

# The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy

## Chapter 21

I stare wide-eyed at my brother, waiting for him to react.

But Rafe just...stares at me, his face ghostly-white, until I start to get seriously worried.

"Rafe," I murmur, leaning forward a little, starting to reach out a hand to touch him.

"What the f\*\*k Ariel," Rafe whispers, so fast that the words all bleed together into one, so low that I can barely hear him. But the sentiment...is perfectly clear.

"Well it's not like I asked for it," I say, spreading my hands out, my eyebrows going up. "I didn't do anything. Rafe!"

"We're getting you out of here," he says, his head snapping back towards the

barracks, coming back to himself now and just like dad – immediately springing

into action. "We're calling mom – this is over

"What!?" I gasp, and then I dart forward, smacking him as hard as I can on the arm,

"Rafe! No!"

He turns his head to me and growls, ready to retort, but I hit him again, which

makes him pause.

"Rafe! You are not taking this from me just because that idiot doesn't know how

to handle himself! I want to be here I want to train as part of the Academy! This

isn't up to you anymore, you asshole!"

Rafe blinks at me in surprise – probably because I don't think I've ever in

my life

sincerely called him an asshole. But I bare my teeth at him now, meaning it,

because he kind of is being one. Rafe is not in charge of my future even if he

thinks he is.

“He is going to kill you, Ariel,” Rafe growls, leaning forward and staring at me,

making me see what's at risk here.

“He's known something was up since the first night, Rafe,” I counter, stubbornly

crossing my arms. and glaring at him. “We've gotten through almost two weeks of

him having no opportunity to hurt me — we can get through a few more days!”

“And then once you're in the Academy?” he says, raising his eyebrows.

“Because

he's f\*\*king good, Ari he's definitely getting in too.”

“When we're in the Academy we're allowed to carry weapons,” I say, speaking

my ideas aloud as I think them because honestly I haven't planned this far ahead

—“I'll learn how to protect myself!”

Rafe groans and buries his face in his hands, realizing that he's not talking me

out of here without a big fight — and also realizing, I think, that as much as I'm his

little sister I'm grown now it's

actually not his job to decide whether I stay or I go.

And damn it? I'm staying until they make me leave.

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Rafe takes a few deep breaths, his face tucked away against his palms, clearly

putting the pieces of his reality back together. I press my hands against my

thighs, waiting, working to slow my own breathing.

Slowly, Rafe starts to look up at me. “Seriously,” he whispers, his green

eyes

peeking over his fingertips. "He's your mate?"

I nod seriously.

"You're sure?"

I nod again.

"How do you know?"

I shrug. "It's like people say. My wolf she knew instantly when I smelled him."

"And Jackson...he don't know?" Rafe asks, exhaling deeply and dropping his

hands from his face, resting them on his knees.

— he's I shake my head. "Jesse's scent marking is enough to confuse my scent, I

think. Jackson figured out his mate is here, and that I have something to do with

it. But he hasn't figured out it's me."

you

"So," Rafe cocks his head to the side. "That's why he's trying to kill you — because he thinks have something to do with keeping his mate away. But

you

know it's him...so..." My brother studies me carefully, narrowing his eyes. "What?

Are you like...in love with him?"

"Rafe!" I gasp, an instant blush coming to my cheeks. "What!? No! I don't even

know him! And!" I fling a hand out in the direction in which Jackson disappeared,

"He keeps trying to murder me!"

"But he's your mate!" Rafe's face screws up in confusion. "Doesn't that mean

"I don't know what it means!" I say, throwing my hands in the air. "But do not

mistake my being mated to him for any like affection! I have no idea what's going

on! I am brand new to this as well!"

Rafe sighs, looking off into the distance. "Maybe we should call mom," he

murmurs. “She has a mate. She knows more than we do.”

“We're not calling mom,” I sigh, and then I push myself to my feet, holding out my

hand to my brother. “Let's just...get through the week, all right? And then we'll

figure out this stupid mate stuff when we're enrolled in the Academy and have a

second to think it through.”

Rafe takes my hand — not because I can actually pull him up, he weighs way too

much, but certainly as a sign of solidarity. When he's on his feet, Rafe uses his

grip on my hand to pull me close.

“All right, Shrimp,” he growls, and I smirk a little to hear him use my barrack

nickname. “But we're doing this on my terms now, okay? Which means you don't

go anywhere alone, and you stick to my god damn side like glue. Do you hear

me?”

Slowly I nod, looking earnestly up into his face.

“And,” he

forbid it.”

, narrowing his eyes at me again. “You don't say another damn word to your

mate. I

“Fine, Rafe,” I sigh, scowling and pulling away from him, knowing it's logical but

hating the way he pulls his big brother card and bosses me around. “Can we get

to breakfast? Jesse's going to start to freak out.”

“Fine.” Rafe growls, grabbing my jacket and tugging me close to his side. I

“Let me go,” I groan, pulling away, but he doesn't let me go.

“Like glue. Ariel,” he snaps, glaring down at me. “Glue.”

“Glue, Rafe,” I agree, rolling my eyes up at him. But when he lets my jacket go, I

stay close, hardly a hand's breadth between us as we walk the short distance back to the barracks and inside for breakfast.

As I predicted, Jesse is indeed freaking out. He's watching the door like a hawk

when we come in. Ben and Luca at the table with him. Jesse throws his hands up

in the air like we can't believe what we've cut it this close, but Rafe just waves a

hand at him and pushes me over to the food line.

Overprotective barely begins to describe it as Rafe fills his own tray and mine

with whatever's left, a random assortment of cereal and breakfast meats and

granola. When another candidate leans over me to grab a yogurt, Rafe literally

growls and snaps his teeth at him, making both of us jump.

