

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy

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“I was a catastrophe of a person,” Jackson groans, laughing softly as he presses his eyes shut and remembers his first few days in the city. “I was...so shocked by the noise, Ariel, and the pavement – god, stone and metal everywhere – and the people. God, I didn’t think that there were that many people in the world, let alone one city.”

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I stay quiet, letting Jackson tell at his own pace. He moves pretty quickly through the story of how he was chosen from the ranks of the young men in his community to attend the Alpha Academy, to gain what new military knowledge he could and bring it back to his own world.

Jacks leaves out a lot as he tells me about how they barely prepared him and then dropped him at a boarding house in the city three months ahead of time, I think not wanting to remember all of it. But he tells me how he showed up basically with a spare set of clothing, a handful of cash, and the order to acclimate himself.

“I stayed inside for a whole week,” he murmurs, shaking his head with an embarrassed smile on his lips. “Like, inside my room. I had this little window? And I sat at it all day, just watching people walk by, trying to...to figure out who they were, what their lives were like. I felt like a complete alien – like I was from another planet, Ariel. There were just men and women, walking together, holding hands, in these weird clothes – and just like, kids everywhere...” he shakes his head at what must have felt so bizarre.

“Well, what changed?” I ask, desperately curious.

“The landlady came,” he murmurs, looking down at me with a smirk. “Demanding the next week’s rent. And that’s when I realized that...I was going to run out of money very, very soon.”

“What!?” I gasp, horrified that he was out of money after a week. “Jackson, how much did they send you with?”

“Like, fifty bucks,” he says, laughing and shaking his head. “Which I’m sure to them felt like an insane amount of money to just hand over – we don’t deal with a lot of cash in the community. I’m not sure they knew how fast it would run out? Or maybe they did.” He shrugs like it doesn’t matter..

do?”

I curl up closer to him, so sorry for my mate and feeling guilty that I’ve never once wondered about paying rent or whether or not I’d have enough money to get by. “So, what did you “Some of the other guys in the house noticed how miserable and scared I was,” he says, smiling at me and stroking his hand over my hair, “and that I hadn’t eaten in a week. They took pity – got me a job washing dishes at one of the restaurants in town. It was enough for some food, and the rent, and the utilities. And it made me leave the room, made me go do what I was supposed to do – which is learn how to be in this world.”

I’m quiet again as Jackson continues, telling me that he was basically a little mouse of an employee – always on time, reliable, hard-working, but silent. That he spent his days listening to people in the kitchen talking to each other, learning about modern life, starting to pick up the vernacular and get more comfortable here.

“I was lucky,” he murmurs, “that pretty much everyone in the kitchen was a man. There were some waitresses, of course,” he smiles here and covers his face with his hand like he does when he’s embarrassed. “And I realize now that they may have been...hitting on me. But I

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refused to talk to them

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I was terrified.”

+15 BONUS

I laugh along with him at this and press myself closer, secretly grateful that none of those other girls got their mitts on him. As hypocritical as it is, the idea of another girl touching Jackson makes me want to bare my fangs and tear her stupid face off. And even if Jackson has hinted that there was another girl in his past...well. I guess I don’t want to talk about her right now, do I?

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"I hate that," I murmur, working to press myself closer to him, even though that's not really possible. "I hate the idea of you scared, and alone, and talking to girls when I was just like... half a city away."

"But you were engaged," he says, his voice strange- I think a little amused? I don't know. I can't quite parse it.

"You knew about that?" I ask, looking up at him wide-eyed,

"How could I not?" he asks, grinning at me. "You were all over the media -- and it's all anyone would talk about, especially as it got close."

"Well," I say, smiling myself a little too and reaching up to stroke my fingers through his hair. "What did you think about it?"

"You'll be disappointed in me, Ari," he murmurs, lowering his face and taking a sniff of my hair. "I didn't really think about it. It was all very far from what I had been instructed to think was important, what I could understand -- a royal wedding..." he shakes his head. "I didn't have a way to understand it, why it was important."

"Oh, come on," I say, shoving his shoulder a little, my smile deepening. "You must have thought something."

Jackson grins at me for a long moment before he breaks, looking away from me like he can't hold my eyes while he admits it. "Fine," he says, heaving a little sigh. "I thought you were... very pretty."

"Pretty!?" I say, grinning and sitting up straighter with a happy squeak. "You thought I was pretty!?"

"Just in passing," he mutters, still not looking at me, a faint blush on his cheeks. "I saw a few pictures on the covers of magazines --"

“So then how did you not recognize me when we met!?” I shout, laughing and tugging on his shirt, wanting him to look at me again. My mate, ever obliging, turns his head to smile at me.

“Because you were a boy, Ariel – and you smelled like a boy, and I had no reason to equate the lowest-ranked Candidate at the academy with the pretty girl I’d seen on a magazine cover

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“You thought I was prettttty,” I sing, a little delighted, wiggling victoriously in his lap.

“And I was right,” he growls, snatching me closer and bending me back a bit in a way that makes heat coil in my core. “You are pretty. Much prettier in person, and not dressed up in all that bride–y gauze.”

“Yes, all that bride stuff really was crap,” I say with a sigh, staring up at him, starry-eyed and swept away by how wonderful he is – at once handsome, and powerful, and cute. God, how does he manage it?

But there’s still so much more I want to know, and I’m being selfish, turning this conversation away from him.

+15 BONUS

“So,” I ask, quieting down, sitting up straighter and resolving to be good. “How’d you spend your time off? Did you hang out with the guys that you lived with?”

All I want in the world right now is to sit right here in my mate’s lap, listening to him talk for hours, spinning out the story of his life. I’d listen for days, if time and circumstance would let me, even

though I know they won’t.

“In my time off,” Jackson murmurs, thinking back on it and raising his hand to my hair, petting me again, “at first, I just sat alone in my room. But then the guys I lived with – they were kind, but...a little rough, you know? They told me I’m a sad sack and that I was being a creep, just sitting in there in the dark. They made me come out into the communal living room, which is where I discovered... television.”

“What!?” I gasp, unable to keep from laughing a little. Jackson laughs along with me, though, giving a self-deprecating little shrug. “You didn’t know what television was!?”

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This gets his attention, and he snaps his face to mine, snarling and baring his teeth. But I just cross my arms, glaring up at him. “Would you listen to me? I know things, all right? And she’s not here.”

Jackson goes still, just staring at me.

“I’m not tricking you, Jacks!” I shout, frantic myself now, wanting to get a move on, wanting to get his mind back on the correct problem before he wastes more time than he already has. “Do you think I’d lie to you? Seriously, after everything we’ve been through in the past few months – I know I’m still keeping things from you, Jacks, but do you honestly think I’d turn you away from your mate if she really needed your help!?”

Jackson’s face softens slightly as he stares at me, his teeth still bared.

And I nod once when I see his eyes clear, see him believe me.

Because, despite everything, over the past few months we have become friends. I have earned some of his trust, and he knows I won’t betray him.

Jackson stares at me for a few moments longer and I hold his gaze, willing him to take my side.

And then he just turns, covering his face with his hand as he tilts his head up to the sky, groaning as he shakes his head. “God, Clark, what the fuck is going on?” he murmurs against his palms.

And I sigh, shaking my head, wanting desperately to tell him, to make this easier on him.

“Can we just go, Jacks?” I say on a sigh, exhausted by all of this – by the Examination, by the sight of my mate so upset, by the fact that another cadet just tried very hard to murder me.

And god, we’re not even an hour into this bullshit.

Slowly Jackson turns, sighing himself, meeting my eyes. “I don’t understand this, Ari,” he whispers, and the fact that he’s using my name now – not Clark – warms me.

“I know,” I say in reply, taking a step towards him. “I’m sorry.”

He just shakes his head, closing the distance between us and wrapping a broad hand around my arm. "Is she okay?"

I exhale sharply, looking up at him. "She's fine."

He stares at me, confused, but I look to the right, along the ridge.

"Come on," I say, taking a step forward and pulling him with me. "Jacks, we have to go. We can't stay here – we have to get to the end."

He tightens his hand, not letting me get away. "Do you promise?" he breathes, and I turn back to him, my heart aching at his sincerity. "Do you promise she's safe?"

"She is now," I say, steady.

