

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

## **Read Chapter 151 – 160**

### **Chapter 151**

#### **Chapter 0151**

But also...what is it that I want? Do I actually want like...two boyfriends? How would that even work? And what does that look like in twenty years – do we all just...live in a house together? Would we...have kids?

God, this is so weird.

Jackson blushes deeply now that he's been put on the spot, his mouth twisting as he looks down at the floor.

"Well?" Rafe asks. "Speak now, Jacks, this is your chance to say what you really want. Are you cool with Ariel dating Luca too? Or..."

"Fine, whatever," Jackson snaps, unhappy to be pressed into telling his truth and not looking at me. "I want what Luca wants, if you really want to know. I want my mate to myself, I don't want to share her with anyone." He raises his eyes to glare at Luca a little, like it's all his fault.

"All right," Rafe says, sounding satisfied. I turn to him in confusion now, my hands spreading at my sides because...I mean, we didn't decide anything –

"It looks like you're going to have to choose, Ari," Rafe says, his face even and his voice controlled.

My mouth pops open in horror.

"Well, they don't want to be in an open relationship," he says, gesturing towards my mates with my coffee mug.

"But we said -!"

"I know," Rafe says, nodding, reading my mind. "And I still stand by that. You have a right to explore both of your mating bonds, which the Goddess gave you – a gift from our grandmother."

"Wait, what?" Jackson asks, stepping forward a little, confused.

“We’ll explain that later,” Jesse murmurs, waving a hand at Jackson, his eyes trained on Rafe.

“But,” Rafe says, holding up a finger, “I don’t think that it’s fair for you to have unlimited time to explore those bonds. I think that, in deference to what your mates have stated they want...that you should take the time you need to make your decision, but that in the end...” he holds my eyes now, knowing that it’s breaking my heart, “you should choose one of them, Ariel. It’s...it’s not fair not to, if that’s not what they want.”

My mouth pops open as I stare at my brother and then over at my two mates, my heart breaking at the idea of not having one of them.

Because –

I mean –

They’re – they’re mine –

They’re both mine!

“Rafe,” I say, my voice thick with my grief at the idea, “I can’t...”

“Well, we can’t,” Luca says, folding his arms and staring at me, hard. I feel all of his sadness, all of his grief as he does. “I mean, I don’t speak for Jackson, but I can’t live like this. Not forever. For a little bit...” he sighs, hanging his head, thinking about it. “Maybe. Maybe, Ariel. Because I think I’m better for you than he is, your true mate, but because you might need time to figure that out? I think...I think I could live with it. For a while.”

Shocked, my eyes move to Jackson next.

But he doesn’t say a word, just holding my eyes.

And as I stare at him, I realize what the emotions are coming down my bond with him – just...a desperate desire, an open yes, absolute horror at the idea that he could lose me and a determination to keep me on any terms.

As I realize that that’s how my sweet mate is feeling – so desperate, so ready to say yes to whatever keeps me by his side no matter what the terms - I set my jaw and raise my chin, determined to do what’s right.

Because it’s not fair to Jacks. Even if he hasn’t said it aloud, he wants me so badly that he’s willing to take me however he can get me, even if that means sharing me with Luca, which is not what he wants to do. And Luca – he knows how to fight for himself, knows how to ask for what he wants, to insist upon it.

But Jackson...

And I can't...suddenly, I can't anymore. I can't insist on both of them letting me have them forever, even if it's what I want, because it's just not fair. If it's not what they want, not what they can give, then it's not fair.

"Fine," I say, my lip shaking and my eyes filling with tears as I raise my chin and move my eyes back to my brother. "Fine. I'll...I'll choose. If that's what's fair, then that's what I'll do."

## Chapter 152

### Chapter 152

Chapter 0252

My brother, seeing the very real grief on my face, stands and moves to my side, pulling into a hug. "You're getting the best end of this deal," he murmurs after a moment. Then Rafe loosens his arms and stands between me and my mates, not letting them see the sadness written in every line of me because he knows I need to stand strong in this decision that I need to make it myself, without them.

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"I know," I whisper, my heart breaking as my brother wipes the two tears that fall quickly off of my cheeks, not wanting them to see. "I get it...it's just...god, Rafe, I can't imagine..."

"I know," he murmurs, leaning forward and pressing a kiss to my forehead. "But neither can they. I think it's right, Ariel or if not right, then the fairest. We can – we can talk to mom and Cora when we get home. Maybe talk to the Goddess? See...see if we can get a better perspective. But for right now, this makes peace."

I take a deep breath, looking up into my brother's face, and then I nod, working hard to steady myself. When he sees that I'm in control again, Rafe turns around, slipping a

protective arm around my shoulders and looking between Luca and Jackson. "So, we're good with this? We're agreed?"

"Well, what's the timeline?" Luca asks, frowning, his hand sunk into his pockets.

“No set timeline,” Rafe replies, looking down at me with a nod. “When Ari knows...she’ll know.”

“So what, we could do this for years?” Luca gasps, appalled.

