

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy

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

life 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."

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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

:) 3

kids. It's a relief, honestly, because this? This is my wheel house. I was always good in school. The content is on ! Read the latest chapter there!

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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. The content is on ! Read the latest chapter there!

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?

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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 [Please bookmark site to read latest content.](#) If you want to read [please visit to read fastest content.](#)

J oi

that he's waiting for me. The content is on ! Read the latest chapter there!

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.

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“Well?” Jackson says, his voice low, and I flinch again god, that's getting annoying as I snap my head up to look at him. He gestures towards the head

table. “Hand in your test.”

“Um,” I say, and then another chair scrapes in the room. Someone else is finished too, and headed this way. “You take it.” I say, making a snap decision

and nodding towards it.

“You finished first,” he growls, taking a menacing step towards me.

I shock myself by holding my ground. “Just turn in your test, Jackson,” I growl,

looking up into his eyes, starting to get pissed. Because if one of us doesn't do it,

whoever finished next certainly will.

Jackson comes to the same conclusion that I do at the same moment, seeing the

next candidate. walking towards us. He snaps his gaze to me for a moment and

then turns, expressionless, and places his test face—down on the table. I follow,

doing the same, fully aware that if Jackson did as well as I did on this exam he

just took first.

Which...well, it doesn't really make much of a difference to our rankings, not

really. But at least, to me, it feels like we're more even now.

He gave up one for me, even if he didn't mean to. And now? I've given one back.

As far as I'm concerned, we're square.

face And as I walk about ten feet behind him towards the barracks, doing my very

best to turn my away so that I don't catch any spare sniffs of his scent. I very

much hope that that's the end of any interaction that me and Jackson McClintock

get to have for my entire time at the academy.

Or, at least that's what I tell myself.

My wolf, who lifts her head in the air and eagerly sniffs at his scent, her eyes

half-lidded, her tongue. lolling from her mouth?

She, clearly, has other ideas.

Get ahold of yourself, I growl to her.

No way, she says, shaking her fur out as a shiver passes through her. Do you

remember the way pinned our wrists above our head? Imagine what he could do

in bed

“Oh

my

y god,” I murmur aloud, clenching my fists and storming past Jackson as we both

walk through the door, locking down my mind and not letting any more of my

wolf's ridiculous thoughts in.

Because the last thing I need to be thinking about now is...

Anything close to that.

he

I climb up into my bed and lay down on top of my blankets, tucking my cap low

over my eyes before I close them, waiting for Jesse and Rafe to come back so

that we can take our showers and end this crazy day.

Luckily, I don't have long to wait. They're not stupid, after all.

“Cousin!” Jesse says, popping up by the side of my bed and making me gasp a

little in surprise. He laughs as he reaches out to shake my shoulder.

“Nicely

done! I saw you get up first.”

“Maybe you'd have been done a little faster,” I say, raising an eyebrow at him as I

sit up, “if you'd kept your eyes on the exam, instead of worrying about

how

everyone else was ranking.”

“How could I do that,” he says, rolling his eyes, “when the exam was so boring.”

“Not everything is fun, Jesse,” I say, sighing and hopping down from my bunk, starting to gather my bath stuff.

“Nope,” Rafe says, walking up and putting out a hand out to stop me.

“Not yet.

We're not done today.”

“What?” I ask, looking between them. I mean, the day is done there is nothing

else scheduled, and frankly I am beat. So what...

“Come on,” Jesse says, slinging an arm around my shoulders and leading me

away. “We've got a surprise for you.”

I groan, but Jesse grins and Rafe is solemn as they walk me through the barracks and back towards the door. I have a bad feeling that whatever this is?

It's not going to be fun. But before we can get to the door, Rafe pauses, peering

into one of the bunks.

“Ternicki,” he says, and I turn curiously to see Ben's head snap up, confused.

“Come on,” Rafe continues, nodding to the door.

“Where?” Ben says, a line of confusion forming between his brows.

“Does it matter?” Rafe asks, dry, and Ben laughs a little, shrugging and getting

out of bed, slipping his boots on and starting after us without tying them.