Jackson takes a deep breath, nodding once, and then drops his hand from my arm. I nod back, steady, and then I start again, adjusting the crossbow slung over my back, and I don't look back to see if he's following. Because I know that he is.

My mate – of course he's at my side. Of course he is. And with him here, I actually have a shot at surviving this.

Jackson and I walk for a long time in silence, and I give him the space to pull himself together. I don't miss, out of the corner of my eye, that he sends worried looks over his shoulder and I swear at one point that I hear a very wolfish whine of worry come from his throat.

But I just breathe out and concentrate on moving forward and paying attention to our surroundings, because one of us needs to be attentive to the world around us. A thousand things could happen now, the most dangerous of which would be getting attacked by another larger group of cadets.

As we walk, though, I calm, and I feel Jackson next to me do the same. Passively, I wonder if that's just normal empathy letting me know that he's calming down and starting to concentrate on the situation at hand, or if it's the connection between us, growing deeper.

After about twenty of minutes of walking, Jackson pushes a canteen against my chest, making my jump a little. "Drink," he murmurs, and I glance to the side to see him pulling his own map out of his pocket, looking over it. "Let me see your map," he murmurs. "I want to make sure that they're the same."

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I oblige, taking a quick sip from the canteen as Jackson holds one map in each hand looking them over. He gives a swift nod, handing one back to me.

"Thanks, by the way," I say, taking my attention from the path for a moment as I hand his canteen back to him. "For...rescuing me. Again."

Jackson doesn't say anything, just shoots me a little look and nods like it was the obvious thing to do. But guilt wells in me, because I know that even though his mate and I are one in the same, that he wasn't actually trying to save the me he knows, Ari Clark – he was trying to save some anonymous girl.

And a little jealousy suddenly wells in me...

But I scowl and brush away.

Because honestly, am I wasting time in this Examination being jealous of myself!? My wolf huffs at me, giving my soul a nip, telling me to pay attention. So I do, pushing myself forward along the ridge as fast as I can, which is slower than I'd like it to be. The terrain has changed now, moving from smooth forest to rocky terrain that slows my steps, even as night falls.

After about two hours, Jackson sighs, putting a hand on my shoulder. "Stop," he says, and I turn to see him shaking his head as he looks up at the sky. "We need a plan."

I stop, turning to him as he again pulls out his map, taking advantage of the last gasps of light to review it. I come to his side, standing on my tiptoes so that I can see it as well.

"The bridge is a trap," I murmur, frustrated.

"It wouldn't be," he replies, his voice chagrined, "if we were faster."

I scowl, because I know that's my fault. If it weren't for me, Jackson would be halfway up the mountain by now.

"The Examination is testing a lot of things," Jackson says, speaking his thoughts aloud as he studies the map. "How fast we can move, how we deal with our apparent enemies, whether or not we can change plans on a dime. Eventually, it will test our ability to handle rough terrain," he says, pointing towards the land closest to the Final Destination, which I noted early is mostly cliffs that we'll have to scale.

I study the map alongside him. “Cadets are going to gather at the bridge,” I sigh, shaking my head. “Make it hell for anyone to cross.”

“Yup,” he agrees, nodding. “It’s not a bad plan – anyone who is strong and fast enough will have already crossed anyway and made it to the mountain by tonight. But for anyone who is a little slower or doesn’t have the ability to shift, it will be worth it to take the time and knock out faster candidates as they try to cross. I mean, I can take them, but...” he glances down at me, not needing to finish the sentence.

I ignore the fact that I cannot, looking up into his face and frowning. “Would it even be worth it, though? I mean, even if you could take them and do some damage, you risk getting hurt.”

“They can’t hurt me,” Jackson mutters, his eyes roving over the map for a plan.

“Jacks,” I sigh, suddenly pissed and a little sick at the idea of him barreling through a gauntlet of cadets at the bridge. “You’re not invulnerable, you’re just big. Stop being so cavalier.”

Jackson takes a second to study me with a frown, I think surprised that someone is worried about him. But then he just shrugs. “It doesn’t change anything,” he says. “We still have to get you across.”

I bite my lip, staring up at my mate’s perfect face, suddenly horribly guilty at all he’s giving up by dragging my tiny little self along in his wake. “Jacks,” I say softly. “Just...go on without me. Leave me behind.”

Slowly, Jackson turns to stare at me like I’ve said the craziest thing he’s ever heard.

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“I’m not leaving you behind, Ari,” Jackson spits out, glaring at me like I’ve said something horrible and ridiculous, like we should both throw ourselves off the cliff.

“I’m just slowing you down!” I say, throwing out my hands for emphasis. “Seriously, if you hadn’t back-tracked for me, you’d be like, finished now –“

“I didn’t backtrack for you,” he mutters, still staring at me, “I backtracked for –“

"Your mate, whatever," I sigh, rolling my eyes. "Either way, it's not fair. I'll find my own way up the mountain, it will be fine."

"It will not be fine," he says, reaching out to grab my arm. "Do you think I want to do this without you!?"

"What?" I ask, suddenly baffled.

"Not...not this, Ari," Jackson says, waving the map around at the darkening forest. "Not the Examination. I mean, the Academy. Do you think I'm not aware that you're the only person who has been nice to me? That you're – you're the only human connection I have at all?"

"But," I frown at him, "Rafe and Jesse –"

"Are only friends with me because you make them be –"

"That's not true, Jackson," I whisper, turning to face him, desperate for him to believe me. "They like you for who you are – sure, I was the start of it, but they really do –"

"Ari," Jackson sighs, his shoulders slumping, "this isn't the time for a pep talk. Just – I'm not leaving you behind, okay? I found you in the woods, for some reason – because you're always weirdly around when I smell her scent – but...I'm not leaving you behind now, all right? There're ways to do

this, even if I have to drag you up the mountain myself." He mutters the final words, looking back at the map, and a slow, terribly pleased smile creeps over my face.

Because my mate – he likes me. He's my friend.

And as stupid as that is to realize because, duh, of course your mate is supposed to like you as a person...god, it means everything in the world to me right now.

"Okay," I whisper, giving in and stepping close. "So, what should we do?"

"Can you shift?" he asks, glancing over at me, hesitating. Not everyone can shift – some people, even though they're full wolves, just never develop the ability. "This will all be a lot easier if you can run as a wolf."

I bite my lip, because while I can shift...I mean, the jig will instantly be up if I do. Jackson will take one whiff of my honey and clove scent in my wolf form and know immediately who I am.

Which will, of course, destroy his world and throw his attention off again when we both need to concentrate on getting to the top of the mountain.

So, slowly, I decide to lie, hoping desperately that it's the right choice. "No," I whisper, and my wolf howls within me to be denied the chance to run as well as the fact that we're blatantly lying to our mate. "I...I can't shift."

Jackson scowls, looking down at the map. "Well, let's get to the bridge then," he says, folding it neatly and sliding it into his back pocket. "See what the situation is there. Then...we can make our next move."

Nodding, I fall in slightly behind him, letting him take the lead.

We walk for another hour then, with me placing my feet where Jackson placed his, trusting his steady steps and his apparently innate knowledge of the wilderness to know the best way through the dark. He silently, almost passively watches out for me, pointing to tricky spots or turning to offer a hand when the terrain is particularly steep. I stop noticing the pulse that rushes through the air every time we touch, because it's become natural to me now, just part of being near him.

Both of us become intent, though, when we see fire ahead. I focus my eyesight, seeing the edge of the ravine and the start to the bridge next to it. Clearly, a group of cadets truly has set up something of a toll at the crossing, and they're not being shy about announcing it.

"Bold," Jackson murmurs, peering through the trees. Then he looks around, interested. "Let's get to higher ground," he says, nodding upwards to a cliff above us. "I want to see what we're up against there."

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Then, to my shock, Jackson ferrets out a teeny tiny little path up the cliff, balancing on it with incredible grace that makes me wonder if he's part goat shifter, instead of all wolf. I do my best to follow, clinging to the rock and taking his patient hand when I need to. Twenty minutes later we're about thirty feet in the air on a flat jut of rock about ten feet wide. I hesitate, wondering if it's safe, but Jackson crouches casually on the edge, apparently having no such concerns.

I scowl and move close to him, wishing I moved in the wilderness with his clear ease and confidence.