“It’s enough, Luc,” Jesse snaps from the couch, glaring at him a little. “You’ve already asked her to choose one mate today, and it’s already breaking her heart. Stop trying to pin it down more. She’s given enough.”

Luca huffs a sigh, hanging his head, but after a moment he nods, giving in. “Fine.”

“Jacks?” Rafe asks. My mate doesn’t reply to him, just holding me with his dark-blue gaze. Then, just once, he nods.

“Wow,” Ben murmurs, I think not even realizing that he said it aloud as he looks between all of us. And I have to admit, I share his sentiment. It’s just all...a lot.

And we all stand very, very still, I think none of us having any idea, at all, what to do next.

Suddenly, we all give a collective flinch as the sound of bells peels out from somewhere in the castle.

“Shit,” Rafe gasps, turning towards the sound. “Shit, shit.”

“What is that?” I ask, turning my head almost as if I could see them, though obviously I can’t. “Since when does the castle have bells!? Since when do they ring them!?”

“It’s tradition!” Jesse shouts, jumping up from the couch and hopping over the back of it, darting for his bed. “End of term! Shit, the train is going to be here in like ten minutes, and we haven’t even packed!”

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— and I I gasp, suddenly realizing the gravity of this — I haven’t packed at all, not a stitch spin towards my nook. But as I rip the velvet curtain back, I turn with a frown, because there are footsteps

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“Where are you going?” I call, seeing both of my mates heading for the door.

“To get our stuff!” Luca calls over his shoulder, worried. “I’ll meet you at the train, Ariel! It’s fine!”

Jackson doesn't say a word. I bite my lip, glancing between my possessions and the door, and then decide that I don't have anything here that I can't reproduce at home except my homework. I grab my textbook, tossing it to Ben who – already packed – sits casually at the coffee table, sipping from his mug. "Pack that for me!" I shout, darting for the door.

When I get to our open doorway I look left and right, a little grateful when I see that Luca and Jackson have taken different sets of stairs down to the single dorm floors. I bite my lip, shooting a glance in Luca's direction before darting after Jacks.

"Jackson!" I call, starting down the spiral staircase after him. I'm moving so fast that I almost have to skid to a stop when I realize he stopped in the middle of the stairs, where I couldn't see him.

"Whoa!" he says, catching me with an arm around my waist before I slam into him or careen down the steps and break my neck.

But there's no time to think about any of that.

"Jacks," I say, taking his face in my hands, worried. "You're still coming, right? To the Palace? For break?"

## Chapter 153

### Chapter 153

Chapter 0253

Jackson hesitates, glancing away from me and looking down the stairs.

"Jacks!" I gasp, pulling his face back to look at mine, aghast at the idea that he wouldn't come. "You said you! You told my

mom!"

"Ariel," he sighs, shaking his head and wrapping the arm around my waist tighter, pulling me closer so that my feet are barely on the stairs anymore, my weight all on him. "It's just... it's been a lot, okay? And I'm no good with this...people stuff, and there are going to be a lot of people there for winter break."

Understatement of the year, but I don't say anything that will encourage him on this ridiculous idea not to come.

“Maybe it’s better for me to not go?” Jackson says, soft, hesitant. “To just take the next two weeks to get my head together, and stay here where it’s quiet, and then I’ll see you when you get back?”

“Jackson,” I cry, my heart breaking at the idea. God, not seeing him, for two weeks? After everything we’ve been through in the past few days?

He groans, clenching his teeth at the sound I make. “Don’t ask me, Ari,” he whispers, shaking his head, his eyes exhausted and sad. “Don’t ask me for more today, because if you ask, you know I’ll give it – I can’t say no –”

“Baby,” I murmur, taking a hand from his cheek and running it through his hair, not

knowing where the pet name came from, not worrying about that now. But Jackson closes his eyes at the sound of it, hardly able to bear it. And even though he’d probably die rather than let anyone hear me call him that...

...I know that he likes it. He likes it a lot.

“It will be good, Jacks,” I whisper, a promise in every word. “I promise it will be good, we won’t push you too far we’ll...we’ll make sure you’re happy. All of us.”

Jackson opens his eyes, staring up at me, and the bells start to peel again.

Worried, he glances down the stairs, and I know he has to get to his room to get his things.

“Just meet us at the train,” I whisper, again turning his face back to me again before pressing a kiss to his mouth – fast, too short, not at all what I really want to do. I pull back, staring into his eyes. “Just meet us at the train, all right? Jackson?”

+15 BO

“I’ll try,” he whispers, looking up into my face. And I nod, knowing that’s the best I’m going to get right now, and that he means it. He will try, but if it’s too much...

Well, my mate has a tendency to run, doesn’t he?

Jackson kisses me again, just as swift as the last, before carefully putting me on my feet and letting me go. “Get back to your brother,” he growls, narrowing his eyes a little. “Don’t go wandering around this castle by yourself –”

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“Oh, they’re ten feet away,” I snap, rolling my eyes and turning to dart up the stairs. “The train, Jacks!” I call over my shoulder. “I’ll see you there!”

