

#Chapter 2 – A Boy Named Ari

“You two,” Rafe mutters, and I glance over to see him pressing the bridge of his nose between his fingers, just like dad does. “This is going to cause a damn firestorm that I am going to have to sort out.”

“But you’ re the best at solving our problems!” Jesse points out, laughing. “Come on, cousin,” he says, giving Rafe a little punch in the arm. “It’ s an adventure.”

Two hours later we’ re in the boxcar of a train headed east, towards the war front where the Academy is located.

It was shockingly easy to smuggle me out of the palace once I got rid of the wedding gown. Jesse just gave me some of the clothes he had packed, and after I had rolled the hem of the pants about a dozen times and tied the waist with some ribbon torn off of my gown...honestly, the clothes don’ t fit so bad.

“Okay,” Rafe murmurs, leaning back into the hay that fills the boxcar, grimacing as he types out messages on his phone. “Mom and Dad are on board.”

“They are?” I ask, wide-eyed with surprise.

“I mean,” Rafe says, flicking his eyes at me, “I didn’ t give them any details about where we are or where we’ re going, and mom is completely flipping out about you being gone from the palace without a guard for the first time in your life. But...she gets it. And they trust us.”

We were always inseparable. I didn’ t even really figure out that I was a girl – or that being a girl meant something different than being a boy – until I was around eight years old and I had to go to ballet class when Rafe and Jesse went to martial arts. I was devastated when I figured out that being different genders meant we had different futures in store for us.

But, well. I figured out pretty quickly that being a Princess means I have my own responsibilities. Even though I loved running wild with Rafe and Jesse, I learned how to be pretty, quaint, and sweet because I knew it would help mom and dad. Plus, it kind of came natural to me.

Rafe and Jesse, they secretly taught me everything they learned in their fighting lessons because they didn’ t want me to feel left out. But I’ m mom’ s tiny twin - petite with long rose-gold hair and a heart-shaped face. I’ m not built for hand-to-hand combat the way Rafe and Jesse are, but things like ballet come naturally to me. And while I thought that I was eager to do my duties as a Princess, to marry a Prince to save our nation from war?

Honestly, I don’ t think my heart has ever been as happy as it is right now, running away from those duties and hopping a train with my two best friends. I’ m so excited that I can barely catch my breath.

Of course, Rafe throws a wet blanket on my excitement. “Okay,” he sighs, tossing his phone into his backpack, finished talking to mom and dad. “What the hell are we going to do with Ariel when we get to the Academy?”

“Seriously, why don’ t we just take her along with us?” Jesse asks, wrapping his arms around his knees.

“What?” Rafe asks, frowning at him. “You mean like, into Alpha Academy?”

“Sure,” Jesse says, glancing over at me. “I mean, you promised our moms that we’ d keep her safe, right? If we have to keep an eye on her, what’ s easier than keeping her by our side?”

I gape at the audacity of Jesse’ s plan. I’ ve been hearing about Alpha Academy all my life and always dreamed about going – but, of course, it only accepts male students. And while Rafe and Jesse will certainly take the warrior track, I fantasized about taking up some of the other things you can study - like espionage, or becoming a master poison maker. There’ s even a rumor that you can study battle magic if you have an affinity for it.

But honestly – no one really knows what goes on inside of the Academy, it’ s all top secret and shrouded in mystery. But whenever one of the Alpha graduates came to the palace to consult with dad or report on the amazing advances they made for our nation? They always had this air about them – like they could take on the world.

And damn, did I envy that.

Still – my dreams never got far. While we always knew Rafe and Jesse would go, I had to make other plans. “Well, I’ m definitely not letting her out of our sight,” Rafe grumbles, his voice growing deeper at the mere idea of it. He shifts his eyes, studying me.

I sigh a little, hanging my head, knowing it’ s impossible.

“It’ s not that I don’ t want you there, Ariel,” Rafe sighs, guilty. “It’ s just not a safe place for girls – ”

My head whips up and I open my mouth, ready to protest that I can take care of myself, but my brother is already waving a hand, dismissing the idea.

“It’ s over a hundred testosterone-fueled Alpha males in their early twenties, Ariel,” Rafe says, frowning, “with no female attention for months. You’ ll get eaten alive. There are going to be guys there like Luca Grant – ”

“Luca Grant’ s going to be there?” I ask, my eyes going wide as my head snaps up. Grant’ s a minor celebrity – he’ s the junior heavyweight boxing champion of our nation as well as a rather notorious ladies’ man. But he just retired from boxing to join the military in a show of national pride. His story has been plastered all over the news.

And it doesn’ t hurt that he is...insanely good looking. He’ s got these dimples that...

Well. His dimples are beside the point. But I had no idea he was going to the Academy or that he’ d be part of Rafe and Jesse’ s class.

“Isn’ t the simplest thing just to just keep plans the same?” Jesse asks, interrupting my thoughts. “Ariel just...comes with us.”

“You’ re being ridiculous,” Rafe scoffs, glaring at Jesse and starting to lose his temper a bit. “What, we’ re just going to waltz into the candidate barracks filled with a bunch of hormonal Alphas like ‘oh hey, we brought our little sister! Don’ t touch her! Hands off!’ ”

“No,” Jesse says, his eyes bright and eager. “We don’ t waltz in with your sister,” he says, pulling his backpack over and rustling around in it, pulling out a grey camo-print patrol cap, standard issue for all Academy candidates. He plops it on my head. “We waltz in with your brother”

“What!?” Rafe seethes, appalled.

“No, it’ ll work!” Jesse says, grinning now as he scoots next to me and begins to tuck my rose-gold hair up under the cap. I grin right back at him, realizing where this is going. “Rafe,” Jesse says, turning to my brother with a wide grin, “meet Ari. Ari Sinclair.”

Rafe’ s mouth drops open as I laugh and then rearrange my face, trying to look tough and do my best impression of a dude.

“Oh my god,” Rafe groans, allowing himself to fall back into the welcoming softness of the hay. “No, absolutely not – this will never work – ”

“No, it will!” I insist, excited now. “It will work, I can do it! I’ m Ari!”

“No, you’ re not,” Rafe mutters, his voice further muffled by the hands still pressed over his face. “You’ re Ariel – you do ballet, and you arrange flowers, and you like making seating charts – ”

“Not anymore,” I say, turning and grinning at Jesse, who nods eagerly at me. “Now, I’ m Ari. And I’ m a boy”

Comments (3)