He

catches up fast, looking between us all curiously but not asking any questions. I

shrug at him, letting him know that I don't know either, and we both sigh as Rafe

and Jesse lead us back into the gym.

“We've got an hour,” Rafe says, flicking on the lights and striding into the

room.

“Let's go.”

“Wait, what is this?” I ask, looking around, confused.

“Look at it as...extra credit,” Jesse says, turning to grin at Ben and me as he

walks backwards into the room after Rafe. “You both need the extra work if you're

going to make any progress on these physical exams. So,” he shrugs,

“we're

going to help you do that.”

“Which,” Rafe says, turning to glare at us a little, “is Jesse's nice way of saying

that we're going to spend an extra hour kicking your asses every night until you

can make the cut.”

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“Wow,” Ben says, his eyes going wide.

“Ohhh no,” I groan, simultaneously, looking over my shoulder at where the

showers are probably already filling up with cadets, all of the lovely hot water

running down drain...

“Come on, Ari,” Rafe says, nodding towards a pull up bar. “You need this.”

I sigh, dragging my feet and heading over to him, but Ben's words stop me...

“Wait.” Ben says, taking a step forward but frowning at my brother and my

cousin. “Him, I get,” he says, gesturing towards me with his thumb. “But why are

you helping me?”

Rafe just shrugs. “I think you got a bad turn, being pitted against me in the bout

today. So, I figured, why not give you a shot. We were doing it anyway one more

isn't much.”

I smile at my brother, who is trying to play off his kindness, even though we all

see through it. The truth is that Rafe likes an underdog — he can't help it, he's

soft-hearted like mom, even if he pretends that he's not. It's probably why he

acts tough all the time — so no one figures it out.

“Well, thanks,” Ben says, smiling and running a hand through his hair. “I mean it.

Thank you.”

“It's no bid deal,” Jesse says, gesturing for him to come over. “I noticed, on the

first day, that you're... kind of shit at throwing a punch. Let's work on that.”

Ben laughs and nods and the two get to work as I walk over to Rafe and wrap my

arms around his waist, unable to help myself.

“My big brother is nice,” I say softly, grinning and giving him a squeeze.

“Don't tell anybody,” he mutters, pushing me away. “Now stop trying to get out of

work. Up!”

I sigh and stare up at the bar, thinking that the last thing I want to do is chin—ups.

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But as I stand, staring, regretting my

choices, suddenly Rafe grabs me by

the waist upwards so that my only

choice is to grab the bar and swing

from it or fly across the room. The

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and hoists me

“Rafe!” I gasp, glaring at him. “I told you stop throwing me around!”

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“pr :

I'll stop throwing you around the day

q — ”

you can do a chin—up unassisted,” he says, smirking at me and putting his hands beneath my feet so that he can take a little bit of my weight, Please bookmark site to read latest content. If you want to read please visit to read fastest content.

making it just a little easier for me to

.. “ ’ :

lift my weight. “Now let's go, Ari —

)
three sets of ten, and then we're
: » 5

doing pushups.” The content is on
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I groan, but I get started because even as I complain?
I know they're just doing it for me. That my brother and my cousin are skipping
their chance at a hot shower and first in line for food to help me.
And that outweighs any of the misery of chin—ups.

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Which is saying something
Because I am...really bad at chin—ups.

“Come on. Ari!” Rafe shouts, laughing at how much my arms tremble as I work to pull myself up so that my chin rises above the bar. “Let's go! Seven more, and then a break, and then six thousand after that.

“I hate you.” I grumble. But he just grins at me. Because he knows I mean the opposite.

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And I sigh and get to work, trying very very hard – and failing to not think about Luca, who is probably stripping down for his shower right about

now... The content is on

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I'm almost too exhausted to notice how fast the next week passes. Jesse wakes

me up early every day, and I scowl at Rafe, who snores peacefully while Jesse

drags me out the door for our run. He seriously puts me through my paces, too,

not even relenting when I try to bribe him.