But as I hurry up the stairs, he doesn't call anything after me, and my heart sinks. I hope to the ends of me that he comes, but part of me knows...well, I know that if he was going to come, he would have told me so. He would have promised.

"Ari!" Rafe shouts as I reach the top of the stairs, frowning furiously at me. "Come on!"

I dash to his side, trying to get back into the room, but Jesse and Ben are already at the door, backpacks over their arms.

"I tried," Ben says, apologetic as he hands me a woefully under-packed bag. "I don't know which of your things you wanted –"

"It's fine," I say, trying my best to give him a smile and slinging the pack over my shoulder.

"Let's go," Rafe says, pressing me on the shoulder and turning me back towards the stairs. "We are not missing this train. We are getting home, tonight. To see our parents and our insane passel of siblings."

"And to drink our faces off." Jesse murmurs, shooting me a wink as I laugh and the four of us hurry down the stairs. "And get back in touch with all of Ariel's friends

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I gasp at that, but Ben laughs and gives me another little shove, making me move forward.

Forward to the train, where I'm supposed to meet my mates And bring them home to meet my family.

–

both of them.

## **Chapter 154**

### **Chapter 154**

Chapter 0254

We basically have to sprint across the field where the candidate barracks are to get down to the train tracks in time. The sleek train is waiting there, puffing steam, filling with cadets all eager to get home for winter break. As we run I mentally thank my mother again for her healing powers – who would have thought that two days ago I was

basically dead over Jackson's shoulder, and now here I am dashing across a field with my best friends, a mostly- empty bag bouncing on my back?

When we get down to the tracks I see that the platform itself is getting sparse, pretty much all the cadets already having boarded, and I dart immediately for a door to the train, wanting to get in and get a seat. But before I can even grab the little handle to lift myself into the closest train car, Jesse grabs my arm.

"Ari, what are you doing!?"

I spin, stumbling a little as I look up at him. "I'm getting on the damn train, Jesse!"

My cousin just grins down at me and gestures down the tracks. "Come on," he says, laughing. "Our seats are back here."

"What?" I let myself be lead down the line, frowning the whole way, but then my face shifts quickly into surprise and delight when I see the bright red caboose attached to the end of the train.

Because of course. Of course mom and dad sent the royal car for us to take back to the city.

"Oh my god," I murmur, my hands going to my cheeks, my embarrassment competing with my pleasure and losing immediately. "That's...that's so nice of them."

"Whoa," Luca says at my side, and I jump a little when I realize that it's him standing there. And then I burst into a grin as he slips an arm around my waist and pulls me tight for a second before

turning his gaze back to the train itself. I watch his eyebrows raise as he takes in the beautiful coach with its cheerful, shiny red sides, its gilt details. "We are traveling in style today." His voice is a little breathless.

"Wait till you see inside," Rafe laughs, glancing at Luca and Ben, who is also staring at the coach, dazzled. But before we can get any further a group of guards step onto the platform in front of us, a handcuffed cadet between them.

And all of us simultaneously go still because...

Well, because it's Wright.

1/3

+15 BONUS

And god, but he looks like shit.



Wright's face lifts at the sudden silence before him and he flinches immediately back when he sees Rafe, Jesse, Luca, and Ben at my side – all of my Alphas, who bare their teeth and take defensive stances, ready to spring at him if he even takes one wrong stumbling step in my direction.

But when his eyes fall on me, Wright can't help the cruel snarl that twists his face. He doesn't say a word, but the hate radiates off him, nearly palpable in the air. As he stares at me I know without a doubt that he doesn't regret a damn thing. In fact, if he had the chance? He would absolutely try to murder me again, his reasons for committing the crime now only compounded in his mind.

Still, despite his venom and his determination, something about this – about Wright shackled and beaten while I stand, healthy and hale, with my best friends and my family all

around? 2

I realize, now, my power. That even if Wright can kill me with his bare hands...

Well, I've got much more than bare hands to defend myself with, don't I?

"Hey, Wright," I say, far too cheerful as I put on my best Princess smile and step forward to greet him, my hands innocently tucked behind my back. I purse my lips a little in mock pity as I look him over, taking in each and every one of his bruises. "Did you have...a rough couple days?"

The snarl that rips from Wright's mouth is vicious and deadly, but one of his guards just cuffs him over the back of the head and he stumbles forward, moving along.

"Have a nice winter break!" I call over m

shoulder as my enemy walks away, a little gleeful at my victory over this terrible man. Luca, pleased, laughs and puts an arm around my shoulders giving me a squeeze.

"He's going to have an absolute shit winter break," Rafe murmurs, slipping his hands into his pockets and watching Wright go as Jesse and Ben climb up the

ttle set of gilt stairs and into our train car. "He's being incarcerated over the holidays, so he'll be in a cell while we're all celebrating. But his trial will be held after the holidays pass, but before we return to school."

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and he totally tried to murder me he was allowed to "So, even though he was accused take the candidate finals?" I ask, looking up at my brother, curious.

