

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy

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Chapter 0201

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It takes me a long time to fall asleep, overwhelmed as I am by my new bond, the closeness of my mate, the secrets that we've passed between us that still ring through my mind. But as the minutes pass I feel my eyelids getting heavier and heavier, encouraged by the steady movement of Jackson's hand over my hair.

When I do finally fall asleep, my head pillowed against Jackson's chest, it's the deep, true sleep of one who feels both weary and completely safe.

I sleep so deeply that when my eyelids flutter open in the morning, I have...no idea where I am. Even though I am...completely comfortable.

I frown, not understanding, and curl into the warmth of what I assume is my mattress, though it's a little...firmer than I remember? I'm not sure.

There's a light chuckle, though, that makes me look up, and my frown deepens as I stare into Jackson's face before I realize that...

"Oh!" I murmur, sitting up a little. He smiles at me, his hand pressing into my back, encouraging me to lean my head back down against his chest.

"It's okay," he murmurs, "take a second to wake up. There's time."

I lay my head back down against him, blushing a little as I realize that what I assumed was my mattress is just his body – that I'm curled up in his lap, kind of sprawled over his torso, my face tucked against his pectoral –

God, is he really that big, that I can basically use his body as a bed?

Or am I just that small?

I peer up at him again, more awake now, taking a deep breath and raising a hand to rub at my eye.

Slowly, a smile overtakes his mouth.

“What?” I mutter, shaking my head a little to clear it, a smile pulling at my lips as well because... well, because he’s just staring at me. And it’s...kind of nice.

“You’re just so pretty,” he whispers, his voice a little awed as he traces his knuckles down the soft skin of my cheek.

I can’t help it then – I burst into a brilliant smile.

Because my mate thinks I’m pretty.

His own smile widens, matching mine, and I squeak with happiness, reaching up and winding my arms around Jackson’s neck, pulling him close and pressing probably a dozen kisses to his cheek and neck. “Morning,” I murmur, after the fourth or fifth.

He doesn’t respond, just puts a hand beneath my chin after a moment and tilts my face up to his, bringing his mouth to mine and kissing me like he’s been waiting for hours to do it, like he can’t wait for it anymore.

And, obviously, I kiss him right back.

But we’re both more contained, now, in the light of the morning than we were last night. There was something freeing about the darkness – about knowing that as long as it persisted, there was nothing we could do except explore each other.

Now that there’s light by which we can see?

We’re both aware that it’s time to move.

“Um, so,” I say after Jackson breaks our kiss. I stay close, speaking softly as I run a hand through his messy hair, tucking it back behind his ear, “I lied to you yesterday. I can shift.”

“Really,” he says, his eyebrows going up, and I can tell that he’s pleased. “Little rose-colored wolf, by any chance?”

“How did you know that?” I ask, my eyes going wide.

“I think I met her,” he murmurs, his finger curling in a tendril of my hair, “a couple times. Dreaming.”

I tilt my head for a second and then burst into a smile as the truth hits me. All those nights, running along the cliffs with another wolf at my side -

Wasn’t just a dream, was it?

But there's no time to tend to that right now. "The only problem is," I say, looking around the forest, "that my wolf is very obviously a girl wolf, and anyone who sees and smells me will figure it out."

"We'll keep the plan the same, then," Jackson says, starting to stand up and ridiculously bringing me with him, setting me on my feet only when he's fully standing. "We'll only shift if we run out of time, yeah?"

"Do you think..." I bite my lip, looking up at him. "I mean, are we going to be too late?"

"Nah," Jackson says, turning to look north. "The only people who would have made it to the mountain and been able to climb it in the night would have been...well, the best of Warrior Track. So, maybe Jesse and Rafe. But still, I think there's plenty of reason to assume that there's time left for us to make it."

"So," I say, smiling up at him and crossing my arms, "what you're saying is...if I hadn't been weighting you down, you'd already be across the finish line?"

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Jackson grins at me, not denying it, but scooping me up in his arms instead and turning me in a slow circle as he presses one last kiss to my mouth. "You can slow me down anytime you want, tiny."

I bite my lip, grinning at him, and I nudge my nose with his before I kick and wriggle, begging to be put down. Jackson laughs, but he puts me back on his feet and we begin to assess our plan and our few possessions. We quickly share the water, though I insist Jackson drink the majority of it – I got some liquids out of the fruit, after all – and then I lift my crossbow, twisting my lips at it.

"Do you think I need this?" I ask quietly. "If we're going to rush, and climb..."

"Leave it," he says, shrugging and making a snap decision as he likewise tosses his backpack into the brush. "We need to move fast now – any extra weight is a detriment. Besides," he bends over, scooping my discarded hat out of the dust where we left it last night and holding it out to me, "I'm your weapon now."

I snatch my hat from him, unable to keep the smile from my lips as I wind the majority of my hair onto my head and plop the hat over top of it. Because I quite like the idea of Jackson as my weapon.

Jackson smirks, helping me tuck the last strands of my hair beneath the brim. "Where on earth did my mate go? Now there's only her boyish twin, Ari Clark, marksman and chemical mastermind..."

"Don't forget powerful sorcerer," I say, lofty, as we both turn away from the plateau, and start out in the blue light of the morning.

"Oh, how could I forget," he murmurs behind me, "melter of very tiny pieces of glass...such raw power..."

I laugh, shooting a little glare over my shoulder, but I focus on my steps on the narrow path ahead of me, which is barely a path and more of a lucky outcropping of rock. I marvel again at Jackson's sense of balance, as well as the fact that he found this in the dark.

When we get to the bottom of the cliff face, a little forest stretches out in front of us, beyond which I know is the bridge surrounded by cadets. I wonder, passively, whether those guarding it have crossed already? Or they're still biding their time, hoping to take out more of their "enemies" before they shift and make their run for the mountain?

"I'm going to go check," Jackson says, looking forward through the woods. "You...wait here."

"Okay," I say, turning towards the forest.

"Here," Jackson says, frowning and grabbing my arm. "Wait here, Ari."

"Um, I don't know if not going to the bathroom is part of your supernatural prowess, McClintock?" I say, looking a little awkwardly up at my mate. "But it is...not part of mine."

He stares at me for a second before laughing, shaking his head. Then he stills, looking around into the forest around us, clearly casting out his hearing to see if anyone is close by. "Yeah, okay. Whatever. Just...don't go far, and return right here, yeah?"

I nod, ready to obey, trusting his senses more than my own.

He stoops closer, pressing a kiss to my mouth, and then as silently as a forest animal himself Jackson moves through the trees, heading for the edge of the forest so he can better see the bridge.

I wait until I can't see him anymore before I move a few trees away, ducking behind a particularly big one and relieving myself in a hurry, silently cursing men – or maybe just men's fashion – for making this so much easier for men to do than women. But I finish up pretty quickly, quietly

mourning the lack of toilet paper, before refastening my pants and heading back to the little spot where Jackson left me.

I grin as I see a black-clad form coming through the trees.

“That was fast,” I say quietly, smiling, my head dipping so that I don’t trip over any roots.

“Oh, did you miss me?”

I freeze and my head flies up as I recognize that voice.

A dark, sour voice – and certainly not my mate’s.

My eyes focus instantly on Alan Wrights, on the ugly sneer on his face. “Because I certainly didn’t miss you.”

I stumble backwards, frantic, seeking a way out –

But as he raises his hand, and I see my crossbow held steady there.

And I know that...this is the end.

I open my mouth and scream even before Wright’s finger tightens on the trigger -

Even before the bolt flies from the crossbow, lodging itself deep in my thigh.

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My scream only intensifies, combining with my moan of pain as I grab my leg and fall to the forest floor. I’m panting with agony as I lay in the dirt and the leaves, my eyes pressed shut for a moment before I glance down at my leg, my hands quickly coating in my own blood as they go directly to the wound –

Trying to do something, to end the pain, to apply pressure, something –

But there’s nothing – god, I think the bolt hit bone, I think it cracked it –

I’m still moaning horribly when a shadow falls over me, and I look frantically up to see Wright standing above me, drawing back the crossbow’s string, that ugly sneer still on his face, though mixed with victory now.

“You deserve this,” he snarls, glaring down at me. “Every inch of pain – laying in the dirt, finally recognizing your failure – you’re nothing but a dirty cheat –”

“Please,” I beg, gasping for breath as he loads another bolt and raises the crossbow towards me. “Please, don’t –”

“Save it,” he snaps, pointing the crossbow directly at me, and then without another word he pulls the trigger again, sending a bolt directly into my gut.

The pain is...blinding this time.

I scream again, but I must pass out from it –

Honestly, did I die? I might have died, a little bit –

But when I open my eyes again, the forest is fuzzy above me, and there’s a dark form looming over me, shouting my name.

I flinch away, screaming again, and a hand goes fast over my mouth before a hand slips under my head, cradling it.

“Who did this to you!?”

I blink, trying to clear my head as I recognize Jackson’s voice, but then I moan and let my head fall back – because the clearer my mind gets, the more I feel the pain.

“Ari!” Jackson shouts, and suddenly he’s on the ground next to me, pulling me into his lap. “Ari, who did this!?”

I almost scream again as the movement jostles my stomach, and my hand moves to the bolt of wood that’s protruding from my gut, that aches with every movement.