"Please." beg. "I'll give you my crown –"

"Why would I want your crown. I'm a duke –"

"But dukes," I pant, "don't get anything pretty to wear on their heads –" But Jesse just laughs, and makes me run harder.

The candidate lessons are no less brutal. Every other day is spent running

through that damn obstacle course, and even though Jesse and Rafe make me

work out every night I still can't climb that damn chain. I mean, I am getting

better, which is satisfying, I can pull myself up about three feet of it now. But still,

every day, after ten minutes of trying, the Lieutenant at that point on the course

blows the whistle and lets me climb the ladder, putting a further demerit on my

time.

Even Ben gets up faster than I do now, looking down at me with apology in his

eyes as he does. But I just scowl and wave him off.

Rafe and Jesse really put the time in with Ben and I every evening, which has

actually become as fun as it is useful. Ben has proven himself to have one hell of

a sense of humor, and he makes me laugh so hard it feels like my sides will split.

Even Rafe, as he pushes us around and tells us to get back to work, can't help

but smile.

Still, it's nice to have made a real friend.

Every day the four of us eat our meals together and every morning our eyes go

immediately to the ranking list to see what the previous day's exams — if any

have done to our numbers.

And while I'm never, ever going to beat out the big guys like Rafe and Jesse — I

have to say, I'm holding my own.

This morning. I grin when the numbers come up to see that I'm ranked at 75 — a

personal high spot. for me. Jesse slaps me on the back, laughing and grinning.

“Nicely done. Ari!” he says, smiling at me with true pleasure. “Looks like the

marksmanship competition yesterday did its work.”

He's not wrong. There are still enough hand-to-hand bouts that while my win

against Jackson and my second place on the logic exam pulled me out of the cut

zone above 96, I've been hovering right on the edge for days. But yesterday,

when they finally put a crossbow and then a gun in my hands?

Then I really showed them what I could do. Because even if dad didn't let me

train like Rafe did, he always made sure I could handle myself with a gun more

than handle myself, really. I came in

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second, falling only behind Rafe and beating Jesse, who came in at

“Thank you.” I say, preening a little as I dig my fingers into my eyes all

on Ben's blank

expression. I feel instant glee. Because here I am celebrating, and I didn't even

look to see how he

“We're going to get you there. Ben,” Rafe says as my eyes fly back to the board,

where Ben is ranked at 100. Four spots. That's nothing”

“You really are getting faster, Ben,” I say, nodding to him encouragingly.

“Don't fuss over me. Ben says, his face breaking into a smile as he waves a hand

around at us. “I'm fine. Seriously, it's fine, it's way better than 119, where I was

So Progress is a good thing

I smile at him, nodding, even though a knot twists in my stomach.

Because there

are only 5 days left until the final ranking, and both of us are still in a great deal of

trouble. None of our runs of the obstacle course have counted yet, and the one

on the last day? It counts as double any of the rest of the tests, because we've

practiced it so many times.

And Ben and I: Even despite our extra credit work after hours with Rafe and

Jesse we're still crap

at it.

Inwardly, I sigh, wondering how much better we can even get, or what the other

exams will be.

We can do it! My wolf yips encouragingly, prancing around inside me. We are strong and brave! No one can stop us! Smiling. I run a mental hand over her fur, grateful for her high spirits and constant support. And then, once we're in the Academy, she babbles, we can get a private room! And invite our mates over to visit us — I sigh, shaking my head and brushing her away, ignoring her crazy words. But, even if she can't stop thinking about our mates, I have to admit...the lure of the Academy itself? It's starting to sound better and better. Chatter has been going around, of course, about what life is like inside. And honestly...I can't wait to see it — presuming, of course, that I get there. It just sounds amazing — you get sorted into a discipline, and then you get to spend months learning the most in-depth, obscure, secret things about whatever that discipline is. I bite my lip, hoping to hell that I get sorted into the espionage track. Because while I am clearly not a warrior — I don't have the brute strength for that the hours spent learning how to spy, or to craft poisons, or become an expert sharpshooter, or a master of any variety of tiny, obscure weapons? Damn, but that sounds just like...everything I've always wanted to do and never knew was even an option. Chapter is “Well done, Shrimp!” A loud voice says, and I jump a little as an arm slides around my shoulder. giving me a squeeze as Luca sits down next to me. He's