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Rafe slowly nods, meeting my eyes. “It’s all still allegations at this point, Ari. If he is declared innocent, he’ll return to school. They had to let hi

take the tests to see if he’d

## Chapter 155

### Chapter 155

Chapter 0255

A little worry curls in me at this and I open my mouth to ask more questions, but suddenly the train emits a loud whistle that makes me leap nearly out of my boots.

“Come on!” Jesse calls, sticking his head out from inside the coach. “There’s champagne in here! I am not waiting for you! If it’s all gone by the time you get in here then you only have yourselves to blame!”

I laugh, moving eagerly forward, Rafe and Luca following close behind. But just as I put my foot up on the prettily-wrought golden stair, I hear someone shyly clear their throat behind me. I gasp, recognizing the sound somehow, and spin, my eyes wide.

“Daphne!” I shout, thrilled to see her standing there, a tiny suitcase anxiously clutched in her hands, her auburn hair curling prettily over her shoulders.

“Um,” she says, biting her lip, looking at me with sad and sorry eyes, her whole body tight with unease. “Is it okay? I mean...does my invitation to the Capital for midwinter still

stand?”

“Daph!” I shout with a laugh, dashing away from the train car towards my friend and almost knocking her over in my eagerness as I hug her tight to me. She gasps a little at the force of me and then laughs too, wrapping one arm around me, her suitcase pressed between us. “Of course it stands! I’m so happy to see you! I’m so happy you came!”

“I’m so sorry, Ari,” she whispers, and I can tell by the tightness in her words that she’s on the edge of tears. The train emits another sharp whistle and starts to rumble. “I didn’t want to do it, but they made me – they said I wouldn’t be allowed to keep my job if I didn’t –”

“This is all very nice!” Luca shouts, and I jump a bit, turning to see him leaning from the edge of the gilt stairs, already boarded, a hand out towards us. “And I hate to interrupt a sentimental moment, but you two need to get on now, because this train is leaving!”

Almost as if Luca’s words themselves made the train move, it gives a sudden jolt and starts forward. I gasp, shoving Daphne in front of me, and she stumbles towards Luca’s hand, grasping it. Luca pulls Daphne upwards with ease as I start to run alongside the train, but my powerful mate handles the situation like he’s done it all his life. After Luca safely hands Daphne off to a waiting Jesse, who, beaming, helps her into the car, he reaches out for me.

I grab Luca’s hand he Luca laughs as he pulls me upwards, settling me against his chest as the train pulls away from the platform and picks up speed. I turn towards the carriage, eager to get inside, but he holds me still for a moment, smiling down into my face.

1/2

+15 BONUS

“Almost too late, Princess,” he purrs, putting a hand on my cheek and running his thumb over my lower lip just briefly, just once.

“Never too late,” I say, lifting my chin and shaking back my head in a way that would send my hair cascading over my shoulders if it weren’t tucked up under my cap a

– a very girlish, very Princess sort of gesture. “I am royalty, after all. This train leaves when I say it does.”

“Yeah right,” he mutters, laughing at me. “We almost left you crying on the tracks, and then you’d have had to run home –.”

But when I start to sputter a protest, pounding him ineffectually on the chest with my fists, Luca just laughs harder, and so I do, and he lowers his face to mine and presses a kiss to my mouth like he can’t help it. And I know I should care, should worry about who might see us kissing out in the open like this but as the train begins to speed through the countryside, and the air whips around us, and my mate kisses me all alone – just the two of us – little platform on the caboose of the train taking us back to the Capital?

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on the

God, but I can’t bring myself to care. Because it’s just so perfect, and just so wonderful, to be here and wrapped in his arms.

But as we speed away, and I lose myself in Luca, my little wolf raises her snout in my soul and loses a tiny, mournful howl, sniffing the air.

Her little nose works hard, trying to find any trace of the scent of embers and pine, leather and whiskey and cold winter nights.

But sniff as she might, we both know it's not there.

And she lets out another tiny, mournful noise. And then tucks her head down against her paws.

## Chapter 156

### Chapter 156

Chapter 0256

"Come on," Luca murmurs, smiling down at me, and when I open my eyes I can't help but smile back. "Let's get inside – they're probably eating Daphne alive in there."

"Oh, no they're not," I say, dismissive of the idea and unwilling to go inside just yet, relishing this moment alone with my mate. I lean closer against him for a warm moment, enjoying the hard muscle of his chest against my cheek, knowing that Ben and

which Rafe and Jesse are being perfect gentlemen inside. Or, at least, Ben and Rafe are, should be enough.

But Luca gives me a nudge, and when I look up at him, he wrinkles his nose at me. "Come on, gorgeous, let's get you some of that champagne."

"You trying to get me drunk, mate?" I murmur, smiling.

"Oh, absolutely," he growls, dipping his face closer to mine for a quick kiss. And I laugh, but look over my shoulder, newly eager to get inside and see what my parents have set up for us. "Come on," I say, grabbing Luca's hand and turning to tug him inside, wanting him to see it. Because the train car – it really is something special.