“I’m sorry,” Jackson murmurs, and I blink again, trying to focus, trying to look up into his face. His voice – it’s so tight, so full of pain. Did he – did he get shot too? But as my eyes focus on his face I see that his pain is all desperate agony for me. “Ari,” he murmurs, his hand shaking as he cups my cheek. “Who did it?”

“Wright,” I murmur, shaking my head.

Jackson growls, his head snapping up, sniffing the air – like he’d go after him right now, like he’ll tear him to shreds.

“Jacks!” I gasp, shaking my head, my hands fisted in his shirt. Because – I mean, if Wright’s not here anymore, then what’s the point?

I don’t need –

God, my head spins, the pain making everything dizzy –

But I do know that I don't need revenge right now. If by some miracle I'm going to survive, I need a healer.

"Please," I beg, shaking my head up at him. "Please, we have to get...out..."

Jackson nods, his whole body trembling as he quickly assesses the situation, as he looks at the blood pouring from my leg and my stomach, as he glances over his left shoulder towards where the bridge likely is.

"I'm going to get you out of this, Ari," he whispers, his voice thick with his vow. "Okay? Just...you just hold on, yeah?"

I nod, fervent, either believing him or...or not wanting him to believe that I'm going to die –

Even as I feel my consciousness fading –

"Ari!" Jackson snaps, and I blink, looking back up into his face as I realize that I almost passed out again. "Hey!"

"Hey," I reply, frowning a little, not understanding.

Then, to my surprise, Jackson rips open the top button of my shirt and presses his hand flat to my chest. Then, he pushes.

Not – not with his body, not with his hand. But with his...his magic.

I feel it, quite suddenly, filling me – a great deal of energy, and strength, and a glowing, rich sort of power. I gasp, my eyes flying open, and then I bat his hand away – suddenly feeling replete – like I can't take anymore.

It doesn't do anything for the pain, but it sure as hell wakes me up. I stare up at him, confused, not getting it.

"How's your healing?" he asks, his voice sharper than it was before. "Your...your wolf healing. It's good, yeah?"

"Um," I say, glancing down at myself, knowing that even though wolf healing is fast it's not fast enough for this. "It's...it's good."

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"I'll keep you going," Jackson says, nodding sharply to me. "I'll give you my magic, Ari – as much of it as you can hold. I think – I think with the connection between our magic, it will help speed your own magic, the healing included. And hopefully it will be enough to..."

He hesitates, not wanting to say it.

But I know precisely what he means. Enough to keep me alive.

And then, again to my shock, Jackson stands, pulling me up with him in his arms. I moan again, almost a scream, as he does. But he continues, staring down at me as I pant through the pain, eventually opening my eyes to look up into him. "I'm getting you out, okay?" he whispers, his whole heart in his eyes.

And I can feel everything down the bond – all his worry, all his grief that he just found me, that he could lose me so soon. But, above all, his sheer determination to make me live – even if it means killing himself in the process.

"Yeah," I reply, pathetically simple, nodding to him, letting him feel my faith.

Because, despite the odds, I believe him.

Jackson nods once, sharply, and then turns in the forest, striding off through the trees. He doesn't bother, anymore, to be quiet, instead stomping and moving swiftly, letting everyone hear him come.

And even as my mind passes from state to state, concentrating on the pain and then concentrating on the world, I see that this, actually, was precisely his plan.

By the time we get to the bridge, every single one of the cadets who was waiting there has turned to us, their eyes wide. I look around at all of them through half-lidded eyes, my arms curled around Jackson's neck – when did I do that? – as he holds me high against his chest.

By their shock and their awe, I can tell that the two of us make rather an impressive sight – or, at least, a terrible one.

The gigantic Alpha, the strongest Cadet in the Academy, especially enraged like this, covered in blood, his tiny charge curled in his arms.

"We're crossing this bridge," Jackson growls, his voice loud enough that he's shouting even though his words hum with anger. As I glance up I can see Jackson's canines sharpening to points, can feel his fingers lengthening to claws as he looks around at every single man standing there. "Does anyone want to stop me!?"

Jackson roars his final words, glaring around at every single cadet, a challenge in every line of him.

And, wisely, every single one of the cadets slowly backs away from the bridge. Because though in any normal moment an Alpha carried a wounded wolf would be a tempting target...

Jackson McClintock in a killing rage, the lifeblood of his mate dripping on the forest floor?

I mean, even if they don't know I'm his mate...

Nobody's fucking with us right now.

Jackson releases a final growl, glaring around. "Any of you who give any aid to Alan Wright," he snarls, "even a kind word or a glance...you will answer to me, on the other side."

Nobody says anything, but they'd be fools not to take him seriously.

And with that, Jackson strides across the bridge, not even looking back to see if anyone takes a shot from behind.

Because none of them – none are that stupid.

I whimper, slightly, when I feel Jackson's footsteps transition from wood to dirt and grass. Because now that that is finished...the hard part, it's coming now, isn't it?

And the pain –

God, fuck, I'd do anything to end it, the way it radiates through me...

"Hold on," Jackson murmurs, his voice breaking as he slips a hand beneath my still-loose shirt, apparently needing the skin-to-skin contact to pass his magic to me. It comes in a flood and my head tilts back – because while it does nothing to stop the pain I...I do feel stronger, after the infusion.

My eyes flutter open again as I look up into his face, and from the fear I see there I know I must be ghostly pale, looking as on the edge of death as I currently feel.

"You hold on, okay?" he whispers, lifting me higher as he strides away from the bridge and towards the foot of the mountain before us. He presses a series of quick kisses to my face. "You'll hold on?"

"I will," I whisper, nodding to him, trying to steel myself for what's to come, even though I know it's impossible.

“Okay,” he whispers, and then as my eyes shut I feel Jackson take a deep, deep breath.

And then, he starts to run.

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Time moves strangely after that, at once standing completely still in my agony and, somehow, passing so fast that I barely understand it when the sun reaches its zenith, and then passes beyond it, and then starts to sink towards the horizon.

How...how have hours past?

God, how have I survived them?

Though it all, Jackson and my pain have kept a steady pace. I do my best to curl myself against him, to make myself small and inconsequential, to not be a bother to this man who is running miles and miles across the countryside with me balanced in his arms.

The pain is...god, it drives me a little insane, I think, gnawing at my stomach and my leg. I can feel the blood dripping from me, at once agonizing and, somehow, a balm against the raw flesh of my wounds. I think I pass out...a lot, but regular infusions of Jackson's magic keeps bringing me back, filling me with energy, making my eyes flutter open.

Always, always he's glancing down into my face, checking to make sure that I'm okay –

But, I mean, we're both aware that I'm not okay.

But, somehow, I am alive.

And, somehow, he...keeps running.

I'm vaguely aware, as the hours pass, that this part of the Examination was meant to be done in wolf form – that he should have shifted by now and crossed this field at his top speed as his gigantic wolf. But even in his human body, carrying me? Frankly, Jackson's faster than most cadet's wolves. Only a few of them pass us, sending us side-long glances and not bothering to interrupt, knowing that Jackson would end them if they did.

Jackson's breath only starts to flag when I feel his pace change. I lift my head, curious despite my haze of pain, wondering desperately if we're at the end –

If there will be a healer, here –

Surely there has to be – surely the Academy has medical staff waiting, knowing as they do that this is a violent Examination in which they've encouraged us to maim each other, to get to the end.

I scowl a little, my mind wandering strangely as I make a mental note to have a deep conversation with my father and my uncle about this particular aspect of Academy life.

Because, quite frankly, I'm not sure I agree with these methods.

But...will I ever live to see them again, to have that conversation?

Suddenly terrified, I sob, my hand clenching in Jackson's shirt as I turn my face into him. I don't have any tears, though – all my liquids are probably depleted, after all, from all the blood dropping from me...

"It's all right," Jackson murmurs, pulling me closer against his chest. "We're almost there."

I pause, looking up at him, a little baffled. "Really?" I whisper, and I'm startled by the cracked sound of my own voice, the way my eyes struggle to focus on his beautiful face.

"Well," he grimaces, glancing upwards. "Well, no."

I groan, putting my head back against his chest. Not that it's his fault – I just...god, I want it to end. All of it, the pain, the movement –

I just want to sleep, curl up somewhere soft and comfortable.

"Come on," he says, shaking me a little, making me look back up at him, his voice cracking in a way that breaks my heart. "Don't give up on me now, Ari!"

I lift my head, forcing my eyes to focus, forcing my head to nod. But it's all – it's all really hard, maybe too much. "Jacks," I moan, shaking my head.

"Don't you do it," he growls, his arms tightening around me. "I did not drag you for miles across that field for you to give up now, Ari –"

I laugh – a sad, croaked sound, half baffled and half tickled that he's mad at me. But something about it brings me back to myself, a little bit more. "Okay," I whisper, nodding my head seriously now. "I won't give up."

"Good," he mutters, a little mad, again pressing his hand to my back and giving me more of his power, his energy, his magic. I feel the difference instantly, the boost, but all

it does is allow me to focus more on his grimace. “I need to...to change positions, Ari,” he murmurs. “I’m going to need both of my hands.”

“What?” I ask, confused.

“Just...don’t hate me, okay?” He stares into my face and I nod, promising it.