frequently a 5(th) at our meals, or at least stops by once a day to say hello. And while my wolf turns in eager, excited circles as soon as his summer citrus scent hits our nose, I grit my teeth in frustration.. Because whenever Luca's here? He concentrates on me, and teases me, and drops little hints about things that know. And I swear to god, one of these days and figure out what I can't believe he hasn't already sense's going to break out of his little fog That Luca's here to see me, and only me, even if he doesn't know precisely what draws him to this table. I don't say anything to my mate as he reaches out to give Jesse and Ben high— fives. He offers one to Rafe, who just gives him a little glare, but Luca laughs it off as he takes his spot next to me. “Seriously, I'm impressed,” Luca says to me alone, and sigh as I turn to look at him. And seriously, it's not that I don't want to look at him — It's just. God damn it. Every time I do. I get this stupid smile on my face, and can't help feeling like my whole body is filled with butterflies — Because I have this stupid, ridiculous girly crush on him- But how can I help it? He grins at me with that perfect face, his dimples flaring, his pretty brown eyes shining at me..... And, I mean, I basically swoon. The guy's a celebrity heartthrob for a reason, doubled by the fact that he's my mate and I'm unendingly attracted to him on a soul level? Oh, and tripled by the fact that over the past week I've figured out that he's nice, and funny? My wolf sits back on her haunches and howls.

I clutch my knife and fork to avoid the insane urge to reach out and run my

fingers through his hair. God, I bet it's so silky.....

“Thanks, Luca,” I say, interrupting my own thoughts and doing my best to keep

my voice dry. “I noticed I kicked your ass in marksmanship. What, you can't hit

something if it's not three feet in front of your face?”

He bursts into laughter at this, grinning at me. “Want to f**k around and find out,

Shrimp?” he asks, lifting his fists into his boxers stance and winking at me.

God, f**k, yes, yes I do, I moan inwardly.

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But outwardly I just give a cool shrug

and turn back to my waffles. Luca

turns his attention to Jesse. chatting

about his own ranking of 9, while

Rafe lifts his head a little and shakes

it at me, because he knows I have a

crush. Of course he does – hePlease bookmark site to read latest

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:)

watches me like a hawk and he's

known me since I The content is on

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chapter there!

was born

2.30 Sun,

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I press my lips together and tilt my head to the side, staring at him,

willing him to

read my thoughts that adamantly protest that I am doing my best and

that I can't

help it.

Rafe just smirks and gives a little shrug, saying without words that he

knows. He

gives a little nod, letting me know I'm not in any trouble.
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But as I let my attention drift back to Luca? As I watch him lean forward towards Jesse, his shoulder coming dangerously close to my face, giving me just the...the perfect little sniff of that scent that makes my eyes drift shut and my toes curl? The content is on ! Read the latest chapter there!

God damn it. Even if Rafe doesn't think I'm in any trouble? I absolutely, patently am.

And it's only a matter of time before this comes to a head.
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Especially because after Luca leans forward to give Jesse another high-five- god, why do boys do that so much? — when he leans back in his chair, he casually, just barely lets his fingers drift across my back. The content is on ! Read the latest chapter there!

That tingle that rises in me whenever we touch rushes through my skin, tracing the pattern of his fingers as they go. My eyes go wide and I spin towards him.

And his eyes are there, waiting for me.

A little smirk on his lips.

Letting me know that he did it on purpose.

And that he knew exactly how I was going to respond.

“So,” Luca says, turning abruptly to the other three, leaving me staring open—

mouthed at his perfect face. “Anyone know what they've got ready to torture us with today?”

I grit my teeth, avoiding my urge to either smack him or throw myself in

his arms.

Because the torture? For me, it's already begun.

