes...

Well. It kindles something in me.

My wolf growls in my chest, as pissed as I am. This guy might be twice my size and

undoubtedly going to win the easiest bout of his life, but he doesn't have to be a jerk about

1. it.

Don't let him talk to us like that, my wolf snaps. Even if he's our mate, we're in charge.

I nudge her sometimes.

away, because while her sentiments are right, she says ridiculous things

"Fine," I say, raising my chin and tightening my hands on the staff, falling into the stance they just spent hours teaching us. "Let's do this."

"Your funeral," Jackson murmurs, his words barely audible over the sounds of sticks banging against each other and bodies hitting mats all over the room. Then he falls into his own stance, and our bout begins.

Get out fast, I say to myself, remembering Rafe's words. Don't let him get me to the mat.

Jackson and I start slowly for a moment, circling each other, looking for openings, but he strikes quick as a cobra, taking advantage of his larger size and charging for me with a wide swing of his staff. Panicked, I leap to the side with a little yelp, ducking to avoid the of wood that probably would have cracked my skull if it had landed.

sweep

Some instinct in me kicks in, either from the quick lesson we just received or my years of casual sparring with Rafe and Jesse, and I move in closer, knowing that he has \$ chance of hurting me if he can't use his whole range. Quickly, I use the butt of my staff to jab at the outside of his knee, connecting solidly.

Jackson gives a little gasp of pain and his leg buckles slightly, but my victory is short-won, because before I can comprehend what's happening he gives a bellow, spins his staff in his hands and sweeps it behind me, hitting me hard behind my knees and taking me down.

The air rushes from my lungs as my back smacks against the mat. As I gasp for air all I can think is shit – shit Rafe told me not to fall

I roll onto my stomach, hoping that I can get to the edge of the circle, that if I get close Jackson can push me out and end the bout-

But suddenly he's on top of me, holding his staff in either hand and looping it over my head so that it presses against my neck. When he pulls back, I'm lifted onto my knees, my back pressed to his chest, the staff choking me so that I can't get any air

—

Something electric passes between us as our bodies touch but I can't concentrate on that as I gasp, desperately pressing my hands against the staff, trying to get it away from me, but he's so much stronger than I am –

"Yield!" Jackson demands, shouting the word above me. I nod frantically, trying to yield, but he doesn't let me go.

"Ari!" I hear someone shout – Rafe but I can't see.

"Do not interfere!" someone snaps.

—

"I told you," Jackson continues, lowering his head so that his mouth is close to my ear now, "to yield –"

I drop my shaking hands, trying to do whatever I can to communicate that I'm giving up – that he's won

—

When suddenly he goes rigid behind me, and then slack, and the staff falls away from my neck.

Immediately, I collapse onto the floor, coughing and gasping for air. My eyes are shut as my face presses to the mat. I press my palms flat, letting air flood my lungs –

But something grabs my shoulder, spinning me – my back hits the floor hard and terror

runs through me as my eyes fly open to see Jackson crouched above me, his eyes flaring. I gasp as I realize that he's losing control – that he's going to shift into his wolf in moments if he doesn't contain himself

Because if he does that, I'm a goner – he'll shred me to pieces –

"No!" I shout, my hands going up, pressing to his chest, desperate to – I don't know him off of me? Or to remind him that he's a man and that he can't kill me

–

to get

As soon as my hands touch him a pulse pounds between us in the air, like a shock wave or a.....god, I don't know how to describe it. Jackson's eyes go wide as my mouth falls open, as my hands begin to heat where they touch him.

Jackson's eyes fly to his chest and he whips one hand upwards, seizing both of my wrists and yanking them backwards, pinning them up above my head as he looms over me, snarling, pinning me to the floor with the weight of his body.

I

gasp in fear, turning my head away and pressing my eyes shut.

"Ari!" I hear Rafe's shout again, and then the noise of pounding feet.

"What," Jackson snarls, and I can feel him moving closer to me, hear him taking a deep sniff of my scent. "What the f**k are you!?"

I sob a little gasp of fear, shaking my head, having no idea how to answer that or if I'm about to die –

When suddenly...

There's nothing holding my wrists anymore. And the weight lifts off my body. And then the shadow retreats, and light presses against my closed eyes.

I stay perfectly still for a moment before I peek through my lashes to see...