But I instantly regret that promise when he lifts me, bodily, and slings me over his shoulder. The moan that rips from me instantly turns into a yell, if not a guttural scream. Jackson murmurs over and over again that he’s sorry, but then he moves forward, even as I cry ceaselessly into his back.

My body is twisted over his shoulder, somehow, so that the weight of me isn’t on the wound. Instead, that faces inward, bumping awkwardly against Jackson’s head and sometimes his cheek as he begins to climb. Most of the time he keeps one arm wrapped tightly around the back of my thighs, and my legs go blissfully numb, meaning I can’t feel the arrow in my thigh anymore.

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Frankly, most of the time I can’t feel anything, because I start to pass out as Jackson moves, somehow miraculously balancing me the whole time. The only times I come to are when Jackson passes more magic, his palm pressed against my back or my side. These come more and more frequently as he feels me fade, as he feels me start to drift away from him.

When my eyes do open, the world is increasingly black, and at first I think it’s because...because I’m dying. But then I realize that it’s just nighttime.

Jackson starts to talk to me then, keeping up a steady string of words, most of them curses and narration of what he’s doing, every step he’s taking, how close we are to the end. But some of them, blissfully, are the sweetest things I’ve ever heard.

I just catch snatches of Jackson’s words, really – of him telling me of how long he thought about me, about what I’d look like. His surprise that I’m a blonde. How much he wants to tell me, and parts of the world he wants to show me.

If I had tears, they’d drip down my face, but I don’t. So instead I just hang limply over my mate’s shoulder, mourning the loss of this incredible bond when I just got hold of it,

even as I determine to stay as long as I can – even as I will myself to live, even for his sake, if not my own.

Because Jackson – he deserves a break in life, doesn't he?

And I laugh, a little, at the irony of that thought – that Jackson needs a break, even when I'm the one dying over his shoulder, being hauled up a mountain. But Jackson laughs too, hearing or feeling my sentiments, and then he passes me more magic, and I clench my fist, determined to live.

I focus on my breathing, when I'm awake – focus on dragging in the next breath as Jackson pulls me higher, and higher.

Until, suddenly, I hear him groan, and then feel him stumble, and then suddenly stand and pause on his two feet.

"We did it, Ari," he murmurs, panting. He passes me more magic and my eyes flutter, confused. I turn my head, trying to comprehend the weird upside-down world.

"What?" I murmur, still hanging, my fingers now as numb as my legs. Somewhere below my cap fell off, and my hair is streaming down around me. There are people all over, cadets and professors that I recognize – and...other stuff? I try to peer through the curtain of my hair, try to understand but...

Well. It's kind of useless, so I just sigh and give up. "Okay," I mutter, giving a little shrug. "Put me down, Jacks."

But he doesn't listen to me, instead striding forward, shouting at the top of his lungs that we need a fucking medic, right the fuck now.

Suddenly I jump a little, going rigid, because –

Was...was that my name?

There's a rush of noise and then a smell hits my nose – a familiar scent I've smelled, I think, every day of my life, and I immediately start crying as I hear my name again, and this time I recognize the voice.

"Rafe," I moan, reaching for him, even though I can't see.

"She needs a medic!" Jackson snaps, turning sharply away from my brother.

"I'm right here!" There's another familiar scent and I start to cry in earnest this time, trying to push away from Jackson, desperate to get to it – to that familiar scent of lilies, and rose, and fresh water, and rain.

Jackson snarls, stepping back, even as I try to turn to push myself up.

"I'm a healer," the woman's voice says, gentle and stern. "Please, please – I can help, okay!?"

"Let her go, Jacks," Rafe says, his voice even and persuasive. "Please – you've done everything you can, just...give her to me."

Jackson hesitates for a second before I feel myself moving, and I groan in agony as my mate tips me off his shoulder, and catches me in his arms and then...then passes me to my brother.

"Hey, trouble," Rafe murmurs, smirking down at me – I think for my sake, because I can see the worry in every line of his face, even if he's pretending he doesn't feel it.

"What!?" the woman breathes, and then she steps forward, reaching for me as she gasps, and I turn my face to look up into what could be a mirror image. A thrill of deep love passes through me even despite the pain.

"Hey, mom," I murmur, trying to smile, reaching for her with a bloody hand –

But before I can brush her cheek, as I so desperately want to...I pass out.

Chapter 0207

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Jackson stares down at the tiny woman who is...god, she could be his mate's identical twin, couldn't she? Except, a little older...

"Rafe Henry Sinclair," the woman hisses, moving closer to the Prince, glaring daggers into his face. "What the fuck are you two playing at!?"

"I'll explain everything, mom," Rafe growls softly through his teeth, turning away with Ari in his arms. "But right now, you need to heal her!"

Jackson stares, confused at Rafe, because...

Well, why is he calling this woman mom?

Didn't Ari just...

And then, as the woman shoves Rafe hard on the shoulder and they start to stride towards a door built into the edge of the cliffside, everything suddenly comes together.

That woman – he’s seen her before, of course – seen her picture a thousand times in print and on television. Ella Sinclair – the Queen of the nation, Rafe’s mother.

And mother of three more children, including the eldest Princess, Ariel –

Ari –

Jackson groans, tilting his head back and covering his face in his hands, cursing himself for being such an idiot –

God, how could he have not put that together last night!? It’s not like she was even being sneaky about it! A girl named Ari, living with her “cousins,” Rafe and Jesse Sinclair!? Who the hell did he

think she was!?

“Are you coming?”

Jackson drops his hands from his face to look towards the door, where the Queen has stopped for a moment to glare at him while she holds it open, inviting him to follow where the crown Prince has carried his damn sister.

Jackson nods once and strides towards the door, obeying his summons – not because a Queen has given them, but because his mate is inside now. And he’s not leaving her alone for one damn second.

No, he didn’t come this far to let someone else take control now. No, Ari – Ariel – she’s his. His to carry, his to protect, and he’s not leaving her side again before he knows she’s okay. Maybe not even then – not for a long time.

Jackson steps quickly through the door and follows the Queen down a short hall to a simple room. The Queen shuts the door behind him as Jackson turns to watch Rafe lays a bloody, unconscious Ariel onto a crisp white hospital bed. God, she looks so tiny, so delicate...

“Hey!” the Queen shouts, snapping her fingers up in Jackson’s face to draw his attention to her. “I don’t know who you are, but you need to fill me in on precisely what happened to my daughter!” She glares at him like it’s his fault.

Jackson stands awkwardly by the door, staring at the Queen, not knowing what to say.

“Go easy on him, mom,” Rafe snaps, standing up straight as the Queen rolls her eyes and moves to sit on the edge of the bed, taking Ariel’s hand. “He’s Ariel’s mate, he didn’t do this – he probably saved her –”

The Queen’s eyes go wide as she stares at Rafe and then turns that shocked gaze back on Jackson, who just stands by the door, trembling a little.

“Well, come on, then,” the Queen sighs, waving him over as she leans over Ariel and starts to look over the wounds. To Jackson’s shock, the Queen rather callously grasps the end of a crossbow bolt and just yanks it out.

Jackson gapes because – I mean, aren’t you supposed to not pull the bolt out? What kind of doctor is she –

“Relax,” Rafe murmurs, glancing at him. “Mom’s got...I mean, it’s her magic, all right? She’s going to heal her. Ariel’s going to be fine.”

The Queen sends another glance Jackson’s way before she starts to snap out questions about what happened, and when, and how long Ariel’s been semi-conscious. Jackson answers them all as fast as he can before the Queen takes a deep breath, settling herself on the side of the bed and taking both of Ariel’s hands in hers.

Then, to Jackson’s shock, the queen just exhales slowly and closes her eyes, looking of all bizarre things like she’s just...meditating.

Rafe exhales a long breath of relief and Jackson turns to him, gesturing towards the Queen, silently asking if they’re all crazy.

Rafe just stares at Jackson and then laughs a little, nodding to the side, silently asking him to take a step away. Jackson hesitates but then follows, glancing towards the door, wondering if he should run and get a real doctor or something –

“Look, Ari’s going to be fine, okay?” Rafe whispers, glancing back towards his mom and his sister, “Mom’s...very powerful. So just calm down, yeah?”

Jackson just stares at the Prince’s face, wondering how the hell he’s supposed to do that.

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Rafe just smirks, his smile a little unsteady, but he takes a deep breath and shakes his head, probably forcing himself to calm down too. “Thank you,” Rafe says, crossing his

arms and looking back towards his sister, laying so pale on the bed. “For taking care of her. It...it kills me that I wasn’t there.”

“Of course,” Jackson says, instant, still staring at the Prince like he’s crazy for thinking that he wouldn’t take care of her.

Rafe looks back at Jackson and flinches a little at the intensity on the other man’s face. And then he laughs, just lightly. “I guess you two...figured some things out in the woods?”

Jackson blinks for a second and then realizes that...well, that Rafe Sinclair knows, doesn’t he? But of course he does – he just told the Queen that Jackson’s Ariel’s mate. “Yeah,” Jackson says after a minute, running a hand through his hair and looking over at Ariel again, not wanting to take his eyes away for a single second. To his shock, color has already started to come back to her cheeks.

Is it...is it seriously possible? That...