Too much time hanging out in a palace, I guess.

"What are you seeing?" I whisper, wanting to know what the situation below looks at from his eyes.

"Big group," he murmurs, gesturing towards the three fires burning below and the cadets gathered around them. "Already done some damage." He points to the side now and I grimace to see that there are about ten cadets passed out to the side, my stomach turning to see a few of their legs twisted and broken, taken out of the running in their attempt to cross.

I press my eyes shut, swallowing hard, hoping desperately that none of them are Ben, or Jesse, or Luca, or Rafe. But...no, it can't be. Their stories at the Academy can't end like that, and neither can mine.

"So?" I ask, forcing myself to open my eyes and pay attention. "What do you think, do we risk it? Rush it?"

"No, too many of them," Jackson murmurs, shaking his head. "They'll hold out overnight, hoping to take out more. Then, in the morning, they'll shift and run. Maybe cut the bridge behind them. We need to get across another way."

"Is there another way?" I ask, fear curling in me now.

"Down the ravine and back up," Jackson murmurs, nodding and pointing left along the trail, beyond the bridge. "It's...harder, it will take time."

"Well let's go," I say, standing up straight. But Jackson's hand intercepts me, pulling me back down.

"Impossible in the dark," he murmurs, and I can see him shake his head. "Handholds, footholds... you could easily fall to your death."

I don't miss that he says that I could fall to my death. He doesn't mention himself.

"So, what?" I ask, ignoring it. "First light?"

"First light," he says, nodding. "We move along the ridge, get to a high point, get into position. Then, as soon as we can see...we move. Hope to hell nobody has projectiles, like you." He nods to my crossbow.

"The only people who do will be marksmen," I sigh. "And...the other two are close enough with me. They won't take us out."

"Trusting," Jackson says, his voice sarcastic, like he clearly thinks that they might. But I ignore him as we both stand and move to the left along the cliff face. Again, I step where he steps, trusting the fact that if the stone can hold him it can certainly hold me.

About fifteen minutes pass as we move along and I'm drenched in sweat, even in the cool night air, with the stress of having to balance so high and so precariously.

Finally, though, we come to another wide, flat area, this time with a slight overhang in the cliff face that creates a little shelter. I peer into it, a little worried it might already contain some wildlife, but Jackson moves towards it without a care.

"In," he says, tossing his canteen beneath the overhang and taking off his backpack, dropping that too. I do as I'm told, sitting down and crossing my legs, unlooping the crossbow from my shoulder and placing it at my side along with the arrows as I look up at him. "There's some fruit in there, and bread," he says, gesturing towards the bag. "You should eat."

"Well, you should too," I mutter, pulling it towards me as I realize how hungry I really am.

"Nah, I don't need it," Jackson says, putting his hands on his hips and looking back the way that we came. "Eat as much as you want. I'll be back by morning."

And then my mouth drops open as Jackson begins to stride away.

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"What!" I shriek, scrambling to my knees and knocking the fruit and bread out of my lap.

"Shh!" Jackson hisses, turning back towards me and holding out a hand, looking at me like I'm crazy. "Don't be an idiot, Ari! If we're waiting for dawn to move into the ravine, others are too! And they will come for us! Just...be quiet, all right!?"

"Jackson!" I whisper, full of rage, ignoring his words and getting to my feet, striding towards him, "you are not leaving me here!"

He huffs a little laugh, clearly implying that I couldn't stop him if I tried. "Yeah, Ari, I am."

"You are not!" I put my hands on his chest and shove, angry.

"I'll be back!" he says, not budging an inch. "I promise, all right? I'm not abandoning you – I'll be back at dawn, I'll help you. I just..."

And I go still as I see his head turn again, back the way we came, back to where...

Well, back to where he imagines she is.

His mate, alone.

His mate, frightened in the wilderness, needing his help.

And then even though I assured him that she's safe, that there's nothing wrong, he can't leave it.

"Jackson," I beg, wrapping my fists in his shirt and staring up at him. "Please, please don't do this."

"I have to, Ari," he says through his teeth, frustrated with me. "She's my mate."

"She's fine!" I insist again, tightening my fists, trying to will him to believe me.

"I know that you believe that," Jackson snaps, shaking his head. "But Ari, I smelled her, I could taste her fear on the air – I swear it, something happened to her."

"And she got through it!" I insist. "Didn't it go away!? Didn't the fear like...dissipate!?"

"Yeah," he concedes, "but what if that's because she got hurt? What if she's unconscious?" He scowls, stepping away from me roughly, suddenly angry. "I never should have let you drag me away from there. I should have stayed –"

"You should not have stayed!" I snap, getting pissed in my own right now, because Jackson – he's being foolish. "She's fine! She doesn't need you to go searching for her – she needs you to stay here, so you can be ready to cross at first light!"

"How the fuck do you know that, Ari!?" Jackson growls, stepping towards me, looming over me. And I realize, quite suddenly, that this is a fight – a real fight. And if I'm not careful, I could make this Alpha snap, that it could get violent –

But I dismiss the thought, instantly. Because my mate – he won't hurt me. His body, his biology won't let him hurt me.

Except...well, except if he doesn't know who I am.

I push it all away, stepping into his space now, unable to help it. "I know that she's safe the way I've always known, Jacks," I reply, my voice low with my own anger in response to his. "Have I ever betrayed you? Have you ever not been able to trust me? Have –"

"I probably shouldn't have been trusting you this entire time!" Jackson suddenly exclaims, throwing up his hands in the air. "I don't know why I do! I mean, is this your magical gift, Clark!? Making me act like a god damn idiot!? Making me constantly, consistently turn away from my mate and just believe you that one day you're going to tell me what the fuck is going on!?"

“You trust me because you know I’m trustworthy!” I snap, putting my hands on my hips. “What was all of that about friendship earlier!? About not abandoning me because I’m the only one who’s been nice to you?”

“And what is that about, Clark?” Jackson says, his voice a little more dangerous now as he steps closer to me, moving so close that his chest bounces against mine, making me fall back a step. I regain my footing fast, scowling at him, suddenly livid that he’d bully me like that – use his larger form to intimidate him.

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“What are you talking about?” I growl.

“Is that why you’re nice to me?” he asks, and I can hear the wound in his voice now. “Because you realize that...that that’s the only way you’re getting through this? You found the loneliest guy in the Academy and gave him the scraps of your attention, and for that I do what – carry you through the Examination? Is that –” he pauses now, his voice catching, “is that seriously what’s happening? Have you...have you been leading me on, telling me that you’ll tell me about my mate someday to...because you know that it would wrap me around your finger?”

I stare up into his face in the darkness, completely shocked, appalled at the idea.

And my heart absolutely breaks for him, that he could consider this a possibility. Again, my mind turns to what his world must have been like – who raised him, that he could imagine me so manipulative?

“Jackson,” I breathe, shaking my head, “I would never do that to you. You’re – you’re my friend –”

His MATE! My wolf howls, grieving within me, realizing alongside me that we’re wounding him further.

Because whatever world he did grow up in, we’re doing the same thing. We are lying to him, every day, because it easier for us. Tears spring to my eyes and my mouth goes dry as I stare up at him, not knowing what to do.

Jackson – I have been betraying him. And he’s been so tough, so sturdy, that he – he just took it, uncomplaining.

"I'm going after her," Jackson growls down into my face, ignoring my emotions. "I have to see, Clark. I have to make sure that there's no trace of her in the forest – I need to know that she's okay."

"Jackson," I murmur, stepping forward once again, wrapping my hands in his shirt, desperate. "Jackson, she's not out there. I swear on everything that she's not – please, please just stay here."

"Ari," he whispers, his face livid and half desperate, "how can you ask me not to? How can you try to keep me away from her!?"

"I'm not!" I gasp, the tears starting to roll down my cheeks. "I swear, Jackson, she's safe! She's not in any danger! You can't leave – you can't spend the rest of the night prowling around the forest looking for her! It's pointless!"

"How do you know that!?" he shouts, losing his temper now and shoving me away from him, his voice ringing out against the rocks as he forgets our situation completely, as he loses himself to his desperate anger, his need to know.

"Because!" I shout in response, stumbling backwards before finding my balance, my hands fisted at my sides. "Because she's right here, Jacks!"