Nothing. No gigantic wolf bent on my destruction.

Nothing.

I look around for him, frantic – what is he planning, some kind of second attack!? But he's not there. I sit up, confused, looking for him, terrified for what's coming next...

And suddenly I spy him across the room, stalking towards the door.

My face goes slack because I...I don't understand it...

"The bout in Circle 2 goes to 120," a dry voice says next to me, and I spin my head to see a Lieutenant marking his clipboard before walking away. And suddenly Rafe is kneeling at my side, his hands on my cheeks, his eyes moving over me frantically.

"Are you all right?" Rafe gasps, his eyes moving over me frantically, looking for wounds and broken bones. "Did he –"

"How did..." I start, shaking my head to clear it, "how did I win!?"

"Because," Rafe growls, falling back on his ass and shaking his head at me when he realizes I'm okay. "You're still in the ring. He's not."

My eyes go wide as I look around me and realize that Rafe's...Rafe's right.

I'm still within the circle. And Jackson is...gone.

"Welcome to the top 80% of candidates, Ari," Rafe says, shaking his head at me, as baffled as I am. "I don't know what kind of mystical intervention just happened, but it may have just saved your ass."

I groan and flop back on the mat, wishing to hell I had some idea what on earth is going on.

Chapter 16

The rest of the bouts around us begin to end pretty quickly, with Lieutenants moving around the room recording the results. Rafe and I sit quietly together

in my circle and, even as my mind whirls fruitlessly, trying to figure out what the hell just happened, my eyes scan the room for Jesse and for

Luca.

Did they win? Did they keep their place high in the rankings?

“If you’re finished,” a Lieutenant says, stopping by our circle, “you should go to lunch.” He nods towards the door before he moves on.

“Come on,” Rafe says, standing up and grasping me by the arm to pull me with him.

“I can stand,” I mutter, even though he’s already pulled me to his feet.

Rafe doesn’t say anything, but he keeps hand on me as we move towards the gym door and towards the barracks cafeteria. As we get into the lunch line which I’m pleased to see we’re at the start of, lucky us – I turn to him suddenly, realizing that I’ve been too lost in my own thoughts to ask.

“Wait, did you win?” I ask, eager.

Rafe just glances at me and rolls his eyes, because duh, of course he did. I laugh, unable to help it.

“You don’t have to be so smug about it, Rafe,” I sigh, heaping mashed potatoes and gravy onto my plate along side the roast meat and peas.

“I’m not being smug, it’s just that the outcome of my bout was basically predetermined,” he sighs, grabbing two bottles of water and passing me one.

“Well so was mine,” I say as we carry our trays over to our usual table. I grin as I see Jesse coming through the door, Luca at his side. Jesse waves to us as he and Luca jog towards the food line. “But my result did not match the odds.”

Rafe settles across the table from me and frowns. “Yeah, we need to talk more about that,” he murmurs. “What the hell happened? Tell me everything.”

“Um,” I say, starting on my food, for which I genuinely am hungry today. “It all happened very fast...” I hesitate and then say what I can, about how Jackson basically had me pinned before he inexplicably bailed. As I speak, I look

around the room for Jackson, who frankly should have been the first person in here.

But he's nowhere in sight.

Rafe hums in thought, considering my story and asking for more details, but I say that's all I know. a whiff Because I'm certainly not going to tell him what I suspect to be the truth that Jackson got of my scent and realized that he might be murdering his mate.

But, if he'd figured that out, why did he just....leave? Why didn't he say anything, or confront me?

I gnaw on my lip, distracted enough to jump a little when Jesse's tray lands next to mine.

"So?" Jesse says, looking eagerly between Rafe and I as Luca puts his tray down next to Rafe's. Luca nods around to us in a friendly way and looks at me with commiseration in his eyes. "How'd it go?"

"I won," Rafe says with a casual shrug, "you?"

Jesse nods eagerly and gestures towards Luca. "Him too. Solid bouts poor kids, it's really unfair that they put top versus bottom, even though it works out well for those in the middle."

"Yeah, it's a shame, Shrimp," Luca says, his mouth twisting with regret as he looks at me. "Seriously, do you have a hidden skill or something? Or are you crazy smart? Because otherwise –"

"Why." Rafe says dryly, interrupting Luca while concentrating coldly on his lunch, "are you assuming that he lost?"