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The next morning I wake up with a groan, because they really did torture us

yesterday. It was an endurance competition that lasted pretty much all day. We

had to stand on a balance beam with a pail of water, of all things, on our heads

and a staff stretched across our shoulders. At regular intervals, the Leutenants

would come around and add weights to our staffs so that it was a test not only of

how long you could stand there and whether or not you could stay straight, but

also how long you could endure increasing weight on your shoulders.

It was absolute agony, only compounded by the fact that I somehow got placed

next to Jackson. during it, so I had the added challenge of enduring his exquisite

smoke—and—pine scent the entire time I stood there. And god, the more I smelled

it, the more I realized that there was something else layered beneath it — something warm, and rich, and delicious, like...cherries? God, I don't know, but

whatever it is, it works.

Needless to say. I did not win this competition. I didn't shame myself I have good

balance after years of ballet and made it somewhere to the midway point of

candidates. It was the weights that took me out eventually when they added a

final set of sandbags to the ends of my staff, I just collapsed — completely

ate dirt

while water from the pail splashed all over me.

And, damn it. I could have sworn that I heard Jackson laughing at me, even

though when I scowled up at him his face was totally blank.

It came down to Jackson, Rafe, and Jesse at the last, and we were all required to

sit and watch them in silence, missing lunch and dinner, while they all stubbornly

just stood there, refusing to give up even when it meant that the rest of us

starved.

Eventually the Captain made them all go to one foot, which took Rafe out pretty

fast, to my surprise. He scowled as he sat next to me, though that was the only

sign of his disappointment.

And then it was all Jesse and Jackson for another hour before Jackson wobbled,

just once, and his pail fell down. Even though Jackson himself didn't fall, the

Captain called it in Jesse's favor.

Jesse and Jackson shook hands, but I could see Jackson's disappointment. He's

at the top of every list, but he hasn't come in first in a single evaluation since the

logic exam, and even that he knows he only got because I let him turn his paper

in first.

But then again, neither has Jesse, who was beaming when he came over to

accept our congratulations.

Still, despite his enthusiasm at winning, I could tell that Jesse was beat. He

skipped his shower and fell immediately into bed. And this morning, even though

Jesse is always up first and waking me with a happy smile....he's dead asleep

right now, his face totally slack and pressed into his pillow.

I grin as I climb down from my bunk, proud of my cousin and also a little pleased

to see him out of energy for once. He always seems to have three times as much

as the rest of us.

But I sigh and decide to give him the morning off, pulling on my boots — I always

sleep in my

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fatigues, much to my chagrin — and heading to the bathroom to give my teeth a

quick brush before moving towards the door. Because even if Jesse is asleep

I've got a routine to follow.

I mean, I know that I showed up to this Academy kind of desperately and on a

whim, but the closer and closer it gets? The more I really do want it.

So, I push open the door to the barracks and get started on my run without my

cousin, going on our usual trail at the speeds at which he usually makes me run.

And when I slacken a little bit, I grit my teeth and tell myself not to go easy just

because Jesse isn't here. And then I push myself to go even faster.

Even without my cousin it's an usual morning. The countryside around the

Academy is usually clear and bright, with little pockets of fog hanging low in the

hills, hiding from the rising sun that will inevitably burn them off. But today the fog

is thicker, hanging in the air and sticking to my cheeks in tiny droplets as I run

through it.