"What!?" he breathes, staring at me and then looking frantically around our little plateau like she's going to suddenly appear or something. "What are you talking about, Ari –"

"It's me!" I shout, the words stumbling from my mouth.

My wolf howls in relief, her noise long and slow and agonized, like letting out a long-held breath that has been aching in her lungs.

"What?" Jackson says, staring at me like I'm crazy, like I'm an idiot.

"It's me, Jacks!" I repeat, stepping forward and glaring at him, tossing out a hand between us like it's obvious. "When you're smelling your mate? You're smelling me. You smelled my fear – that's why you came running to me!"

"What?" he repeats, his face screwing up in concern and confusion, his head tilting as he tries to put it all together. "Are you two like...tied? Does her magic...does she feel your fear? Are you like... twins?"

Oh my god, my wolf says, standing rigid in my soul. He really...he really just doesn't get it.

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I stare at Jackson like he's an idiot now. Because...honestly I really kind of did think that he'd figured it out, at a least a little bit. Or that once I told him, all the pieces would snap into place.

But the way he's looking at me...Jackson does not know.

He bought, hook line and sinker, the lie that I'm Ari Clark, royal cousin who has some strange and elusive tie to his mate.

"Jacks," I growl, shaking my head. "No, it's...it's me. Your mate is me." And with that, I whip off my cap, revealing the hair braided in a coil on top of my head, letting my true scent free.

He continues staring at me, uncomprehending. But I see him stumble back a step, his eyes going wide the moment my scent hits him.

"How..." he murmurs, his voice trembling. "How can you...you're a Cadet...you're male..."

"Oh my god," I groan, dipping my face into my hand for a second before dropping my hat and grabbing the hem of my shirt, tugging it up halfway as fast as I can so that he can see the shape of my body beneath, my wider hips, my trim waist. "Jacks, no, I'm a girl."

I stand there, my shirt fisted against my breasts, staring at him, breathless.

Realization hits Jackson like a bus.

His eyes go wide and he stumbles back a step, not breathing, his face going deathly pale in the light of the moon. I stare at Jackson, watching him struggle to make sense of the newly disparate pieces of the world. His eyes move fast over me again and again before, always, returning to my face.

But he just stares back at me, slack-jawed, not saying a word.

And then, after a long, long moment of staring at each other, Jackson just...turns on his heel.

And stalks away.

And I stare after him in...absolute shock.

Jackson's tall form disappears quickly into the darkness and I stare, my mouth hanging open, into the black night for way, way too long.

And then I groan a long, slow groan, standing up straight and burying my face in my hands, wondering what the hell I just did.

It's okay, my wolf says, a little frantic, it can't be bad – we told him the truth...the truth can never be bad...

Yeah, I reply, deeply sarcastic, unless the truth completely upends your world in the middle of an insane trial. And your core reaction is to just run and leave your mate stranded on a cliff somewhere.

My wolf murmurs comforting things about how that can't possibly be what's happening, that he just needs a minute alone to process because he's the solitary sort, but eventually she runs out of pleasant, hopeful sentiments as we both just stare into the darkness waiting for him to come back.

But...he doesn't.

I curse, slowly and fluently, and turn towards the little overhang of rock where I'd been sitting with the water. I sink into that spot, sitting hard on my butt and ignoring the pain as I rest my elbows on my knees and then prop my miserable chin into my hands.

Because, I mean, what did I think was going to happen!? That he was just going to be like, "Oh, cool! How nice! What a relief, now I can stay!"

No, of course, my weird outdoorsy Alpha mate reacted to his panic by going completely back to his roots. He probably shifted into his wolf and is now prowling around the cliffside in the moonlight, not even thinking human thoughts anymore, just letting his animal instincts take over and forgetting all about me.

I scowl a little because...well, because as sorry as I feel about losing my temper and blurting it all out in a rush...

It did hurt my feelings, a little bit, that he just...walked away.

I mean, did he...did he reject me?

Does he hate me? Did he realize that I'm a girl and think, immediately, "ew"?

Oh my god...does Jackson think I'm ugly?

I groan, putting my face back into my hands and shaking my head, hating that these are my thoughts right now. I mean, I hate not knowing, I hate that he's not here to talk this through with me, to hear my apologies and my reassurances, but I also hate that I'm dealing with mate drama while I've got less than twenty-four hours now – or thereabouts – to get to the top of a mountain so that I can keep my place at Alpha Academy.

Chapter 0190

Chapter 0190

I mean, could there have been a worse moment to admit the truth to my mate?

“God, I have such shit timing,” I mutter to myself.

My wolf lays down in my soul, stretching out her long, sorry nose, burying it under my mental hand, wanting to show me love at the same moment that she begs for a little attention. I turn towards her, giving her a little scratch, marveling again at the softness of her fur.

It will be okay, she assures me, her eyes wide and limpid and sad. No matter what happens...it will be okay.

I hope so, I say, smoothing her fur back lovingly. She lets her eyes drift shut, holding on to the hope for both of us.

But she sits up at the same moment I do at the sound of footsteps pounding back towards us.

My breath hitches because...

I mean, is it Jackson? Coming back?

Or...I mean, we weren't precisely quiet, were we?

Despite our earlier decision to be stealthy and quiet, to hide up here all night and sneak back out at dawn, we just got into a shouting match that other people were bound to notice.

So...could it be someone else? Could it be someone coming...coming to hurt me?

Anxious, I spin, looking for my crossbow. I reach for it, snatching it up into my left hand, my right working anxiously at the quarrel, wanting to get it loaded before whoever is approaching actually gets here.

But it's too late – I'm not fast enough.

And when I look up, and see who it is, the crossbow falls from my hands anyway.

Because those shoulders, that height, that steady stride – I'd recognize it anywhere. In my sleep, in my dreams.

Anywhere.

My breath hitches as Jackson stalks across the little plateau towards me, his face stern.

"Jacks," I murmur, taking a step back, but there's no time for anything else.

Suddenly, he's there, in front of me, and he doesn't even pause as he dips low, one arm going around my waist while the other hand wraps around the back of my thigh, lifting me suddenly and steadily up against him as he continues forward until my back is pressed against the wall of the cliff behind me.

And then, before I even realize what's happening, Jackson is kissing me.

My physical reaction to Jackson is immediate, and visceral, and vivid. I cling to him, my legs wrapping instinctually around his waist as he moves his lips against mine, bidding my mouth open, dipping his tongue inside to lick me, to taste me.

I'm completely frantic both with shock and the immediacy of wanting him. My hands seem like they move everywhere at once as I gasp against him, my eyes pressed shut. My fingers are in his hair, and then down his neck and his back as his hand untucks my shirt, pulling it out of my pants like it was stupid that it was ever in there in the first place. And then his palm is flat against the skin of my back and it makes me tilt my head back with a deep moan. God, Jackson's skin against mine, suddenly it's all – all that I want.

Jackson takes immediate advantage of my bared throat, dragging his mouth down the length of it, taking a long, slow breath of my scent as he goes. He drags his canines across my skin when his mouth gets to my shoulder, pressing his teeth delicately against the tendons there in a way that makes me shudder, hard.

God, fuck, but I want him – immediately I want him. I pull my head back up and use my hands to lift his face, putting my thumbs beneath his heavy jaw and moving his mouth back to mine. Jackson immediately complies, kissing me fervidly, with utter abandon – taking my mouth with his, tasting me however he wants to. And every inch of me responds, pressing him closer, wrapping myself tighter around him.

Chapter 0191

Chapter 0191

I'm panting, gasping really as Jackson presses me flat against the wall of rock, both of his hands under my shirt now, his palms a damn song against my skin as they press up over my ribs, as they move slow over my flesh like they're trying to ensure that I'm here, that I'm real.

And suddenly, quite suddenly, I realize that I do not at all want to be wearing this shirt anymore. That I don't want to be wearing anything – that all I want in the entire world –

No, not want – need –

Is to have my skin bare against Jackson's – flush, with nothing in between, not even air – nothing but sweat -

Jackson groans, though, and turns his face away, ripping his mouth from mine.

"What?" I breathe, my voice trembling as my hands again go to his cheeks, trying to turn his face back to me, wanting his mouth back right where it was. God, his mouth, those lips. "Jackson, please –"

I'm begging, but I don't fucking care. God, I want him.