As we duck through the door and I place my backpack on the little luggage rack next to the door, I do my best to tuck my anxieties about the missing Jackson away, not wanting Luca to feel any of it. Because I am excited to be here with him, and with the rest of my family and friends, and none of them deserve to have their excitement spoiled by me worrying about where my second mate is.

But I have to admit – it's very difficult. Because where is he? Did he seriously choose two weeks of solitude over winter break with me, just because he's overwhelmed?

I put a determined smile on my face, though, shoving these worries away as wave Luca into the beautiful train car, enjoying the way that his mouth hangs open as he turns around, taking in the gorgeous woodwork, the red leather and velvet seating all around. But even as I smile at Luca, my eyes catch on Rafe, who stands by the window with his arms crossed, watching me with a raised eyebrow.

Rafe and I don't have a mind-link, obviously, but I can read the question all over his face. He's intuiting that I have definitely noticed Jackson's absence, as he has, and he's asking me silently if I'm okay.

I give my brother a short nod and a shrug when Luca's back is turned because what am I supposed to do about it now? Go to pieces, and ruin everyone's good mood? Rafe holds my

1/2

+15 BONUS

gaze for a long moment and then nods once, steady. And in that, I know that he's telling me that he hears me, and he understands, and that whatever he needs me to do – he'll do it. 1

And I beam at him, loving my brother anew for his secret, steady empathy, for his willingness to already be there.

Bolstered, I turn my attention back to the room, taking a further step in and deciding to dedicate myself to this moment, and to turn my mind to Jackson when I can. Because there's already enough here drawing on my attention.

"This is amazing..." Luca murmurs,

his eyes

wide as he finishes looking around at the long row of windows on both sides of the car that allow us to look out over the countryside, the rich warmth of the wood-paneled walls. A little overwhelmed, he sinks onto a plush velvet seat by the window, leaning his arm against the adjoining table and staring over at the bar at the far side of the room where of course – Jesse is already pouring drinks, Daphne at his side being helpful and setting out the glasses.

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Behind Jesse is a set of glass-lined refrigerators and cabinets that display an insane amount of delicious food – far too much for the six of us to eat and drink on the journey to the

Capital. But her hearty

congratulatory hand is all

over it, and I can see that it's her gift to us,

congratulations. She's stocked all of our favorites, after all – all the sandwiches we like, all the treats, all the things we like to drink.

Only wine and beer, I note with a grin, because she wants us to show up to the capital sober enough to walk. But, she also wants us to have a good time.

“Do you like it?” I ask, stepping closer to Luca with a smile and running a hand through his hair, unable to keep from touching it.

“Um, obviously,” he says with a laugh, grinning up at me and slipping a hand around my hips. “Do you seriously travel like this all the time?”

“This,” I say on a sigh, trying to sound as snobby as possible and make him laugh. “Or the private jet, or the helicopter, if we're only going short distances but the bar cart on the helicopter is just

terrible – ”

Luca bursts into laughter, as I hoped he would, and pulls me into his lap, wanting me close. I press a kiss to his cheek, nudging him with my nose a little, so incredibly happy to be here. “Do you mind if I talk to Daphne?” I whisper, my eyes darting over to her behind the bar where Jesse is finishing up pouring out champagne. “I want to make sure that she knows that we're okay-”

## Chapter 157

### Chapter 157

Chapter 0257

“Of course, Gorgeous,” Luca says, frowning at me a little, like he's ashamed that I felt like I had to ask. He loosens his arm around me. “You don't have to –”

“I know,” I say, interrupting and looking at him quite seriously. “But Luca, it’s not like we haven’t had our own challenges these past two days too –”

He smiles at me, at the understatement of it all, and I can’t help the matching smile that takes my lips.

“I just don’t want you to think you’re not important to me,” I murmur, pressing a warm hand to his cheek and sending a great deal of warmth down our bond. “Or that she’s more important, or ”

“I get it,” Luca says, nodding to me and pressing a kiss to my cheek. “We’re good, Ari – go check in with your friend! Friendships are important!”

A great deal of love swells in me at Luca’s support and I hug him tight for a moment, so grateful for him. Because there’s something in me that knows that he came off as the selfish one in this whole thing – that he was the one to first say he wanted me to give up Jackson, that he wanted a timeline on me making my choice between them.

But really, overall, Luca has been so supportive of me at every turn. Hell, he was eager to have me even when he thought it meant changing his entire understanding of his sexuality. He just...loves me, and wants me to himself like everyone else with a mate does, and he isn’t shy about voicing that. But when it comes to what I want, and what I need?

At every turn, Luca has been on my side, even if it takes him a moment to get there.

I’m just so, so lucky to have him in my life.

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“Love you,” Luca murmurs, holding me tight for a second before he lets me go. And I beam at him, pressing another kiss to his mouth before I stand up and move over to the bar. Ben – angel that he is

takes two glasses of champagne off the little tray next to Daphne and carries them over to Luca, wanting to keep him company.