Luca stops mid-sentence, looking between Rafe and me. I raise my eyebrow at him, adopting an arrogance that I absolutely have not earned.

"No way," Jesse breathes, and then he starts to laugh. "No way!" he says again, a shout this time, and he wraps his arms around my shoulders, rocking me back and forth. "What the hell, Shrimpy!? How did you do that?"

I can't help but laugh with his enthusiasm but I swat him away, trying to be cool like Rafe does with no effort at all. "It's not a big deal," I sigh, though I

blush a little, because it kind of is a big deal. I mean, there are more tests coming, but this one will give me a significant boost in the ratings that I absolutely need, especially considering that I'm still coming in last in the obstacle course.

"Are you

serious?" Luca asks, his voice thick with disbelief as he leans forward to stare at me. "You.... you beat McClintock?"

"Maybe you should learn not to underestimate me so much, Grant," I say, my voice dry as I pretend to concentrate on my food. "Or I'll take you out next."

Luca laughs a little at my hubris and grins at me. I can't help the little smile that pulls at my lips. My brother looks up at me then with a small smirk on his mouth, pleased with me and proud. Because even if I didn't really win the match? I'm at least learning how to handle myself around these guys.

I burst into a smile at that and we fall into an easy conversation then, eating our food hastily because we know the day isn't nearly over.

We're all shepherded into what looks like a classroom after lunch, with one hundred and twenty little desks all lined up in neat rows, a pack of paper and a pencil neatly set on each one. New ratings haven't been calculated just yet, so I'm in the back row again with Ben Ternicki. He nods to me with a little smile and I shrug at him, communicating without words that I'm sorry my beat him in the match.

brother

Ben just shrugs like it was inevitable and I grin, liking his easy sense of humor. My eyes pull away

from him, though, when I notice a bunch of figures in black enter the room, spreading out behind the head table and observing the candidates.

"Who are they?" I whisper, leaning over to Ben.

"Professors from the Academy," he whispers back. "They're probably specialty subjects. They're allowed to come down and note any candidates who they think might be worthwhile, even if they don't otherwise stand out."

“Oh.” I say, my eyes going wide as they focus on one professor in particular with a handsome, angular face, his dark hair pulled back into a knot at the back of his head. “I didn’t know there was a...way in. Beyond the examinations.”

Ben nods and I look down at the papers on our desks, the cover sheet marked with our candidate number and name. “What are these?” I ask as the Captain commands us to sit.

“Logic test,” Ben answers as we take our seats. “Basic math, word problems, that sort of thing. It’s a thinly veiled IQ test.”

“Oh.” I say, my eyebrows going up. I’ve never taken one of those at least not to my knowledge.

—

“Begin,” the Captain calls from the beginning of the room, his voice dry. “Bring your test up to the front when you’re finished with it. And then you’ll be dismissed.”

I nod to Ben, wishing him luck, and then I flip to the first page, sinking into a calm, almost meditative state, moving through the exam pretty quickly as soon as I realize that these are the kinds of problems our have tutors trained us on since we were kids. It’s a relief, honestly, because this? This is my wheel house. I was always good in school.

The exam takes almost two hours, but I write my answer to the last problem and set my pencil down with a satisfied smile. I mean, it was tricky, and the problems got harder as the test progressed. But...I know I got them right. Every single one.

I sigh, pushing my chair back, and I jump a little at the screech it makes as it slides across the floor. Awkward, I look around the room to see if I’ve disturbed anyone....

And my eyes go wide to realize that I’ve disturbed everyone. And they all turn to look at me.

I glance down at the test in my hands, wondering if I missed a page or something, because...I mean, I know I’m smart. But I can’t have finished first, right?

Another chair scrapes across the room and I flinch when I realize that I recognize the giant form that stands up next. He turns and looks back at me and my eyes meet flinty blue steel. He stands still, and I realize that he's waiting for me.

Because I stood up first.

I stumble a little as I move away from my desk and then, scowling, I hurry to the front of the room. To my chagrin, Jackson starts in that direction so that we get to the head table at the same time.

Heat rushes to my face as I look down at my shoes and my mind spins because – what the hell is going to happen?

Is he going to like punch me? For taking his victory from him? My shoulders seize despite me as my whole body tenses, waiting for him to act.