I want him...bad.

But Jackson just presses his mouth into a thin line and holds his eyes shut. "...I think we need to stop, Ari," he murmurs, his head moving once, sharply, from side to side.

"What?" I gasp, baffled. "Why?"

"Because," he growls, and I go rigid when he turns his blue eyes to mine, when I see the powerful want behind his gaze. "Because if we don't stop now, I am going to...throw you down in this dirt, Ari, and I am not going to be able to stop."

My breath hitches in my chest and then stops completely as I consider that...

Well.

That that's maybe not such a bad idea.

But then, slowly, as Jackson stares at me, patiently waiting for me to catch up with him, I remember where we are. And what we're trying to do. And the fact that there are people below us who will probably try to kill or maim us if they find out we're here. And that tomorrow we have to climb a ravine and then a mountain.

So.

This is probably not the right time to let my mate throw me to the ground and ravish me.

As I stare at him, putting all the pieces together, I can't help the furious scowl that forms on my lips.

Jackson's face breaks into a slow grin as he raises a hand, tracing the shape of my lips with his thumb. "Perfect," he murmurs, shaking his head as he stares at my mouth like he can't believe it.

He leans forward again, pressing a kiss to my lips, ridiculously soft considering the way that we both just tore into each other.

But my body responds again, beyond me or despite me or just...expressing precisely how I feel. And I lean into the kiss, moving my mouth slowly over his, holding him close to me and never, ever wanting to let him go.

Jackson, again the responsible party here – I am doing absolutely nothing to help, I'm well aware - again breaks our kiss with a groan, shaking his head.

"Fine," I sigh, tilting my head back and giving him a half-hearted shove on the shoulder. "Let me down, then, you big gigantic brute."

Jackson just laughs but keeps me in his arms as he pulls me away from the wall, folding his legs beneath him and sinking gracefully to the ground with me still in his arms, tucking us away beneath the little overhang of rock. It's dark, but in the moonlight I can still make out his features, his expressions. Suddenly, ridiculously, I bless the goddess that it's a clear night.

And then I grin, looking up at the moon, realizing that...well, that that's her. And she did this. And so of course my grandmother has given me a clear night so that I can look on my mate's face. My smile broadens and I send her a quick prayer of thanks because...

Well, because I really like my mate. She picked well.

"Are you okay?" Jackson asks, drawing my attention back to him.

"What?" I ask, confused.

"I, um – I'm sorry, for like, slamming you up against the rocks." He grimaces at me a little. "I got carried away."

"Jacks," I say, laughing and shaking my head, "I'm fine, I..." I hesitate for a second, biting my lip, "I liked it."

Chapter 0192

Chapter 0192

My mate, bless him, blushes just a little but then clears his throat, I think wondering where to begin.

I raise my hands to his cheeks, cupping his face between my palms. “Jackson, are you all right? I – I’m so, so sorry.”

“I’m okay,” he says, nodding, his voice choked. “I’m sorry I stormed out of here – I was...really freaked out.”

“Are you still freaked out?” I whisper.

“Oh, for sure,” he says, his eyes widening as he lifts them to mine. And I can’t help it, I burst into laughter. He takes a second and then he laughs too, but his arms wind around me, holding me tighter and I think...well, I think everything’s going to be okay. “Ari, this is absolutely insane – I mean...I was...” he scowls, hanging his head for a second, “I was completely convinced you were a boy.”

He lifts his head and narrows his eyes at me for a second, sniffing the air, as if he still kind of suspects that I am.

I burst out laughing, giving him another shove. “I’m a girl, I promise, see?” And then I raise my hands to my head, making quick work of my braid, letting my hair fall down around my shoulders.

Jackson groans again, taking a second to dip his head close to my hair, taking a deep breath of my scent before he slowly raises his eyes to meet mine again, though his are half-lidded now. “Boys can have long hair too,” he murmurs, sounding a little drunk.

“Do you require further proof, sir?” I ask, sitting up straight, half scandalized and half...well. Tempted.

“No,” he murmurs, ducking his head against me again and pulling me back against his chest, making me smile ridiculously with joy. “No, just...stay here, please. Right here. Don’t ever leave.”

“Have to leave at some point,” I murmur, running my fingers through his dark hair, which is silkier than I thought it would be. “Kind of...a big day tomorrow.”

“I know,” he groans. He lifts his head again, blinking at me, lifting a hand to tuck my hair behind my ear. “Stupid sun. Now would be a great time to blow it up or melt it, you

know,” he says, making me laugh again. “Make sure tomorrow never comes and we can just...stay right here.”

“Really?” I whisper, still smiling at him. “You want to spend the rest of our lives sitting in the dirt under this rocky overhang?”

“Yes,” he replies, instant, leaning forward to brush his nose against my cheek, dragging it back towards my ear and then down my neck. “Right here, for the rest of time. That would be...perfect.”

And I bite my lip at the sweetness of him, but even as I do I realize that he’s...he’s kind of right. Right here it is just us in our own little world. But tomorrow, if and when we do get back? There is... a whole lot of truth waiting.

And, for me...another mate.

Another mate who is not going to be pleased when I show up on the mountain top smelling all over of Jackson McClintock.

But still, as I wrap my arms tighter around Jackson’s neck, I realize that in this moment? I...just can’t bring myself to care.

My mate, I think sensing my joy and my anxiety at once, lifts his head from its place tucked against my neck to look at me. Slowly, a smile takes over his lips.

“What is it?” I whisper, grinning at him, unable to help it.

Jackson just shakes his head at me, marveling. “I just can’t believe you’re real,” he whispers, and my heart breaks and heals and breaks again, all in an instant. “I’ve been...thinking about you my whole life.”

“Me too, Jacks,” I whisper, pressing my hand warm to his cheek, my stomach filled with butterflies – because, honestly, it’s not a lie. “I’ve been waiting for you too.”

He kisses me then – slow, and rich, and deep.

And if that were my magical gift, to blow up the sun and prevent tomorrow coming, or stopping time right now and live in this moment forever?

Honestly, I’d probably do it.

Because this – and Jacks...

It’s just...perfect.

Chapter 0193

Chapter 0193

But of course, time does pass, and we do eventually stop kissing when things again get heated. Because what Jackson said before really was the truth – this is not the time or the place for it.

Somehow we separate ourselves from each other, though we're never really more than an inch apart, and we take a moment to get comfortable, organizing our supplies and taking inventory before Jackson passes an apple to me.

"Here," he murmurs. "Eat, please. And then you should probably get some sleep."

I take the apple but laugh at the suggestion that I'm going to get any sleep. I mean, I just confessed my deepest secret to my mate – what, does he think I'm going to just curl up and take a nap?

"I'm serious," he growls, though I wave a hand at him, dismissing the implied danger in his voice that probably makes other men quail. We're both well aware that he'd never hurt me. "You should rest, Ari."

"Well, so should you!" I protest. But when I look up into his smirking face I scowl, shaking my head. "You seriously just don't need it?"

"Nah," he says, shaking his head and reaching for the canteen. "The water I need, we have to share that. But food and sleep – that's all for you. I'll keep watch."

"I'll rest," I say, hesitant. "But Jackson...there's still a lot we need to talk about. And I'm not going to be able to sleep until we...come to terms with some stuff."

"Okay," he murmurs, wrapping an arm around me and pulling me tight to his side. I smile up at him, pleased that he's not fighting me on it, but then I realize that he's...well, he's got a ton of questions, doesn't he?

But before he gets to those...I have to start.

"Jackson," I murmur, turning more fully to him now and taking his face seriously in my hands, gazing at him. "I am so...so sorry that I've had to keep this from you."

"It's okay," he says, instantly willing to forgive, his broad hand coming up and wrapping around my wrist like he wants to be touching me all the time.

A little smile takes my lips as I shake my head back and forth. “You shouldn’t forgive me so easily, Jacks. You were tortured by this – I know you were.”

“Well, yeah,” he says, the corner of his mouth turning up in a smirk. “But now that it all makes sense – why I could catch whiffs of my mate’s sense all over the castle, why her trail always seemed to lead to you. I mean. I get it now.” He frowns a little, lowering his head to my neck and taking another long sniff. “Is that...Jesse? Has he been scent marking you?”