I smile as I go, though, because it looks kind of cool and spooky — like running

through a cloud. I start to look forward to breakfast now as I crest the final hill,
wondering if Jesse is going to fall face—down into his eggs like he used to do
when we were preteens and he was going through a growth spurt. God, he'd fall
asleep at the craziest moments, his body just taking whatever rest it needed
whenever it needed it. One time he fell asleep mid—conversation at the dinner
table, his cheek falling right into his mashed potatoes.
We'd all laughed, and Uncle Roger had gathered him up in his arms to carry him
to bed, but
I slow, abruptly, when I see a dark figure forming in the fog ahead of me.
His
head is down as his arms pump — he's running too —
But there are only two people who are that all, and that broad, in the barracks
right now.
And one of them is a prince who absolutely does not get up for a morning run.
My steps stutter to a stop as Jackson comes more clearly into sight. His head
whips up as he senses.
and I freeze on the path, my eyes wide and my hears me, smells me, I don't
know what
me
arms out like an idiot, ready to bolt.
But when his eyes light on me, and he realizes who I am, and his mouth lifts in a
sneer, I realize that my instinct was correct. This man — he is not just going to
pass me with a casual morning hello.
F**k. F**k! What do I do? Do I run?
But I'm out of time.
“Where are your bodyguards?” Jackson snaps, stalking towards me, his

eyes

livid.

“Um,” I say, keeping my eyes on him, not at all able to come up with an answer

better than that. My mind goes completely blank in my panic.

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Chapter 19

“Great,” he growls, stepping close so that there's only a breath between us. I tilt

my chin upwards, staring up at the mountain that is my mate, fear streaking through me.

Go! My wolf urges me, for once logical and not telling me to kiss him or something stupid. Run! Get back to Jesse and Rafe!

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But before I can move Jackson grabs me by the front of my uniform, twisting it in his fist and hauling me with him so that I stumble backwards until my back is pressed up against a tree. I pant in my fear, staring at him like a trapped animal. The content is

on ! Read the latest chapter there!

“Then it's time for us to have the conversation that we should have had that first

night.” Jackson hisses, “when you sent me on a wild goose chase after my mate.”

“Um,” I say again, my eyes darting to the side, trying to come up with something, anything.

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And then,” Jackson continues, “why the f**k you smell like her. Did you Please bookmark site to read lastest content. If you want to read please visit to read fastest content.

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think I wouldn't notice? Maybe you would have gotten away with it if we

, . -

hadn't been paired up in that bout, but I got close enough, Clark, to realize that you f**king have her
" :

scent on you — " The content is on ! Read the latest chapter there!

My mind suddenly flashes back to that moment in the ring. Because that's not

what he said then — he didn't say “why do you smell like her,”

He had said “what are you?”

Which means...

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Which means that something has changed. Either he talked himself out of realizing what I am — or he forced himself to forget the pulse in the air — the way my hands heated — The content is on ! Read

the latest chapter there!

But he doesn't think I'm her — hasn't yet figured out that I'm a girl — “Please!” I beg, pressing myself against the tree, turning my face away from him

and pressing my eyes shut. “Let me go! I'll tell you!”

But, unfortunately, it was the wrong thing to say.

“Let you go?” he growls, leaning closer. “Fat chance, Clark — I'm not letting you go anywhere.”

My heart begins to pound almost out of my chest.

Chapter 20

Jackson raises his left arm, bending it and pressing his forearm tight against my neck.

The moment our bodies touch — he only had his hand fisted in my uniform before it happens. again.

My eyes fly open as the pulse pounds through the air, almost audible this time.

Jackson's eyes go wide as he stares down at his arm. Desperate, I snap my hands up, pulling at his arm — but, f**k, they do it again my hands start to heat

immediately when they come into contact with him —

“What the f**k!” Jackson shouts, but he doesn’t run this time, he leans in closer,

cutting off my air with the pressure of his arm against my windpipe. “What the f**k

is happening!? What — what are you!?”

I cry out in pain and fear as Jackson realizes again what he must have dismissed

as his imagination before-

That there's something about me about us — that's that's different —

I scrabble at his arm, desperate to get away, but he’s so much bigger than me —

Suddenly there's a sound like the crack of thunder in the air and I gasp as my breath comes back. My eyes fly open and I gasp as Jackson falls away from me,

clutching the side of his head.

“Get the f**k away from him!” Rafe roars, his voice louder than I've ever heard it

before, the Alpha command thick in his voice.

Jackson stumbles back and almost falls to the ground, but regains his footing as

Rafe strides towards him, pulling his fist back and cracking Jackson against the

jaw once — twice —

Jackson moans the second time and falls to the ground, his hands going to his

face. Rafe pulls his leg back and delivers a kick to Jackson's ribs and I swear I hear something crack.