“Jacks,” Rafe murmurs, and Jackson almost jumps out of his skin when the Prince puts a hand on his shoulder. But Rafe, to his credit, doesn’t pull it away. Jackson turns to him now, starting to tremble all over like a frightened animal. “Look,” Rafe says, keeping his voice low and calm, “if mom gets to them while they’re breathing...I mean, I’ve never not seen her bring someone back, okay?”

The two stare at each other for a long moment, Jackson...not knowing how to understand it, or how to believe it.

“Ariel’s going to be fine,” Rafe insists, his voice still soft, his brows knitting together in concern. But Jackson flinches when he realizes suddenly that Rafe’s concern is...is not for Ariel anymore. It’s for him. “You got her here in time, Jacks. You did it. She’s going to be okay.”

Jackson continues to stare at Rafe for a long, long moment before he gasps in a long breath, suddenly flooded with hope he hadn’t realized he’d lost.

Because he’d repeated to himself over and over again that she was going to make it –

That she’d survive, that he’d make her survive, damn it, if he had to pour his own blood into her veins –

But deep down, after she’d stopped moving? After he could feel her pulse slowing, after she started taking the magic in lesser and lesser quantities?

God, he’d really thought he’d lost her –

And then Jackson, even though he hasn't done it since he was a very small child, didn't know he even could anymore – he bursts into tears. Big, wracking sobs, the kind that shake his shoulders and make him gasp for air. Half mortified, half lost in grief and worry, he tucks his face against his palms.

Rafe's face falls, but suddenly he's there, wrapping an arm around Jackson's shoulders before tugging him close. Jackson, not knowing what impulse tells him to do it because he's never hugged another man in his life, wraps his own arms around Rafe's back and clings to him, burying his face against Rafe's shoulder, emptying his tears.

"It's all right," Rafe murmurs softly, patting Jackson's muscled back with his own broad hand. "It's okay, let it out. She's going to be fine. She's going to be fine."

Rafe murmurs it over and over until Jackson cries himself out, until the big Alpha raises his head and wipes an exhausted hand over his bloody cheek.

Rafe helps Jackson steady himself, find his feet, and then looks him up and down. "You need a shower," he murmurs, and Jackson pauses before he laughs, just a little, glancing again towards

the bed where Ariel...

God, she looks like she's sleeping now, even though the Queen still holds her hands, still has her eyes closed, a faint lavender light shining around both of them.

"Yeah," Jackson murmurs, even though a shower is the furthest thing from his mind in this moment. "I guess...I guess I do."

"Welcome to the family, man," Rafe murmurs, clapping a hand on Jackson's shoulder and leaning against him just a little bit. "Welcome to non-stop drama, probably for the rest of your life."

Jackson just groans lightly at the thought, and crosses his arms, and stands steadily – even if he needs to sniff a few times and wipe again at the final tears on his cheeks.

Then, quite patiently, he stands still and waits for his mate to wake up.

Chapter 0209

Chapter 0209

When my eyes flutter open, I stretch myself a little, feeling bright and refreshed.

“All better, baby?” I hear my mom murmur and I go still for a moment before I focus on her face leaning over me.

A smile breaks out on my lips, because it’s my mom – my mom, the best mom in the whole world, who I love so much, who I’ve been dying to see for weeks –

But then I gasp, and sight up straight, with my entire reality flashing back to me in a moment – why I haven’t seen my mom for months, the Academy, the Examination –

“Slowly now, slowly,” mom murmurs, putting her hands on my shoulders and pushing me gently back towards my pillows. “You’re fixed, baby, but you’re still dehydrated and exhausted. Go easy.”

But I resist, not wanting to lay down – only wanting my mom, to be in her arms. “Mama,” I cry, tears springing to my eyes, and she relents, wrapping her arms around me and gathering me to her. She holds me close, shushing me quietly and rocking me back and forth like she has a thousand times, telling me how much she loves me and how precious I am to her. And those words – god, they heal me more than any magic she has.

I mean, that’s an overstatement. But it certainly feels like it.

“Thanks, mom,” I say, my words hitching a little in my voice. “Thank you so much. I was so scared.”

“You were scared,” she says, pulling back a little and looking at me with wide eyes, “Ari, you just laid there – I was the one who was scared. I’m going to kill you for this!”

I can’t help it – I burst out laughing, a rough and shaky sound as I lift my hands and brush my tears from my cheeks. “What a waste of magic, mom,” I murmur, shaking my head, “if you heal me just to kill me.”

My mom just moans then, shaking her head at me and gathering me into her arms again. I cringe, hating that I made her so upset, but there’s a bright side in that too, right? Because if she’s mad at me, that means I’m okay. If I was dying, mom would go much easier on me.

“I’m sorry, mom,” I whisper. “I’ll tell you everything – I promise.”

“Damn right you will,” she murmurs back, tightening her arms. “What were you and your brother thinking taking you off to that dangerous school – you’re so little, Ariel! Why did you think you could –”

“Um,”

I start a little at the manly voice that sounds somewhere to my left, sitting up straight and looking around. And my eyes go wide when I see Rafe and Jackson just...standing there, staring at us.

How – how long have they been there?

“Yeah,” Rafe says, glancing anxiously at Jackson, “I think...I think you need to let this one see that you’re okay? Or else he might have a stroke.”

Another little sob breaks from my throat as I open my arms to my mate, calling to him in my mind, and instantly he’s across the floor – so fast I didn’t even see him move – gathering me into his arms and taking shaky breaths as he runs a hand over my hair, and takes a deep sniff of my scent. As Rafe comes to stand closer by the bed, Jackson does his best to look me over all while keeping me as close as he can, which kind of defeats the point.

“You’re – you’re seriously okay?” he asks, his voice trembling. “How...”

“I’m fine,” I say, nodding my head eagerly to him, “mom patched me up, Jacks, it’s okay –“

He screws up his face in confusion, glancing between me and mom, not getting it. “So, you’re like... you are going into surgery soon? She stopped the bleeding? What about the infection – you need –“

“No,” I murmur, taking his face between my palms and shaking my head, making him listen to me. “Jacks, I’m healed – that’s her gift. It’s pretty incredible.” When he still stares at me, not getting it, I grin and lean back a little in his arms, pulling up my shirt so he can see my stomach, which looks exactly as it did before Wright plunged a crossbow bolt through it – smooth skin, no scar, no wound. Nothing.

“See?” I say as his eyes go wide. “Like it never happened.”

“What...” he breathes, sitting up straight, his arms loosening around me in a way I can’t stand. “How...”

“Well,” mom says dryly, “I think that’s enough bared flesh for one evening.” She swats gently at my hand and makes me drop my shirt. I laugh, grinning at her, and then glance at my mate, feeling suddenly awkward to be in his arms like this. I mean, he’s here...did they like...meet?

Chapter 0210

Chapter 0210

Does she know who he is to me?

And, oh my god, has Luca shown up? Did he even finish the Examination? Does he even know that I'm here, that I was hurt? I glance anxiously towards the door.

"All right, young man," my mom says, sterner than she usually is, leaning forward to deliver a little rap to Jackson's arm. "You've verified that she's alive and well – now hands off my daughter at least until we've been properly introduced."

Jackson blushes terribly and goes rigid before letting me go, sitting up straight. I grin at him because, I mean, I know that mom is teasing him – but knowing how Jackson is around women?

And especially a Queen?

Oh, my poor baby mate.

"Well?" mom says, sitting up imperiously and holding out a hand to him, palm down with her fingers delicately pressed together. "Will you not kiss my hand and perform the proper obeisances to your Queen, Cadet?"

Jackson just stares at her hand, wide-eyed, having absolutely no idea what to do and in a complete panic about it. I let it all happen for about two seconds, glancing between them and taking in Jackson's slack jaw, the twitch at the edges of my mom's lips, before I burst out laughing and smack her hand away.

"Mom, leave him alone!" I order, and she grins, dropping her hand. "You're scaring the crap out of him."

Rafe laughs too, enjoying the scene as I murmur to Jackson that she's just teasing him – that there are no Queenly obeisances due.

"Yeah well," my mom says, crossing her arms and sighing with pleasure as she looks over me and then Rafe, her first two babies who she loves so, so much. "Your boy here scared the crap out of me, so I thought I'd return the favor."

"He's delicate mom," I murmur, pressing myself warm against Jackson's side, sensing that he needs it. "He's –"

"Delicate!?" Rafe questions, his voice full of doubt, but I ignore him, continuing on.

"He's not used to women's tricks and pranks. And he's had a hard night, dragging my bleeding butt all over the countryside. Be nice."

My mom just sighs, still grinning, as she smiles warmly at Jackson. "I owe you a life debt, boy, for bringing my daughter back to me. I'll never be able to repay it."

She leans forward, offering her hand in a normal way. Jackson, sensing that it's real this time, reaches forward to take it, wrapping his large hand around her small one.

"You're my family now," mom whispers, holding his blue gaze, her voice serious and sweet, "nothing will ever change that. Yes?"

My heart swells as I look up at Jackson, because even though mom has no real way of knowing it, I think she's given Jackson the thing he's always needed and never knew to want – a family, a mother to care for him. And I know her – I know that she means every word of it. That beyond being my mate – what Jackson did for me today? He'll always, always have a place in her heart.

"Thank you," Jackson says, his voice quiet and very reverent. And I grin when I realize that Jackson, like the rest of us, has been caught up in mom's spell.