Quickly I nod. “My cousin,” I whisper, seeing the possessive question already in his eyes. Slowly he nods, believing me. “Again, Jacks, I hope you can forgive me for it, over time. It wasn’t easy but...I didn’t have a lot of choice, not if I wanted to stay in the Academy.”

“No, it’s okay,” he says, giving an easy shrug, already over it. “I don’t care. I didn’t mind waiting, Ari – I just wanted to know that you were safe.”

“You should care,” I say, smiling at him but still feeling a little guilty. Luca’s response in some ways made more sense – he punished me, a little, and rightfully so. I lied to him for weeks. But Jacks – he’s so instantly ready to move on.

“Nah,” Jackson replies, wrapping me up closer in his arms, pulling me cozily into his lap again and against his chest as he presses a kiss to my hair. “It’s all worth it. I don’t want to make myself feel mad just because I should. I have you now, don’t I? It’s all that matters.”

Chapter 0194

Chapter 0194

I find myself feeling quite touched, and a little overwhelmed, as I lean against his chest, tucking my head for a second beneath his chin, cozy and warm despite the chill in the night air. Because... maybe he should be mad. There is...there is more coming, after all, that he’s not going to be pleased about – it’s actually not so simple as him having me now.

And if he just forgives me at every turn, even though none of it is my choice either, even if the Goddess herself gave us this path...

Well, who is going to watch out for Jackson’s heart, in the trials to come?

We are, my wolf growls, fierce.

And I set myself to the task, immediately agreeing. Jackson – he's big, and he's powerful, but he's quite tender, beneath it all, isn't he? And...

As sad as it sounds, Jackson is a bit more desperate for love and affection than I'd like him to be. He's willing to wipe away all the offenses against him, just to have me in his arms.

God, he's too good, too pure and sweet. I press my eyes shut, begging the Goddess for strength so that I can be as good to him as he deserves.

"What?" Jackson murmurs, nudging me with his nose, and I realize that I've gone quite still and rigid in his arms.

"Nothing," I murmur, lifting my face to look into his. "Just...thinking about a thousand things."

"Well, don't worry about them," he says with a little frown, like it's so easy to just not. I grin at him, laughing a little. "We'll figure it all out. It will all turn right."

I smile at him, unable to stop myself as I reach up to stroke his hair, tucking it back behind his ear over and over again. "Jacks," I murmur, as he looks down at me with such tenderness in his face, his expression. A tenderness that is...not totally unfamiliar, if I'm being honest – because he has looked at me that way before, even if he thought I was a boy. "Did you really not know?"

His face bursts into a grin and I can feel him laughing all around me – in his chest, in the way his arms shake. My smile widens and I find that I quite like being all wrapped up in him. "Ari, I definitely did not know. It was the shock of my life when you pulled your shirt up and I saw you had a girl body under your uniform."

"Really, though?" I ask, laughing outright now, shaking my head a little in disbelief. "Like, no hints before? No inklings – nothing about my face, or my mannerisms? I was just...all boy to you?"

"Ari," Jackson sighs, shaking his head, growing a little more serious even as he smiles. "I have... absolutely no context for any of that. I don't know any girls – everyone I've met is a guy. So, if there are social cues that I'm supposed to pick up on to be able to tell that you're a girl? I just don't know them."

I tilt my head, considering him, remembering what Ben said about me reminding him of his sisters. "Ben says I laugh like a girl," I blurt out, saying the words as I think them.

Jackson grins. "I like your laugh," he murmurs. "So, if that's how girls laugh, then...I guess I like that."

"Were you attracted to me?" I hear myself ask, curiosity getting the better of my mouth.

Jackson's smile grows. "No," he murmurs, shaking his head.

I squeak a little, sitting up straight, indignant.

"I mean, I am now!" he says, laughing as he works to correct himself.

"What, just because I show you my stomach and you realize I'm a girl suddenly you think I'm pretty!?"

Chapter 0195

Chapter 0195

"Well, kind of!" he replies, laughing louder now, freer. "I mean, I just didn't let my mind go there before. You were just...another guy. A little shrimpy one who I liked hanging out with, and who I worried about sometimes. But...I didn't think of you that way."

I narrow my eyes at him, leaning a little closer, inspecting his face for lies. "That's not how attraction works, Jackson. You can't just decide to turn it on and off."

He stares at me stoically for a long moment before his mouth twitches in the start of a smile.

I gasp, pointing at his face. "You totally were!" I whisper, thrilled. "You were into the Shrimp! You had a crush on me!"

He laughs, snatching my finger out of the air and wrapping his hand around mine even as he leans closer. "Fine, I thought...I thought you had a nice smile, okay?"

I grin, leaning into him, making him say more.

He groans, sighing and rolling his eyes. "And nice skin and...and pretty eyes. But! I thought you were my mate's twin, okay? That was my best guess. So, I was just imagining what she looked like, which was probably a lot like...you?" His face twists up now, getting all muddled in the truth.

I laugh with him, leaning back against him, pleased. "Well, I'm glad you didn't find me totally repulsive."

"Not totally," he murmurs, lightly tracing his fingers down my arm and then around my back, settling me cozily against him again. "What about you?" he asks, his voice a little wicked.

"Oh," I sigh, leaning my head against him. "It was terrible."

“What?!” He’s laughing now.

“Rafe had to drag me back to the room all the time,” I say, looking up at him, a little embarrassed. “Told me I wasn’t allowed to moon after you in the hallways –”

“What!?” Jackson repeats himself, I think shocked, but laughs harder.

“It was very embarrassing, Jacks! My stupid wolf always telling me to do ridiculous things, like just leap on you in the hallway when we’d see you between classes, or steal your shirt and hide it under my pillow, god –”

He’s shaking with his laughter now and I can’t help it, I join in with him, delighted as I look up into his face to see him looking so...

Well, so happy. My serious mate, who sometimes looks like he’s never had a happy day in his life, laughing like that. God, but it does wonders for my heart.

When his laughter fades he turns his head back down to me, his eyes shining. “Well, I’m glad I didn’t disappoint. That your wolf,” he presses a finger against my chest, where I suppose he imagines she lives, “likes me, at least.”

She preens inside of me, happy to be addressed and acknowledged directly. “Oh, she’s a big fan,” I sigh, looking down at his finger and smiling. But then I turn my face back up to his, returning to the question at hand. “Jacks,” I say quietly, and he turns his face to mine, more serious now but nodding to invite the question he can hear in my voice. “Why...why were you so shocked to find out I was a girl? Why don’t you know any of the cues?”

Jackson releases a long sigh and drops his eyes from mine.

My heart drops along with his gaze, and I worry that I’ve said too much, or the wrong thing –

“No,” he murmurs, reaching out and taking my hand, wrapping it in his. “It’s fine – I want to tell you. It’s just...I have been taught, all my life, to keep it a secret. So, it takes a little bit of...unlearning, you

know? To muster up the courage and tell you everything.”

I bite my lip, worried for different reasons now, and press myself against him, hoping to communicate my support, my genuine interest, my faith. He raises his face to mine with a small smile, and I give him mine in return.

“Honestly, Ari, it’s probably better that I didn’t know you were a girl when we first met, really,” he murmurs, smirking a little, “or else I’d never have been able to talk to you. Not at all.”

Chapter 0196

Chapter 0196

I work hard to fight my grin, wanting to be serious, but his own smile brings mine forward. “I know,” I whisper, nodding, “I saw you with Daphne.”

“Oh my god,” he mutters, taking a deep breath before slowly releasing it. “I thought my heart was going to pound through my chest when she came in.”

“Why!?” I ask, laughing. “Daphne is really nice –“

“Because she’s a girl – it’s like meeting...I don’t know, a gigantic whale, or a unicorn or something. Even if you know it’s nice you still don’t know what to do – what it’s going to do –“

“We’re unicorns to you?” I squeak, pleased to death.

He laughs, shaking his head. “Almost nearly as mythical,” he murmurs. “To me, at least.”

I narrow my eyes a little, suddenly struck by something. “That was one hell of a kiss, Jackson,” I say, tilting my head and wrapping a hand in the fabric of his shirt, possessive, “if it was your first one.”

His mouth twists a little and he looks away for a second. “Well, no,” he murmurs and I gasp a little at the drama of it all. “I knew...I knew one girl. For a little bit.”