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“Hi,” I say, almost skipping to Daphne’s side, where she hands me a glass of champagne and gives me a shy smile.

“Hi,” she replies, laughing a little.

“Be careful with that,” Jesse calls to me with a studied frown, peering over Daphne’s shoulder. “I poured this champagne, and checked to ensure the bottle was sealed before I

1/2

+15 BONUS

opened it, but Daphne may have slipped something in that when my back was turned –

Daphne groans, covering her face with her hand and shaking her head, even as she laughs a little at Jesse’s teasing.

“You could wake up on the floor of this train twenty–four hours from now, or absolutely anywhere else, completely under Daphne’s control –” Jesse continues in mock–seriousness, grinning at me

now that Daphne can’t see.

“Will I never live this down!?” Daphne calls, her face still buried in her hand.

“Oh, when you’ve given him ammunition like this?” Rafe asks, laughing and stepping close, taking his own champagne glass from Jesse. “Daphne, this is enough for years worth of teasing. He may spin this one out until the end of time.”

Daphne sighs, dropping her hand to look up at the Prince and the Duke with a little good- humored exhaustion.

“Greatest midwinter gift I’ve ever been given,” Jesse says, grinning at her and lifting his glass of champagne in her direction. “I’m eternally grateful, Daph.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she murmurs, flapping a hand at him, “saves me from having to buy you a sweater, doesn’t it?” We all laugh as the train chugs along, our little car rocking softly from side to side as we go.

“To Daphne,” Rafe calls out, raising his champagne glass. We all do the same, everyone smiling – even Daphne, who blushes a warm and pleased red. “Who has knocked us all out with her poison, yes, but especially with her warm presence and rich company. We’re so pleased you’re here, Daph.”

And as I raise my glass to my friend, I don’t miss the way that Rafe smiles at her.

It’s a smile that I’m not sure I’ve seen before on Rafe, a very...rare sort of smile. That he perhaps saves for a very rare sort of girl.



Anxious, my eyes dart to Ben, who I see...

Well, I see that Ben doesn't miss it either.

And that his own smile looks more forced than it usually does.

## Chapter 158

### Chapter 158

Chapter 0258

A cheer goes round the train car and we all lift our glasses higher, toasting our friend and making her feel at home, before we each take a sip. Daphne, a little embarrassed but clearly pleased, struggles to take a sip because she's smiling so hard. A little rush of joy moves through me as the rich taste of the champagne moves across my tongue, the bubbles echoing the effervescent happiness of my soul in this moment.

"Well, thank you," Daphne says, nodding her head around to all of us. "But the true celebration is your success at the Academy this first semester—"

We all cheer round at this too, laughing and shouting, I think needing this outlet after the stress of it all. —

"To making it throu

Daphne says, raising her glass again, and we all toast to this as well, sipping more. When it's all done, I frown at mine and Daphne's half-filled glasses and move around her to grab the second bottle of champagne out of Jesse's hands the moment he pops it open.

"Hey!" he shouts in protest, but I know that he doesn't really care as I take the bottle by the

neck and move back to Daphne's side.

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"Sorry, this is girl champagne," I say, giving a little shrug and carefully looping my arm with Daphne's, grinning at her and nodding towards the door to the bathroom at the far end of the room. I turn my smile on her alone now. "Want to take a second, just me and you?"

“Well, if there’s girl champagne involved,” she says, giving a happy little shrug. “Who am I to protest?”

“I know there’s some boy champagne back here,” Jesse murmurs jokingly, ducking beneath the bar and pretending to search.

“Boy champagne is just whiskey,” Rafe mutters, dry, as Daphne and I move along to the bathroom and I push open the door. “Is there any of that back there?”

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“Yes!” Jesse shouts, victorious, popping back up a tiny bottle that our dad either forgot to have removed or secretly hid there, knowing Rafe would want it. It’s his drink, after all. Boy champagne, all around!”

And, as the boys start to pull out cut crystal glasses to drink their own toast, I shut the door behind Daphne and I and prepare myself for a much-needed bit of girl time.

When I turn around, prepping to pour both of us more champagne, I smile to see Daphne

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+15 BONUS

looking around a bit in awe.

“Um,” she murmurs, taking in the wide pink cushion that stretches along the length of the window, the crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling, the marble finishes to the sink and the tucked-away toilet area. “This was....not what I was expecting when I thought ‘train bathroom.’”

“I know,” I say, laughing and gesturing over to the window seat. “This was...all mom. But she knows that a bathroom is for more than bodily function.”

It’s true, though. As Daphne and I settle ourselves onto the pink cushion and I refill our flutes, I consider that while mom and dad designed this caboose together – as they do most things – she really took the reins in here. The main room of the train car has much more

dad in it

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dark colors, masculine lines, polished wood – all rich monied elegance. But here, with rose-gold details and lilies and soft bright lighting?

Yup. Dad probably didn't even think about the bathroom, and mom snuck this in. Which is probably why it's my favorite space.