How couldn't he be, though? Mom is the best.

"All right," Rafe says, his voice dry and a little bored, "this is a lot of love, but you two are both covered in blood and you smell terrible –"

"We do not," I protest, turning my face up to stare at him.

"Well, he does," Rafe says, pointing at Jacks in a way that makes me squeak in objection. But my brother just grins at me, a little wicked. "Listen, you just got carried across the countryside, you didn't have to break a sweat –"

I protest with a louder squeak this time, objecting to the idea that any of that was easy for me.

"But he," Rafe continues, pointing at my mate with more vehemence, "did all the work. So would you please unwind yourself from him for half an hour so he can get cleaned up? Because dad's here, and he's going to want to meet him, and your mate is gross –"

"Dad's here?" I ask my eyes going wide.

Chapter 0211

Chapter 0211

"Yup, dad's somewhere – I'm shocked he hasn't come running yet," mom says, dropping Jackson's hand and fluttering her hand at him. "Rafe's right – shower for you, and then Ariel is next. Because if your dad meets your mate covered in your blood and your scent – he's going to flip."

Jackson, as freaked out as he should be, presses a quick kiss to my head and then stands up. "I'll be right back," he says to me, looking down at me with worry. And I grin at him, touched a little – but what does he think, that I'm worried he's going to run away or something?

"I know," I murmur, reaching for his hand giving it a little squeeze. "Don't worry. I'll be okay."

Jackson hesitates, I think fighting the instincts that tell him to stay absolutely by my side at all times, but then he sighs when Rafe wraps a hand around his arm and starts to pull him away.

Mom and I both watch as the two head for the second door in the chamber, which I guess leads somewhere else – communal bathrooms? Who knows.

And then, when my mate and my brother disappear and the door swings shut behind them, my mom turns to me with a grin.

"Well," she murmurs, her eyes flicking over me impishly, "you've been busy, haven't you, daughter?"

And I just moan and put my head in my hands, sinking back against the pillows.

Mom just laughs, shoving me gently aside and coming to snuggle up against the pillows next to me. "Oh, don't pretend that you're all tired now –"

"I am tired!"

"Not too tired to gossip the women in this family are never too tired to gossip. Come on, baby! I want to hear everything! I'm dying over here – we haven't had any news of you in months –"

"Okay, okay," I grumble, secretly pleased as my mom wraps an arm around me and pulls me close. Because she is right – I am dying to talk to her, and the ladies in this family – we really can talk. And so I launch into my story, laying my heart out plain for her.

I start at the beginning, at the wedding, and I apologize profusely for bailing on it without even saying goodbye – but my mom is all warm support, saying that she understands, and considering the horrible things those men said when they found out I'd fled...

"Well," she says, tossing back her hair and lifting her chin, "they're just lucky I let them walk away with their skins intact."

"You are a lady, after all, mom," I say, nodding sagely.

“And a queen,” she adds, mimicking my tone and making us both laugh. But then she squeezes me, urging me on.

So I tell her all about just wanting to be with Jesse and Rafe, my best friends, at first, but then as time passed how much I really, really wanted to be at the school. How much my heart, genuinely, sang when I was admitted as a cadet, how much I love my classes, the excitement I feel whenever I think about becoming a spy and helping our nation.

“I really want to do it, mom,” I murmur. “It’s...it’s more than just escaping from the wedding now. This feels like my life, like what I was...meant to do.”

“And it doesn’t hurt,” she says, her voice sarcastic, “that your super hot mate just happens to live down the hall.”

I squawk in surprise, sitting up straight and staring at her. “Did you just call my mate hot!?”

Mom bursts out laughing, shaking her head. “I mean, he is, Ariel –”

“That’s so gross!” I gasp, swatting her arm. “You’re my mother –”

“Your mother who has eyes,” she continues, laughing hysterically, “besides, I mean, it’s not as if the two of us don’t have a similar type.”

“WHAT!?” I shout, appalled.

“Oh come, on, Ariel,” mom says, rolling her eyes as she tries to get the words out around her vivid laughter. “Are you seriously trying to tell me that you haven’t noticed the similarities between your mate and your dad? I mean, talk about daddy issues –”

Chapter 0212

Chapter 0212

I yelp in protest then, grabbing my pillow and starting to thwap her with it, yelling disconnected words about how I didn’t even pick him, the Goddess did, and actually Jackson and dad are nothing alike, just because they’re both big –

But mom just laughs hysterically and eventually I join her, dropping my pillow and curling up at her side, covering my blushing cheeks with my hands and shaking my head at the heat against my palms.

"It's okay, baby," mom murmurs, dropping a kiss to my forehead as she shakes with giggles. "Your dad is hot too. Trust me, I get the appeal."

"I don't ever want to talk about this ever again," I murmur, my words muffled in my humiliation.

"Too bad," she sighs. "Cora's going to come in here in a few minutes and say the exact same thing –"

"Cora's here?" I gasp, sitting up eagerly and looking towards the door like she's going to come through it at any minute.

"We're all here, baby," mom says, sitting up with me. "You think Cora and I are going to let your father and your uncle put on this ridiculously dangerous Examination without us at the end to patch everyone up? We come every year –"

"You do?" I ask, my eyes going wide.

"Yes! You didn't notice that every year around this time we take a little vacation –"

"What a crap vacation," I say, shaking my head.

But before my mom can agree, the door to the room flies open again and my mate comes stumbling into the room, gasping in fear and surprise.

But...not that mate.

The other one.

I'm caught between a gasp of relief and a moan of mortification – because my mom is going to be so confused by this. But I immediately open my arms for Luca, who comes crashing across the room to my side. I throw my arms around his neck as his slide immediately around my back, holding me close, shaking a little.

"Are you all right?" he gasps, horrified, worried.

"Are you!?"

"Ariel," he snaps, leaning back to glare at me a little, "you are not checking in on me when I just heard that you showed up at the finish line unconscious, bleeding everywhere, thrown over Jackson McClintock's shoulder – of all people –"

"I'm fine," I murmur, my eyes wide and sorry as I see the real fear in him. "Seriously, Luc, I'm fine – I'm all patched up – I'm..."

And then my voice fades out as my mom clears her throat.

“Um,” I say, awkwardly turning to her and glancing between her confused but entertained face and my mate’s still-terrified expression. “Mom? I’d like you to meet...Luca Grant. Luca, this is my mom – she...she healed me up. Magically.”

I finish the sentence lamely, not knowing how to explain that. But Luca, to his credit, takes it in stride. He sits up straight in surprise but the immediately falls back on his manners, which are

impeccable when he wants them to be.

“Your highness,” he says, immediately offering his hand, which my mother takes with a smile. “I am so sorry – you’ll have to forgive me, I was...I was very distracted. I care a great deal about your daughter and I didn’t – honestly, I didn’t even notice you sitting there.”

“You’re forgiven,” my mom says, turning her head at him curiously as she squeezes his hand. “But, if you don’t mind me asking, my daughter told me that she kept her identity and her gender a secret during her time at the Academy. How is it that you know?”

“Because,” Luca says, his eyes wide with his innocence. “She’s my mate.”

My mom’s eyes go wide with surprise and then scandalized delight.

“Well,” she says, turning her cat-like grin on me as I cover my face with my hands. “You really have been busy, Ariel. Very busy indeed.”

Chapter 0213

Chapter 0213

Mom and Luca exchange pleasantries while I work very hard to pull myself together, wondering how the hell I’m supposed to manage all of this chaos, when Jesse – of all wonderful people – comes to my rescue.

He, too, skids through the door and is across the room in half a second, shoving Luca roughly aside and knocking him to the floor so he can wrap his arms around me, murmuring about how scared he was and how glad he is that I’m okay.

I hug my cousin back, assuring him that I’m all right, and it’s only when Jesse offers a hand and an apology to Luca that I’m able to look at my mom again. She quickly raises a questioning eyebrow at me, asking silently if everything is out in the open, and I hurriedly shake my head, begging her with my expression to please, please not say anything.

Slowly, she nods, a smile still playing at her lips as she turns her attention back to the boys, who are now standing at my bedside.

“As much as it is a pleasure to meet you, Luca,” she says, her voice official now, “and I do very much want to talk to you more - Ariel still isn’t well.”

Luca’s face pales at the news and he anxiously looks between me and my mom.

“She’s fine,” Jesse explains, putting a hand on Luca’s shoulder. “Aunt Ella healed her up, Luc, don’t worry –“

“I healed her,” mom says, nodding to Jesse, “but she’s still exhausted and dehydrated. Jesse? Will you please go get your mom, and tell her to bring an IV? Ariel needs fluids.”

Jesse nods and immediately moves to the door, but Luca hesitates, clearly wanting to stay. My mom simply quirks one queenly eyebrow at him, though – clearly requesting time alone with her daughter

– and I see Luca give in.

“I’ll see you soon,” he says, kneeling down by the side of my bed and running a fond hand over my hair, my shoulder, and then down my arm. I can see him bodily fighting his instincts to stay by his mate’s side – but he also knows that I am clearly all right in my mother’s hands.

“It will be okay, Luca,” I murmur, leaning impulsively forward. Luca puts a soft hand on my cheek and presses a brief, chaste kiss to my mouth – not really able to resist, but also not wanting to put on a display in front of my mom.