“Stay the f**k away from him,” Rafe shouts, his voice desperate and afraid.

“You

touch him again, and I will kill you!” He kicks Jackson again and something in me

breaks when I hear Jackson groan and then cough into the dust.

“Rafe!” I shout, stumbling forward. “Rafe, stop!”
My brother doesn't listen, continuing to kick, and then he kneels down on the ground next to Jackson and cocks his elbow, ready to punch him in the face again while it's pressed against the ground.
“Rafe!” I scream, running forward and grabbing his arm, putting my whole weight into it and knocking Rafe off balance so that he and I both fall into the dust. Jackson pushes himself away from us, gasping for air and scrambling to his feet.
Rafe turns to him in a rush, pushing to his own feet, and I let him go, covering my head, terrified suddenly that
Chapter 20
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But my mate just stares at us for a moment before stumbling away into the fog, working himself into a run and getting heading back to the barracks.
I spin to my brother, calling his name, my voice choked
And I burst into tears when I see blood on Rafe's knuckles, because I have no idea if it's Jackson's, or if Rafe busted his hands when he hit him—1 reach for my brother, wanting to see, wanting to help.
But I gasp when Rafe pushes me away, making me fall flat on my ass in the dirt.
“What the f**k, Ariel!?” he gasps, his shoulders shaking, and my eyes go wide in horror when I see that there are tears in his eyes.
“Rafe.” I gasp, desperate —
“No!” he shouts, shaking his head at me as he gets to his knees. “I have been begging you to be careful — what the f**k were you thinking going out here alone
“I was just — I wanted to let Jesse sleep —”
“You are so f**king stupid,” he growls, using the heels of his hands to wipe brusksly at the tears that fall from his eyes. My eyes go wide and my heart sinks,

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because — I mean, I know he doesn't think that — but f**k, it hurts to hear him say

it—

Rafe shakes his head, using his sleeve now, but the tears keep coming. “I told you it was a bad idea for you to come here —” he growls, his voice shaking and

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“Rafe,” I groan, trying to interrupt, desperate, getting to my own knees now and

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him.

“Do you know what dad would do to me if you got hurt!?” he shouts, his voice breaking now as he grabs my shoulders and shakes me. “Do you —” his lip trembles now, and he completely gives up on trying not to cry — “do you know what it would do to me if you got hurt? F**k, Ariel, it would kill me -” his hands move to my face now, cupping my cheeks, “you're my f**king little sister t of my being.”

I'm sobbing now too, shaking my head at him, guilt filling every sorry,” I cry, shaking my head.

“F**k, Ariel,” Rafe gasps, and then he pulls me to him, his arms around me tight.

“I love you so much I've always loved you, even when you're so f**king annoying

I want to throw you off the palace roof —”

A hysterical little laugh breaks from me and I bury my head against his chest.

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“If anyone ever hurt you,” he gasps, and I can feel his rage passing a little, his breaths coming slower in his chest, “I would I would f**king burn the world down,

Ari—”

“I'm sorry.” I say again, hiccupping against him as I press my eyes shut and lean

my cheek against his chest. “You're right it was stupid I should have woken one

of you up

“It was stupid,” he mutters, still shaking a little, but I can't help the smile that comes back to my face, because I can tell that he's...he's merely pissed now, instead of in a full-on dad—style Alpha rage. Rafe raises a shaking hand to stroke

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and figure it out.”

He laughs a little too and loosens his hold on me, looking down into my face and
shaking his head. at me like I’m the most agitating thing he’s ever seen.

“When
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Then, almost like he’s exhausted, he falls back on his ass in the middle of the
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I sit across from him, hunching over, emotionally and physically exhausted
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Instinctually, I bite my lip, because....well, because I have an answer to that
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Rafe’s eyes immediately move to my mouth and his eyes flare, flicking back
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Instantly I release my lip, my own eyes going wide.

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“It’s nothing!” I gasp, leaning away.

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