"Ari," Daphne sighs, and I open my mouth to stop her saying that she's sorry – but she puts out a hand towards me. "Will you please let me get this apology out? It's important to me.

"But I've already forgiven you," I say, smiling softly as I rest my head against the wall. "If there's anything to forgive."

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"I know, and I'm grateful for that," she says, nodding, "but...I mean, it's unforgiveable, isn't it? I feel like you may never trust me again. You should be able to trust me implicitly know that I'd never, ever slip something into your drink or betray you in any way. Because, I

if I can be bought so easily...well, why would you trust me in the future?"

mean,

"What do you mean, bought?" I ask, frowning.

"They were having trouble figuring out how to knock you all out before the trial," she says with a worried frown. "Most of the cadets were eating alone or in two's, so they just slipped it into the food, but you guys, with your party.... They came to me last minute and told me the plan. I refused at first, but they said if I didn't do it then they'd fire me."

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"Daph," I say, shaking my head. "That was unfair of them, not you – you were just doing your job. And it was absolute crap for them to make you do something you were uncomfortable with and threaten your job if you didn't."

"I know," she replies with a frown. "But still...I don't want anything to be damaged between

us."

"And I promise you, it's not!" I say, reaching out and putting a hand on her knee, willing

+15 BÔNUS

her to believe me. I watch as her eyes flick to the door too. “And they’re not mad either. Honestly, Daphne, we’re good! If anything, I’m going to have a talk with my dad about how they threatened you at work. That’s not right.”

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## Chapter 159

### Chapter 159

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Daphne sighs and we talk through some further protests, but finally we get to the point where we both feel like we’re on even terms. The champagne helps, I think, unwinding our tongues and our inhibitions, and after long I think we’re feeling even again, renewed.

Which is how I know that it’s time to blow up our world again.

“What?” she asks, frowning at me, sensing that I’m prepping to tell her something as she holds out her glass for a refill. I oblige her, filling my own as well.

“I’ve been keeping secrets, Daph,” I say with a sigh. Her eyes go wide and I laugh little, shaking my head. “Nothing to do with you, but..”

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And then, with another big sigh – honestly, I’m getting kind of tired of sighing I spill. I tell her everything about having two mates, and Luca and Jackson figuring it out last night, and how everything went to pieces, and how Jackson didn’t show up for the train today.

Daphne is an amazing listener, scooting immediately closer to me and wrapping an arm around my shoulders. She quietly listens to the whole story, nodding her understanding and hugging me tighter and tighter as I go. “Wow,” she murmurs when I’m all finished.

“Ari –

that’s...that’s insane.”

“I know,” I groan, shaking my head.

“I can’t believe Jackson didn’t come home for winter break,” she murmurs, looking over her shoulder out the back window of the caboose, almost as if she’ll see him running back up the tracks

behind us or something. “What a jerk.”

I laugh a little, straightening up and shaking my head at her. “He’s not a jerk, Daphne, he doesn’t have it in him to be a jerk –

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“All men do,” she says with narrowed eyes, and I laugh, which just makes her laugh in turn.

“No, Jacks is...he’s just delicate in this way,” I say on a sigh. “I guess he just...needed a minute alone to figure out how he feels about all of this. But at least Luca’s here.”

“Yeah,” Daphne says, patting my shoulder warmly. “But I get it. You wanted both of them you want both of them. It’s hard for everyone, I think.”

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She takes a moment to consider me, tilting her head a little bit. “So,” she says quietly, “they want you to choose between them?”

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Slowly I nod, sipping my champagne.

+15 BÔNUS

“And are you...leaning one way or another yet?” Her question is hesitant, careful.

My eyes go wide and my mouth pops open. “No!” I say, shaking my head vehemently.

“Really?” she says, leaning forward, pressing but doing so delicately. “Like, not even at all? Not even a little bit of you liking one more than the other, or seeing a...a better life match? Or

.” she wrinkles her nose a little bit here before lifting her champagne to her lips, “who might be... better in bed?”

I burst out laughing at this and cover my face for a second with my hands. “No, Daphne,” I say with a sigh, dropping my hand and smiling at her. “I mean, honestly, they’re both really different and bring different thing to the table – but maybe it’s

because I'm mated to both of them? But I'm absolutely not leaning towards one or the other right now. They're both...

mine."

I sigh, hoping it makes sense, even though I know it's probably impossible unless you're in my own heart.

"Well, then that just makes it all harder, doesn't it?" Daphne says, twisting her lips a little as she stares at me with empathy.

I nod, leaning my head against the wall, grateful that she understands.

Daphne's eyes move over me now, taking in how sad and exhausted I am by all of this. I mean – it's been a big couple of days. I think it makes sense that I'm tired and stressed by it all, even if we are celebrating today.

"You know what might make you feel better?" she says, soft and encouraging. I lift my head, curious. She grins, leaning closer. "Turning you back into a girl."

I sit up straight, laughing "What!?"