I grin at him as he stands with a sigh and heads for the door. I’m still grinning, watching his form, as my mom clears her throat.

“Don’t say anything,” I whisper, reaching out a hand for hers and squeezing it before the door snicks shut behind Luca’s retreating form. Then, once we’re alone, I turn to her, grimacing a little.

“Soooo, Arielll,” she says, leaning forward and grinning at me, her voice light and gossipy. “Why do both of those boys think that they’re your mate!?”

“Because,” I say, my voice and my face completely serious. “They both are, mom.”

Slowly the smile falls from her face. “Wait, what?”

I nod slowly and then burst into an explanation – telling her about that first day, when both of their scents hit me, and then of figuring it all out as time passed. Mom’s eyes are

wide and shocked by the time I'm halfway through the story and I can tell that she's mesmerized and worried, all at once.

I don't even have time to get to the end – about how I just told Jackson last night, during the Examination – when the door opens and Aunt Cora comes in, wheeling an IV stand with her.

I give a little cry of joy when I see her – Cora, she's my only aunt, but she's my favorite anyway. She makes the same little noise as she slams the door shut and rushes to me, pushing the IV with her and abandoning it a bit when she sits on the bed next to me and wraps me up in a tight, tight hug.

"You idiot," she mutters into my hair, rocking me back and forth. "You followed your brother and your cousin, of all people!? To the Academy!?"

"I like it there!" I protest, laughing a little and pushing her away a bit so that I can look into her face, smiling despite all the drama. "Besides," I say, cocking my head to the side, "where did you guys think I was?"

"In a convent," Cora sighs, slumping back against the pillows with me and glancing at my mom. "At least, that's what we hoped. Safe and sound, all walled up, practicing the art of making tapestries or something equally dull and harmless."

"Oh, well, it sounds like Ariel was doing the exact opposite, Cors," my mom says, leaning forward with her chin on her palm and grinning at me. I scowl at her, thinking she's enjoying this just a little too much. "Considering that she just told me that she met two mates at this little Academy."

Chapter 0214

Chapter 0214

Cora gasps, staring first at my mom and then at me. I blink, shocked at the...the delight in her eyes. "They're both here!?"

"What!?" my mom squeals, sitting up rigid and straight, just as I do.

"Did you...did you know!?" I'm equally shocked.

"Oh my god!" Cora shouts, laughing and covering her face with her hands for a second. "I've known since you were a baby! I saw it at your baptism – I'm so glad you both finally know so that I don't have to keep it to myself anymore!"

“Cora!” my mother shouts, half laughing half enraged as she leans forward to smack Cora on the arm, “how could you not tell me this!?”

“You opted out of it!” Cora replies, laughing and pointing a finger at mom’s face. “I told you I would tell you, but we agreed that there are some things a mom shouldn’t know! Besides, you wouldn’t have been able to not tell Dominic and he would have locked Ariel up in a box the moment she hit puberty.”

“I just thought you saw Ariel getting into a lot of romantic drama with her mate, I didn’t think –“

“Wait, you knew I had a mate!?” I gasp, turning to my mom now. “How could you not tell me!?”

“Well, why would you want to know?” mom replies, spreading her hands innocently. “It’s important to go through life and take it as it comes, with no expectations –“

“Dad told Rafe he had one!”

“He did?” mom gasps, turning to look at the door. “Oh, I’m going to kill him –“

“Okay okay,” Cora says, raising her voice above ours and spreading her hands out, silencing us. “Let’s...get organized here. Ella, I maintain that you did not want to know this, because it would have driven you absolutely insane.”

“Probably true,” my mom concedes with a nod.

“But Ariel,” she says, turning to me, her face breaking into a smile. “Come on, dish. Who are they!?”

“Mom just met them –“

“Oh, which one do you like better?” Cora asks, eager, leaning forward.

“That is so unfair!” I protest, gasping but...I look immediately to my mom, also kind of wanting to know.

“One of them is Luca Grant,” my mom says, leaning forward eagerly, almost as if I’m not there.

“Luca GRANT!?” Cora squeals, her hands going to her cheeks. “The boxer!? Oh my god, he’s so cute – I’ve had a crush on him for like, a year -“

“Ew EW!” I shout, hitting Cora now. “That is so gross – you’re both so gross –“

"I am not gross, Ariel," Cora laughs, dodging my blows, "I am just a woman, and he is good looking. God, you're so lucky –"

"I'm telling Uncle Roger you said that," I reply, narrowing my eyes and crossing my arms.

"Go ahead!" she says, waving a hand. "He'll probably agree – Luca's a hottie. But your dad," she grimaces, "he's not going to be happy about that one."

"Why not?" I ask, my eyes going wide.

"Because," she says, grimacing a little and glancing at my mom, "he's kind of a ladies' man, right? Dates around? He's dated like everyone – every little starlet."

I growl, hating the idea and crossing my arms. "Well, he's not going to do that anymore."

"Oh yes," Cora replies, laughing again, "convince him to be faithful to you while you're out there, dating your other mate."

I groan, leaning against her, because I mean...she's right, isn't she?

"You should see the other one," my mom says, raising her eyebrows with a grin. "He looks just like her dad –"

"He doesn't," I moan, throwing my head back, a little whine in my voice.

"You're right, baby," my mom says to me consolingly, but when I lift my head I catch her mouthing "He totally does" to Aunt Cora, who just laughs.

"He doesn't! They have totally different coloring! And their...face shapes..." I hesitate, trying to come up with other differences, but mom and Cora just grin at me.

"Fine," I groan, putting my face in my hands. "But their personalities are totally different –"

Mom leans forward, beginning to assure me that she's sure that's completely true, when Cora interrupts, her voice considering.

"Actually," she says, her expression a little far-off. "Your dad would probably be the right one to ask about this, Ari."

"What?" I ask, completely confused. "Cora, dad is the last person I want to talk to about this stuff – he's gong to flip."

“Well, that aside,” she responds with a shrug – like it’s an easy thing to handle the most powerful Alpha in the world when he’s flipping out – “he’s also the only person I’ve ever heard of who had two fated mates.”

My jaw drops almost completely to the floor.

Chapter 0215

Chapter 0215

“Wait, what?” I gasp, shocked.

“Oh yeah,” my mom says, her own eyes going far-off as she apparently remembers this long-lost, incredibly important and interesting detail. “I forgot about that...”

“You knew!?” I’m scandalized – mom and dad, they’re so perfect for each other. The idea of dad being mated to someone else...

God, I can’t even imagine it.

“Of course I knew, baby,” mom says, leaning closer and tucking a strand of my bloody hair behind my ear as Cora stands up and begins to fuss with the IV, apparently remembering suddenly that I’m coming off the edge of death and need some fluids.

“Dad and I don’t keep secrets. Plus, I knew her.”

“Real piece of work,” Cora murmurs, shaking her head as she reaches for my arm.

“What!?” It’s all I can say in my shock as Cora hooks me up to the IV, helping me get on the mend in her own non-magical way.

“It wasn’t at the same time, like you and your boys,” mom says, turning her head consideringly. “He rejected her and then was single for a long time before he met me. Which, I mean, thank god – I don’t think I’d have been able to handle that. I’d have been so jealous, and she’d probably have tried to kill me. I mean, more than she eventually did.”

My face screws up in shock and confusion as I stare at my mother, but she just waves a hand, dismissing it.

“Speaking of the jealousy,” Cora says, sitting down next to me and taking my wrist so she can check my pulse. “How are your boys handling it?”

“Um,” I say, looking between them. “They...aren’t. Because they don’t...know about each other.”

Mom and Cora’s faces are twin pictures of shock and then delight before they burst into scandalized laughter.

“You little minx,” mom says, leaning forward to prod me with the tips of her fingers. “How the hell did you manage that!?”

“I didn’t manage it,” I murmur, not really liking the implication here that I’m doing it nefariously and for my own good. “It was...I didn’t want anyone to find out, at first, that I was a girl. And then I...it took a while to get to know them, and to decide I could trust them.”

“Wise,” Cora says, nodding as she slips a stethoscope out of her pocket and slips it around her neck. “And Rafe and Jesse?”

“Um,” I say, because...well, this one is a little more nefarious, I guess. “Rafe knows about Jackson. Jesse knows about Luca.” My mom and my aunt grin at me again, but I just shrug and sigh.

“Well, how are you feeling about it, baby?” my mom asks, leaning forward and taking my hand. “It must be a lot, in addition to your studies.”

“It is a lot,” I say, my shoulders slumping in relief to hear her voice it aloud, to have her understand. “It’s scary! And they’re both so great, but...” I bite my lip and shake my head, looking down at my lap, “it’s really confusing.”

Mom begins to murmur comforting things about how of course it’s confusing – it’s bound to be – but suddenly the door flies open again.

This time, broad shoulders fill the frame and I blink because...

Well, for a second, as embarrassing as it is, I did think it was Jackson.

But my eyes fill with tears the moment that I realize that it’s my dad.

“Dad!” I croak, suddenly completely overwhelmed with emotion as I try to pull myself up, to move to him, to get immediately to his side.

Because I mean, I love my mom – endlessly, in every atom of me. But my dad...