My eyes go wide and a thousand questions are instantly on my lips, but they all fall away when he turns back to me.

“Please,” he murmurs, shaking his head, his eyes a little sad. “I...I will tell you about her, okay? Just...not right now. Not when I’ve just found you, and...there’s so much else to explain first.”

I nod, agreeing to it, though my hands tighten their grip on his shirt. I find that I do not like, at all, the idea of this singular other girl. It is somehow, bizarrely, worse than Luca’s fifty anonymous women.

So, I let him move on from it, because I’m...honestly not sure I want to know. At least, as he says, not right now.

“The world I grew up in,” Jackson begins, his voice soft and hesitating, “well, we called it the Community. It’s way, way up North, in the mountains. It’s really pretty there, honestly, Ari. Like... much prettier than here.”

I smile a little, cozying up against him, settling in to listen and pleased that he grew up somewhere beautiful. But I don’t say anything, wanting him to talk.

“But, um...” he hesitates again, “we do things...really differently. Like, for instance, I grew up with boys. And only boys. The girls were...kept elsewhere.”

“Kept?” I murmur, confused.

“Yeah,” he replies, and I can feel him nod. “We grew up in barracks – which is why, I think, it was easy for me to fall into life here, I’m kind of used to it. Except you all talk a lot – like constantly, Ari, everyone is always chatting – most of the time about nothing –

“Jackson,” I murmur, lifting my head to look into his face, frowning, “what do you mean grew up? Like, from how young?”

He pauses his harangue against chattiness and goes a little still before he shrugs. “Since I can remember. That was my home.”

I frown, not understanding, and then I remember suddenly something that he said last night...

God, was that just last night, when Daphne came over and Jackson mentioned that he...

“Jackson,” I murmur, shaking my head, “where were your parents? Were they there too?”

“No,” he replies, his eyes suddenly wary as he confesses what, I think, is part of the great secret of his life. “I don’t...I don’t have parents. Or, I mean, obviously biologically I do, but...I was raised apart from them. We all were. If I ever met them,” he shrugs, “I didn’t know who they were. And they probably wouldn’t have known I was theirs.”

My mouth falls open in shock and horror as I stare at my mate.

Because what...what the hell!?

Read Chapter 0197

Chapter 0197

Chapter 0197

Jackson works hard for a smile when he sees my reaction to my story, though he kind of fails at it. “I take it,” he murmurs, “that you have parents? And you like them?”

“Well, yeah, Jacks!” I reply, staring wide-eyed into his face. “They’re kind of great!”

Jackson laughs a little, tightening his arms around me. “Well, if you don’t know that parents are a thing, you don’t really notice them missing, do you?”

I tilt my head, considering this, as Jackson goes on with his story, telling me about being a little boy growing up in a Community and sleeping in what was essentially a bunkhouse full of little boys just like him. The youngest babies, he knew, were raised in a nursery, and every year a new batch of boys was brought to the bunk house when they were very young.

And from that young age, they were trained to fight.

“Just every morning,” Jackson murmurs, his face distant as he remembers, “we’d troop out of the bunkhouse and get to work – running, learning to fight, sparring with each other.” He shrugs. “It wasn’t so bad. As we got older, the guys who weren’t as good at it – they stopped coming to practice and I’d see them out in the fields and stuff, or training for a new job. But, I mean, I was... good at it. So. I just kept going.”

“You could see them?” I ask, trying to picture this world. “But not...talk to them?”

“The bunk house was for men and boys in warrior training,” Jackson explains, turning his face back to me. “If you were sorted out of that, you...moved to another bunk house, I guess. I could see our little community – the main part of it, with the council house, and the mess hall. And the women’s barracks, too.”

My eyebrows raise at this but I press my lips together, wanting him to tell the story any way he wants to. He notices, though, and smiles.

“Yeah, the women lived all together too. And we could see them, from where we lived on top of the hill.”

“But weren’t you curious?” I breathe, fascinated.

“Of course we were,” he laughs, smiling at me. “Especially as we grew older and...noticed them more. In a different way. But you have to understand – it was forbidden. We were taught our roles very, very well, and we were never, ever supposed to talk to anyone in town, especially the women.”

I shake my head, baffled by it, and especially by the fact that these kinds of attitudes towards gendered difference and communal living exist within my own nation. It sounds, like anything, more Atalaxian than native to Moon Valley.

But, honestly, who the hell am I to judge? Just because Jackson grew up differently than me...does that honestly make it worse?

"Were you happy there, Jackson?" I ask, my voice worried. Because while I desperately want him to have been...I just don't see how a little boy could be, growing up in a world with that much restriction.

He takes a long moment before he answers. "No," he whispers, shaking his shaggy head, and I raise my hands to his face, stroking his cheeks with my thumbs and murmuring soft nothings. "But you have to understand...I didn't know anything else. I didn't even know I was unhappy for...for a long time. I thought that was just...life. I thought everyone lived like that, and that everything was hard, and...a little sad."

"Did you have any friends?"

"Of course I had friends," he replies, smiling at me. "They still live there – Cristof and Zachary. I spent pretty much every day of my life with them until I left. They were...well, they were the best part."

"Why did you leave?" I ask, fascinated. Honestly, I could listen to Jackson talk for days about this world – and he probably has enough information to fill those days.

"Because I was assigned to," he answers instantly, perfectly honest. "I was sent...um..." he hesitates now, glancing away, and I can see that he's suddenly measuring his loyalty to the Community against his new loyalty to me, his mate.

Chapter 0198

Chapter 0198

I wait, trying to be patient, letting him decide what to tell.

"I was...sent to learn things," he murmurs, hanging his head a little. "New fighting techniques, new technologies. And then, when I've decided that I learned enough, I'm supposed to...desert. To go back and teach the Community what I learned."

I tense in his arms, my hands again taking fistfuls of his shirt, suddenly terrified by the idea that he's going to leave and go back to that...that place.

But Jackson just laughs and shakes his head. “Don’t worry,” he murmurs, leaning forward and pressing a kiss to first one of my cheeks, and then the other. “I already decided that I’m not going back.”

“Oh,” I say, surprised, even as the tension lessens in my shocked muscles. “Why not?”

“Because,” he murmurs, “I learned...enough, in the few months that I lived in Capital, to understand that what they’re doing is...well, I mean, it’s a cult, right? They control people, give them no choice in their lives. They...take their children away.”

He sighs, shaking his head, and I press myself closer against him, wanting to fix it all – heal it all, instantly.

“I mean, I don’t know...anything about having a family,” he murmurs, raising his eyes to mine. “But I do know that if I had found you, somehow, when I lived there? They...they wouldn’t have let me keep you – wouldn’t even have let me see you. And there’s something wrong about that, Ari – wrong about all of it. It’s not right – I can’t go back. I can never go back.”

My eyes fill with tears as I study his face, as I see that his own heart is broken with the realization. And I’m overwhelmed, suddenly, with the strength it must have taken to come to that decision –

To decide to leave, forever, the world in which you were raised? Everyone you’ve ever loved, no matter how badly they’ve treated you?

God, my mate, he’s...he’s so much stronger than me. So much stronger than I’ll ever be.

“You can have a home here now, Jacks,” I say, speaking fast and earnest, pressing a desperate hand to his cheek. “We’ll be really nice to you – everyone will! And you can have my mom – she’ll take care of you, she loves being a mom –”

Jackson just laughs, his eyes crinkling as he turns his head to the side and presses a kiss to my palm. “You’re my home now, mate,” he murmurs, the words simple and true.

And I can’t help it. I sit up, and wind my arms around his neck, and hold my mate tight to me as he wraps his arms around my back, pressing me to his chest like he’ll never let me go.

“Damn right I’m your home,” I growl, possessive, ready to rip into anyone who’d try to say otherwise. He laughs, I think pleased by the ferocity of his little mate. I pull away then, looking into his eyes, willing him to see it and believe it. “You stay with me now, yeah?”

“Nowhere else I’d rather be,” he replies, the corners of his mouth turning up as he raises a hand, stroking it down the length of my hair, letting his fingers get tangled in the rose-gold lengths of it.

And I can’t help it, then. Even though we’re supposed to be talking, even though there’s so much more I want to know, I kiss Jackson, wanting him to feel the promise in my words as well as hear it. Because he’s mine now, and I’m not letting him go, not for anything.