"Come on!" she says, her smile deepening. "Don't you want to go back to the Capital as a girl!? You can borrow some of my clothes, and I have make up

"Yes!" I shout, immediately enthused. "Oh my god, yes!"

That's enough for both of us. We jump off of the window seat and hurry for the door. The boys all turn to us in surprise as we burst through it, but we ignore them. Daphne heads immediately for her suitcase as I dash behind the bar, getting a bottle of wine instead of champagne so that we're thoroughly fortified for our mission.

"Important Princess business!" Daphne says loftily as she strides back towards the

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bathroom, her case swinging in her hand.

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# Chapter 160

## Chapter 160

Chapter 0160

“Yes, pay no attention!” I call to all the boys, chin high, as I head back into the main room of our train car after Daphne. “However, the bathroom will be off limits for the next hour, so you can all just...deal with it!” I’m about to close the

door behind me when I hear Luca’s next words.

“Do I even want to know?” Luca murmurs to the boys, a little shocked and fascinated as he watches us go.

I grin, pressing my eye to the crack in the door and watching this unfold.

“Nope, it’s girl stuff.” Rafe says, clapping a hand on his shoulder. “So, you definitely do not.”

“You poor thing,” Ben says, resting his hand supportively on Luca’s other shoulder. “I always forget you don’t have sisters, so you’re completely unaware of the rules and codes of girl time.”

“Welcome to this land of mysteries,” Jesse says gravely, raising a glass of whiskey towards Luca. Luca responds with a smirk, raising his own glass and clinking it against my cousin’s. “There’s a lot of glitter here.”

I laugh, rolling my eyes at all four of them, and press the door firmly shut. And with that Daphne and I lock ourselves away and get to work.

My brows arch when I see the incredible amount of clothes that Daphne has

packed into such a small case.

“I know,” she says as we lean over cache together and she quickly sorts through it. “I’m a great packer. Plus, I really like these thin fabrics that really save space

Daphne quickly explains the logic behind her packing choices while pulling out a few options that she thinks will suit me. Daphne is taller and a little fuller-figured than me, and certainly more gifted in the chest, so she picks a few options that are not quite as fitted. I admire each of them in turn, but a soft “oohh” slips from my lips when she pulls out a mod-style navy dress with white trim and gold.

details.

“Yeah!?” Daphne says, grinning at me. “You like this one?”

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“Can I?” I squeak, taking it gently in my hands. Daphne laughs and pushes it towards me and I quickly change as Daphne pulls a pair of white booties out of the bottom of the case. As I pull the dress over my head, I bless our luck that our feet are miraculously the same size.

When I turn to look at myself in the large mirror above the sink, I give a little gasp. Because, I mean, it’s just a chic little day dress it’s certainly not the most dramatic thing I’ve ever worn. But in the mirror I see a girl looking back at me

And god, god I’ve missed being a girl.

“Yup, this is the one,” Daphne says, coming to stand beside me and tugging at the dress in her seamstress way. “Let’s just fix the hem a little-”

I laugh and wave a hand at her. “It doesn’t need to be fixed, it’s perfect

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“It’s an inch too long!” Daphne protests, horrified, even though the hem is already a little past mid-thigh. “And if this is my first time dressing a Princess, then it’s going to be perfect!”

“You’ve been dressing a Princess for months,” I remind her, dry. But Daphne just laughs and ignores me, getting her needle and thread and rapidly making the changes she wants to ensure that the fit is, as she said, perfect. That done, we move on to my hair and my makeup – just light touches, but things that make me feel more and more like my former self as the time passes.

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But as my image in the mirror transforms, I have to admit I’m not sure how I

feel about it.

“What?” Daphne asks, leaning back a little as she takes in my frown, the little stick of eyeliner suddenly still in her hand. “You don’t like this color?”

“No,” I murmur, shifting my eyes to her from my reflection in the mirror. “It’s just...I don’t know if I want to be Princess Ariel again. She was kind of a pushover. Cadet Ari Clark is...tougher than she is.”



“I hate to break it to you,” Daphne says, leaning in with a false grimace. “But Ariel...they’re the same person.”

+15 BONUS

I burst into laughter, cheered, and she does too. “No, but seriously, Daphne! I’m afraid I’ll fall into all my old ways I used to be so pleasant and obliging. I was willing to do anything – get married, even! Just to make peace and help the country. I guess I’m afraid that now that if I’m stepping back into that role, I’ll step back into those old habits.”

“Yeah, but now you’re also a kickass marksman who knows a lot about

poisons,” she says, shrugging and turning my face so she can finish the make up on my other eye. “So, if anyone tries to make you do anything you don’t want to, you can just smile pleasantly and slip something terrible into their dinner.”

“Good point,” I murmur, but my mind still turns on it, wondering what it’s going to be like to go back the life of a Princess. Being a cadet – being a boy there were so many freedoms there, even if there were a great deal of secrets.

“Well, I’ve got your back,” Daphne says quietly before she blows on my closed. eyelid to dry the liquid eyeliner. “And so does your cute little pack of Alphas out there