“Baby,” he groans, striding across the room and scooping me up off the bed even as I scramble for him. He groans again when he ducks his head and presses his cheek to mine, as I burst into tears and wrap my arms around his broad shoulders.

My dad holds me tight for a long, long few moments, and Cora and my mom stay quiet, letting us have this time, understanding the bond between us.

He takes a shuddering breath before raising his head, looking into my face. “Are you okay, sweetheart?”

I nod, sniffing. “Just a little overwhelmed, pops,” I murmur, which earns me a smile. “Mom fixed me up good. I’m fine.”

Dad growls deep in his throat as he lowers himself to the bed with me still in his arms, clearly not ready to let me go but ready to join the conversation. Cora, smiling, goes and closes the door before untangling the IV chord and laying it out neatly. Then she sits down on the edge of the bed opposite my mom. The poor overloaded bed gives a desperate little creak, but we all ignore it.

Chapter 0216

Chapter 0216

“I’m going to kill your brother,” dad says, shaking his head as he looks me over, frowning at the blood all over me and narrowing his eyes as he gives me a suspicious sniff. But if he smells Jackson or Luca, he doesn’t say anything.

“Go easy on Rafe, dad,” I murmur, raising a hand to run it fondly over his stubbled cheek. “It was all Jesse’s idea anyway.”

Mom and Cora laugh at this but dad continues frowning, not ready to joke. “I could have lost you, Ariel,” he whispers, his voice tight. “Do you – do you know what that would have done to me?”

“Don’t, dad,” I say, shaking my head, my lip trembling as tears start to threaten my eyes again. My dad – he’s so strong, so steady – seeing him emotional like this? God, I can’t handle it – not at all. “I’m perfectly fine – nothing happened –”

“But it could have happened,” he whispers, devastated even by the thought of it. “It almost did – Ariel, from what Jesse said, you almost died –”

The tears start to slip down my cheeks and my lips turn down in a desperate frown, because I hate that I did this to him – hate that he was this worried.

“Easy, Dominic,” mom murmurs, reaching out a hand and placing it softly on dad’s knee. “Don’t make the girl feel guiltier than she already does. She’s had a rough day.”

Dad glances at mom for a moment and then heaves a deep sigh, forcing himself, I think, to move on from it.

“Well,” he says, giving me a steady nod as he takes a deep breath. “At least it’s all over, now.”

I nod, agreeing, likewise grateful that the Examination is done but then I go rigid in my dad’s arms, looking up at him with suspicion. “Dad,” I say slowly, “what do you mean by that?”

“I mean that we can bring you home now,” he says, giving me a steady nod. “Where you’ll be safe and sound –“

“What!?” I gasp, staring up at his face. Instantly I drop my arms from around his shoulders. “You’re – you’re taking me home!?”

“Well of course we’re taking you home, Ariel – the fuss with your ex-fiancé is all cleared up, you don’t have to be in hiding anymore –“

“No!” I protest, shaking my head vehemently and wiggling hard until dad lets me go, staring at me in shock. “Dad, I’m going back to the Academy! I mean, unless I didn’t pass the Examination? Were we too late!?”

Dad just stares at me in shock and confusion as I turn to the door, suddenly desperate to know. “Did I slow Jackson down too much?” I ask, my voice getting squeaky in my panic. “Did they – did they say I failed because he carried me across the finish line? I don’t know the rules –“

“Jackson?” my dad asks, and then he leans towards me, sniffing suspiciously again. “Who the hell is Jackson? What happened, Ariel –“

“Was. I. Late?” I ask, my voice sharp as I turn to stare at my dad, my lips a thin line.

“What?” my dad asks again, completely baffled.

“Um,” Cora says, interjecting awkwardly. “Ariel, if you’re asking if you made it across the line within the top 60% of candidates...you did...”

I huge rush of air leaves my lungs and relief sweeps through me, because at least Jackson is getting through –

But me? Are there rules about how healthy you have to be when you cross? Do you have to do it under your own power?

“Ariel,” my dad snaps, his voice harsh, “are you saying – my god, you can’t be serious – you want to go back to the Academy!?”

“Of course I do!”

He stares at me for a long second before his face turns cold. “Absolutely not.”

I gape at my father as he crosses his arms over his chest.

“Dominic,” my mother says, and I whip my head to see her frowning at him, clearly taking my side. “Ariel is at the Academy for more reasons than just to hide from that horrible fiancé – she’s been working really hard! She’s –“

“It’s out of the question,” dad snaps, slicing a hand through the hair like that’s the end of it. “My daughter is not going back to an Academy of Alpha males who clearly want her dead –“

“Dad!” I protest.

“No!” he shouts, his voice booming out, carrying with it his Alpha command. “You were shot with a crossbow, Ariel! No daughter of mine is going to be at that school – it’s too dangerous for you! It is male-only for a reason!”

My hands curl into fists in my side as I glare at my father, my jaw set.

Chapter 0217

Chapter 0217

I’m well, well aware that I’m supposed to quail under the look my father is leveling at me now – that it’s sent many big tough Alphas running for the hills.

But, well, I’m my father’s daughter, aren’t I?

And I am not giving in that easily. No way in hell.

“I’m going back, dad,” I growl, my voice matching his own even though it’s several octaves higher. “You can’t stop me.”

“The hell I can’t –“

“I have worked too hard!” I shout, getting up on my knees and leaning towards him now. “I have been busting my ass at that school, proving myself! I –“

“And it almost killed you, Ariel!” my dad shouts back, leaning in so that our faces are only inches apart.

"I survived, didn't I!?" I whip my finger up between us, a move I've seen my mom make a thousand times, but my dad just swats it away. "I'm proving myself, dad. I already beat twenty percent of the candidate class getting into the school, and now I've beat forty percent of the men who have been training just as hard as me! You cannot discount me and say that I haven't earned my spot!"

"You were carried over the finish line bleeding and barely breathing, Ariel," dad says, and his anger snaps a little as he speaks the words. He groans again as he pictures it, straightening up and closing his eyes against the mental image. "I cannot, in good faith, send you to your death – you are not built, physically, for this world –"

"So, the only people who are worthy of the education," I say, sitting back on my butt and crossing my arms as I glare at him, "are big guys, like you?"

His eyes fly open to stare at me, and then they narrow. "You know that's not what I mean."

"In this school I am not your daughter – I'm Ari Clark, who is a boy," I argue, knowing perhaps that it won't make as much sense but needing to make the point anyway. "He's small, but he's smart. And he's earned his place there. You can't take this away from me not when I..." I hesitate now, biting my lip. "Not when it's the only life I think I've ever really wanted, dad!"

He groans again, pressing his eyes shut as he whips his head to the side. And despite his actions, I know he's hearing me – I know he's listening. He just really, really doesn't like it.

"She's not wrong, Dominic," my mom says softly, and a rush of joy runs through me when I hear her support, though I don't turn to look at her, keeping my eyes on him. "You're being more of a dad than a military commander right now – if she was a boy; or, hell, if she was anyone else's girl... you'd let her go back."

"Quite frankly, Dom, if you keep her out you're just being sexist." My eyes go wide as I turn to stare at Aunt Cora, and my dad and mom do the same. She just shrugs, her chin high as she stares him down. "I've said from the start that this school was on the wrong side of it to only let in boys. It's been running for more than twenty years now, and you finally have a girl Cadet who has genuinely proven that she's better than half the boys who showed up and tried."

Cora gestures to me here, and another rush of joy pulses through me.

"Again," my dad says, his teeth gritted. "She nearly died."

"But I didn't," I say, seeing my opportunity. "Dad, check the rulebooks. If there's a rule that says that you have to cross the finish line of your own power, then..." I bite my lip, not wanting to say it, but taking the gamble anyway, "then...I'll go back to the Palace

with you. But if other cadets have passed the Examination when they were carried across the line...you have to let me stay."

Dad sighs, closing his eyes, and I clench my hands in hope because I know he sees the logic in that. I know that he's a fairer man than he's being right now – that he is, as mom says, acting on his dad instincts more than anything else.

Chapter 0218

Chapter 0218

"Let me talk to your brother," dad growls, each word slow and distinct. "I need...more information about how the rest of the time at the Academy has been. Although, I'm going to put him through a meat grinder the moment I see him, so he's not going to be able to get any words out."

"You can ask Jesse, then," I offer, more cheerful than I have a right to be, because I can see dad's determination starting to crumble.

Dad just glares at me. "Don't think he's not dead too."

"Please," Cora says, her voice dry, "murder your own children. Leave mine to me. I've got special plans for that sneaky little rat – a long, slow death, I think..."

Dad glances towards Cora, opening his mouth to retort, but we all go silent and turn towards the second door in the room the moment it opens and Rafe reappears with a certain tall, freshly- showered Alpha by his side.

Rafe's eyes go wide when he sees the collection of his loved-ones gathered on the poor over- burdened bed and he puts out a hand, smacking Jackson in the chest and stopping him in his tracks.

I can't help it, though – Jackson, in a fresh cadet uniform, his hair all wet and slicked back?

God, but he looks so good.

He grins, feeling my emotions down the bond, passing his own relief and joy back to me. But then his eyes flick to my dad, and he stills, realizing...

Well, realizing precisely who is sitting before him.

My dad slowly gets to his feet, scenting the air, a vicious growl building in the back of his throat as he recognizes the scent of this cadet as the scent that is all over me.