And as my mate kisses me back, I feel it happen – feel our perfect silver bond snap into place between us.

I can feel it, in my soul, shining just as pretty and bright as my other bond, that points...oddly in the other direction.

Towards Luca, wherever he is, out there in the night.

While I’m wrapped up here, in Jackson’s arms.

Chapter 0199

Chapter 0199

I worry about myself, a little, just passively, as Jackson kisses me. Because something about the way that his mouth moves against mine makes me...just...really, really stupid.

Honestly, all logic is gone from my head – all thoughts, all sense, all practicality.

It’s almost like all of my wolf’s crazy impulses – which I usually think are so ridiculous - come to the forefront, and they all make a great deal of sense. Because the only thing I want to do right now is strip off my clothing, and climb on top of him, and let him do whatever the hell he wants to my body – just take...complete control.

I am all instinct and impulse now as I lose myself in Jackson, as he bends me backwards, slightly, in his arms, levering his body over mine even as he holds me tight, dominating me and demonstrating in the same moment how incredibly precious I am to him.

His hand moves slowly down my side as his tongue dips into my mouth, and my hips rise up against him, seeking friction, wanting to be touched as his hand moves lower to take a firm grip on my ass. I moan, deep and shuddering, as Jackson presses me

tighter against him and then lets his hand dip further in, his fingers just barely tracing the hot core of me through the fabric of my cadet uniform.

My head falls back on my neck at this touch, a panting gasp escaping my lips.

“Fuck, Ari,” Jackson growls, tucking his face against my neck and then pressing his cheek to my chest. But he moves his hand away, back to my ass and then slipping down my thigh to tuck safely behind my knee.

I lift my head, confused, foggy. I frown to see Jackson’s frustrated expression, his clenched teeth.

Slowly he shakes his head at me as I blink at him, coming back to myself.

And then I laugh, covering my face with my hands, groaning a little as I do – because I can sense his emotions now, sense just how much he wants to continue precisely what we were doing just a few seconds ago.

But...he’s right. We can’t do any of that right now. Nothing has changed.

And we have...we have got to find some semblance of self-control and resist getting lost in each other. This is the Examination, after all.

“You should sleep,” he murmurs, working to clear his throat.

I laugh at the idea, rolling my eyes even as I sit up in his lap and tuck my hair back from my face, pretending to ignore the hard, thick length of him that’s now pressed against my ass. I do my very, very best to resist the urge to press myself more firmly against that length.

And I...fail. Just a little bit.

Jackson groans, suddenly grabbing me beneath the arms and lifting me bodily out of his lap, placing me gently beside him as if I’m as light as a kitten. I burst out laughing as he leans away from me.

“I cannot be the only responsible party here, Ari,” Jackson growls, glaring at me even as I can see the joy on his face, the temptation in his eyes. “You have got to help me out here.”

“But I don’t want to,” I murmur, leaning closer to him again, reaching to wrap my hand around the back of his neck, wanting his mouth back on mine –

But Jackson just laughs, deep and rueful, pulling away and then getting to his feet, shaking himself from head to toe like the wolf he is. “I am...going to take a very small

walk,” he murmurs, turning away from me. “And when I come back, we are going to behave ourselves, yes?”

I grumble, discontent, even though I know he’s right. And then Jackson does precisely as he says – walking a little distance away into the woods with his hands on his hips. I smirk, my hearing straining a little to hear him giving himself a little pep talk about self-control, and then I lean over in our little space, reaching for an apple as my stomach growls.

How can you think about eating, my wolf murmurs, sprawled out in my soul in a satisfied daze. We have to strategize – think about how to get him naked. Do you think, if we accidentally spilled the water all over him, that he...

But I smirk, shaking my head, knowing that I’m not going to ruin our only water source in what will be a vain attempt to get my mate naked. I bite into the apple with grim satisfaction, staring into the dark after him, wanting him back right now.

He takes his time, though – time that we both probably need. And as my body unwinds a little bit – god, I hadn’t realize how tense he’d made me – I wonder at myself.

I mean, sexually, I have been so shy with Luca – I’ve made him wait months to barely do more than kiss me in the dream state.

And then here, after thirty minutes with Jackson, I’m ready to just...throw down in the dirt? Let him have all of me, just after a couple of kisses?

Chapter 0200

Chapter 0200

A couple of really good kisses, my wolf counters, her eyes half shut and her tongue lolling from her mouth. I swat her little rump, correcting her, because Luca is one hell of a kisser too.

So...what is different?

Has Luca just done all the hard work and Jackson’s here to reap the benefits? A little guilt twists in me at the idea.

Or, my wolf suggests, lifting her head a little, curious, maybe you just have...a more sexual connection with this mate. They don’t have to be the same. Luca brings his own particular set of appealing characteristics to the table.

But as I consider that...well, that doesn't quite fit either, does it? Because it's not like Jackson's just some piece of meat with no personality, and it's not like Luca doesn't get me going.

They're just...different.

I sigh, taking another bite of my apple, studying it, confused but...well, letting myself be confused, I guess.

Nobody I know has ever done this whole two-mate thing before, at least not that I know of. This is new territory for everyone involved, and I suppose I'm bound to feel this way.

Confusion wipes away, though, the moment Jackson walks quietly back onto our little plateau, apparently having gotten control of myself.

Unfortunately, my confusion is replaced by an immediate and undeniable sense of lust. God, has he seen himself? Does he know how insanely hot he is when he just...walks? The way his shoulders shift, the grace with which he moves -

"Ari," Jackson moans, stopping a few feet from me and dragging his hand down the length of his face. "You have...you have got to stop doing that."

I burst out laughing, suddenly terribly embarrassed, because I just sent every one of those emotions right down the bond, didn't I?

"Okay, okay," I say, turning suddenly so that my back is to him now. "Here, this is better, I can't see you anymore -"

He laughs, coming to sit next to me again. "We have to be able to look at each other -"

"No, we don't!" I squeak, turning away again as he tries to peer at my face, leaning my shoulders back against him and facing the stone wall at the back of the tiny plateau. "I'll just...stare at these rocks. And pretend that you're...very, very ugly."

"Well, don't tell yourself lies, Ari," Jackson murmurs, wrapping an arm around me and tilting me back so that when I open my eyes I can see his gorgeous face again, just...a little upside down now. "Honesty with one's self is really important -"

I burst out laughing, shaking my head and turning back to him, letting him wrap an arm around me as I press my cheek to his chest. "You are very handsome," I murmur, nuzzling a little and working hard to scold my wolf when she urges me to climb back into his lap.

"I know," he murmurs, kissing the top of my head. "You're so lucky to be mated to such a looker, Ari, honestly -"

I squeak in protest, whipping my head up at his vanity, but he's ready for me, cupping my cheek in his broad palm and pressing a sweet, chaste kiss to my mouth.

"Not as lucky as me, though," he murmurs, shaking his head. "You're the most precious thing in the whole world. Do you know that?"

Everything in me just...melts at the insane sweetness of my big, scary Alpha mate. And I smile at him, a little dazed.

"Now, will you please try to sleep?" he pleads, stroking my cheekbone with his thumb.

"How can I sleep?" I ask, shaking my head at him, baffled at the thought, "when I just got you?"

"I'll just be really boring," he murmurs with a shrug, making me grin.

"Impossible," I say, but I lower my head to his chest, wanting to please him and, honestly, feeling a little weak and tired after the insane day I've had, however short.

"Oh, very possible," he replies, his voice soft and easy as he strokes his hand over my hair again and again, comforting and steady. "If you want, I'll recount the hundreds of ancient battles they made us memorize for warrior track – that should put you out –"

I groan, shuddering at the prospect, which makes him huff a little laugh.

"Fine," he sighs, continuing to pet me, his hand drifting over my shoulders, too, when it reaches the ends of my hair. "Let's just sit here and...be quiet."

"You'll wake me?" I whisper, feeling my eyes drift shut despite myself. "The moment the sun comes up?"

"I will," he promises. "The moment there's light to see by, Ari, I'll wake you. We have a lot to do tomorrow. We need an early start."

And so I shut my eyes, letting myself rest a little, trusting my mate to keep me warm and safe through the short hours left in the night.