“Dad,” I say, my voice worried as I shoot a glance between him and Jackson, grabbing for his sleeve. But my dad just brushes me off, moving slowly as he stands, his eyes moving between Rafe and Jackson. “Dad, don’t –”

“Who the hell are you?” dad asks, his voice very, very dangerous. “And why is your scent all over my injured daughter?”

“Dad,” Rafe says, stepping in front of Jackson, his eyes wide.

“Enough!” dad snaps at my brother, glaring daggers at him. “Step aside, Rafe, let this man speak for himself.”

Rafe sets his jaw and stays still for a moment, clearly deciding what to do. But then, to my surprise, he steps to the side, letting Jackson handle this himself – some Alpha instinct letting him know that this is between my dad and Jacks.

To my surprise, unlike the vast majority of men who would fall back a few steps and beg forgiveness or start spouting an explanation in the face of my father like this, Jackson stands his ground. He sets his jaw and curls his hands into determined fists. His shoulders slump forward, just a little, in what I think is a sign of non-aggression, letting my dad know that he does not want to fight. But he doesn’t give up a single step of the space between them.

Instead, Jackson just flicks his eyes to me, asking silently what I want him to do. Letting everyone in the room know that his next actions are at my command, not Dominic Sinclair’s.

“Oh,” Cora says, her voice a little breathless with awe and surprise next to me. “Oh, so this is...the one you were talking about, Ella...”

“Dominic,” my mom snaps, and from the corner of my eye I see her rise to her feet.

My dad stills just a second before turning towards her. Slowly, she shakes her head. “You’re making the wrong assumptions, Dominic,” she says, her words cold and filled with warning. “That boy did not hurt Ariel, he saved her. Jackson is the one who carried her across the finish line – he’s her mate.”

My dad goes absolutely rigid with shock as I turn to stare at my mom.

Because as my father’s growl fills the air and he turns his murderous gaze back to Jackson, I am desperately, deeply unsure that that was the right thing to reveal in this moment.

Chapter 0219

Chapter 0219

Jackson's eyes go wide for a second with worry as my dad focuses singularly on him and takes one single, dangerous step in his direction.

"Dominic!" my mother snaps, and then she's moving quickly between my dad and my mate, turning and holding a hand up in front of my father's face. "Think about what you're doing right now, let alone the impression you're making!"

The growl dies in my father's throat as he blinks, hard and refocuses on my mom. "The...the impression? Ella, this man's scent is all over our child, he's claiming her as his mate, and you want me to worry about first impressions!?"

"Dominic," mom murmurs, stepping closer and shocking me by laughing a little bit. Slowly she stands on her tiptoes and takes his face in her hands. "Don't you get it? He didn't claim her as his mate – the Goddess fated them. And if I know my daughter as well as I think I do, then I'd be willing to bet a lot of money that Ariel had more to do with this than poor Jackson did."

Dad stares at mom for a long moment before turning to look at me.

I just shrug, feeling awkward and...well, old. Because my entire life I've been dad's little girl, and now here I am...introducing him to my mate.

Suddenly overwhelmed, my eyes fill with tears. "Yeah," I say, shrugging again, not knowing what to do. "I've...I've known since the first day as a candidate, dad. I told Jackson...yesterday."

My lip trembles as my dad stares at me, shocked, and I can't help the tears that start to slip down my cheeks. I also don't miss the three steps forward that Jackson takes towards me before Rafe grabs his arm, hauling him back.

"Be nice to him, dad," I squeak out. "He's...he's really nice, okay?"

Dad stares at me for a long, long moment before he lets out a long, long groan, covering his face with his hands and tilting his head back towards the ceiling. Aunt Cora scooches closer to me, giving me a quick hug and then wiping the tears from my cheeks, whispering that it's all right.

I nod to her, understanding, but still feeling overwhelmed. I keep my eyes on the four people standing in the room.

Jackson and Rafe stand still, waiting for my dad to decide what he's going to do next. Mom steps close to dad, wrapping an arm around his waist and waiting patiently until he drops his hands from his face, folding his arms around her and sighing deeply before looking down at her.

"I wasn't ready for this today, Ella," he murmurs, glancing back at me. "I wasn't ready for our little girl to grow up."

"Well, we've still got the meatball," she murmurs, pointing at Rafe. I laugh, unable to help it, as Rafe scowls. He hates his nickname. "He hasn't left us yet. And Markie and Juniper. Or Ariel – not really." She smiles at him. "Kids grow. It's what they do." She stands on her toes. "It's a good day, Dominic."

Dad presses a kiss to her mouth and then nods once, sighing again. "A good day." Then he turns to me and holds a hand out. Cora helps me stand and then I wheel my little IV over to my dad's side, slipping my hand in his as the three of us turn to face Jackson, who suddenly looks completely freaked out.

I smirk, a little tickled by the idea that he was ready to take on my dad when dad was about to slash him to pieces. But meeting my father in a calm, pleasant way? He looks ready to bolt.

"All right, Ariel," dad murmurs, his voice grumbling as he squeezes my hand in his. "Introduce me to your young man."

And so I do.

Introductions are quick, largely formal, and a little awkward, with dad shaking Jackson's hand and asking him some questions about who he is, what he's studying, how we met. Jackson's face gets redder and redder as he stumbles through the interrogation, and I'm basically melting with second-hand embarrassment, but Rafe saves me.

One look at Rafe's wide grin, at the way he watches Jackson with a little bit of good-humored delight at how horribly awkward he's being, and I burst into laughter.

Mom and Rafe start laughing too, and dad looks down at me with surprise as I shake my head at him and move to Jackson's side, slipping my hand into my mate's and giving it a squeeze. "Dad, please, you're killing him, all right?"

Chapter 0220

Chapter 0220

Dad stares at me and then up at Jackson again. "What?" he asks. "I was just being polite –"

"Jacks is...not great with polite," I say, pressing myself warmly to his side. "Actually, I think he'd probably rather fight you than do the small talk thing."

Jackson scowls, already coming back to himself a little. "Ari, I don't want to fight him –"

"I know," I say, nodding and smiling up into his face. "Just – can we all maybe take a bit of space? Try this again over midwinter, maybe over dinner?"

"Or an activity," Rafe suggests, knowing that even a dinner might be a bit much for Jacks. "Or a great, great deal of whiskey – barrels of it."

"Enough," dad snaps good-heartedly at Rafe, waving a dismissive hand at all of us as he turns away. "Fine, fine! We'll do it all later! I need much more information anyway."

I grin after him as he walks to the bed with mom at his side, and then I grin between Jacks and Rafe.

"You did great, Jacks," I whisper, supportive.

"I didn't...say anything," he murmurs, glancing after my parents. "Besides, like, my name –"

"But you did that so well," Rafe says with humorous condescension, patting him on his shoulder with a laugh. I laugh too and Jackson gives a tentative smile, I think giving into it.

Jacks opens his mouth, I think to ask a question, but the door opens again – suddenly, I long for a lock on it – and a professor I don't recognize comes into the room.

"Um," he says, looking around, a clipboard in his hand. "I'm looking for Cadets Sinclair, McClintock, and Clark?"

Rafe steps hastily in front of me, asking whether the professor is looking for Jesse or Rafe Sinclair, and in the intervening moment Jackson hands me his cap, which was apparently tucked into his back pocket. Hastily, I loop my hair up onto my head and whip the cap on top. It's too big, but, in a pinch, it works.

When the professor reveals that he's looking for Rafe Sinclair, Rafe glances back at me and then nods to him, letting him know that we're all here.

"Oh, good," the professor says, looking anxiously over at the King, Queen, and Duchess standing quietly together by the bed, perhaps wondering what the hell is going on. But he doesn't say anything about that, instead clearing his throat and consulting his paper.

“Well,” he says with a sigh, “the three of you have been marked as passing the Examination –“

I squeal suddenly with delight, throwing myself into Jackson’s arms. He laughs with me, turning me in a circle, giving me a big hug. When we go all the way around before we see the professor at the door giving us a strange look. Jackson just clears his throat and awkwardly lowers me to the floor.

“So,” my mother says, interrupting as the professor starts speaking again. “It’s not an issue that Cadet...Clark...” here she glances at me, and inwardly I cringe at how obvious she’s being, “was carried wounded over the finish line?”

“No, highness,” the professor says, giving her a deferential bow. “The rules are to cross the finish line, full stop. I think,” he glances at my dad here, “they were written that way with this express situation in mind.”

My mouth falls open a bit as I realize that my dad knew this all along because he wrote the rule book – that it’s not a surprise to him, at all, that I’ve passed.

Dad catches my glare and just gives me a little shrug, telling me to deal with it. I roll my eyes at him but let it pass – he’s had a stressful day too.

The professor continues. “Sinclair and McClintock have been given orders to return to the Academy tonight,” he says, lowering the clipboard to his side. “Though Clark has been given special permission to stay overnight to ensure that there are no complications to his injuries. Though...”

He hesitates, not finishing and looking at me strangely because obviously I’m standing before him perfectly hale. I just shrug, not explaining anything.

“Absolutely not,” Jackson growls, stepping forward towards the professor. “I am not leaving Clark here alone.”

The professor steps back, shocked by the defiance and the aggression in Jackson’s eyes.