The candidate jumps almost out of his boots before muttering his apologies and

darting away, wide-eyed.

"You need to cool it, Rafe," I say, looking up at him in shock as I pick up my tray.

"F\*\*king mates," Rafe growls, shoving me between the shoulder blades and

making me stumble towards our table. I just heave a sigh and ignore him, sitting

next to Ben when I get to the table as far away from my other mate as I can get.

Because I absolutely do not need Rafe finding out the other half of my secret —

not seeing how he reacted to the first bit.

"Where were you," Jesse snaps, glaring at us. "I wake up and you're both gone?"

And you almost missed breakfast!"

"Ari decided to go for a run on his own," Rafe growls, glaring at me but not saying

anything else.

Ben studies his breakfast and doesn't get involved, but Luca lifts a spoonful of cereal to his mouth, blatantly watching our little cousin drama with interest.

"Ari," Jesse breathes, staring at me. "You know you're not allowed to —" "Rafe already schooled me, all right?" I growl, flicking my eyes in Luca's direction

— an action he

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catches, of course, because he's starting at me. Jesse looks over at Luca and

realizes that he's perhaps saying too much. "Just let's let it go."

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Jesse heaves a big sigh as Rafe

starts to shovel food into his mouth

and we all sit in stubborn silence I

pour some dry sugary cereal into my

hand and shove it into my mouth,

crunching on it, not having much

stomach for anything else. Luca

smirks at me, somehow entertained

by that The content is on

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chapter there!

I glare at him. His smirk just deepens.

But before we can get any further, the Captain stands at the front of the room.

"All right." he says, gathering everyone's attention to him differently.

"This year,

we're changing things up for the final few days of candidacy."

Everyone sits up straight at this and Rafe looks around at all of us in surprise.

Luca and Ben shrug, letting him know they have no idea what's coming.

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Academy officials have reported a

level of discontent with our  
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candidates’ survival skills. Apparently,

,  
we've been sending them a bunch of  
cadets who can beat each other  
bloody but who fall apart after a  
single night in the wild. So, over the

) Sa  
next forty—eight hours we're splitting  
you up and sending you out into the  
woods in teams to test your survival  
skills as part of your candidacy

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ranking.” The content is on  
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He continues speaking, laying out the rules as our little group looks  
anxiously  
around at each other. Luca curses under his breath, tossing his spoon  
down on  
his tray.

“No survival skills?” Jesse asks him, a little pity in his voice because he  
and

Rafe, at least and me, to an extent — have been camping with our dads  
for years.

“I'm a city kid,” Luca mutters, shaking his head.

“Same,” says Ben, his voice filled with dread.

“You're staying with me,” Rafe mutters, glaring at me across the table  
and looking  
around. “I'll find a way to pull some strings.

“You can't do that, Rafe,” I grumble, sitting back and crossing my arms.

“You are not going into the woods with that maniac,” he growls, glaring  
hard at  
me.

“What maniac?” Luca asks, frowning.  
We all ignore him.

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No,” I say, my eyebrows going up as

I look past my brother at the  
leadership board, which has changed  
now to show the groups with which

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we'll be headed into the wild. I point

coup : :

at it. “I'm not going into the woodsPlease bookmark site to read latest  
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with him- but I'm not going with you

" .

either.” The content is on

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chapter there!

Everyone's head whips towards the board, Rafe going pale as he realizes  
that

Jesse, Rafe and I have

for the first time — been completely split up. And I'm right — Jackson is  
in a totally

different group

as well

But after he stuches the board for a second, Luca turns to grin at me

Because be and Our names are on the same.

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



## Chapter 22

Jesse and I quietly pack our rucksacks over the next half hour while Rafe pitches

a fit with the Lieutenants, insisting that he be allowed to transfer to my team or

me to his. Jesse grimaces at me, shaking his head to let me know that he doesn't

think that it's going to work.

I just sigh and roll my eyes at my cousin, communicating that I don't even want it

to work. I mean, it would be different if I was being sent out in the forest with

Jackson — but I'm not. As far as I know? No one on my little team of five people

wants me dead.

Eventually the Captain is called over and he has about four short words to say to

Rafe before my brother scowls and stalks back to our bunks, grabbing Luca

along the way and dragging him with

1. US.

“You,” Rafe snaps, shoving Luca to a stumbling stop before our bunks.

“Are

responsible for him.” He points a stark finger right at my face, his eyes still on

Luca's. “If Ari dies, you die. If he even gets a papercut, you get a papercut. Am I

perfectly f\*\*king clear?”

“Geeze,” Luca says, looking Rafe over with surprise and a little distaste as he

runs a hand through his mussed hair. “Message taken, your Highness. I'd have

done it anyway, all right? We're friends.”

“You'd better f\*\*king take this seriously —” Rafe leans in, just getting started, but

Jesse cuts in smoothly.

“It's so nice to have friends,” he says, looping an arm around Luca's

shoulders

and grinning broadly at my brother. "Let's not try to drive them all away today,

right? Rafe?"

Rafe scowls, leaning back and realizing that he's going a little overboard. I sigh and shove Rafe's pack into his arms. Jesse and I prepared it while he had

his meltdown at the front of the barracks.

Rafe sighs and slings it over his shoulder, glancing at all of the candidates who

are starting to filter to the front of the room. "Fine," he snaps, turning to me. "You

take care of yourself, all right? You know how to do this shit. Don't let anyone

boss you around or take advantage of you."

"Right back at you, cousin," I say, giving him a little glare — because as much as I

love my brother, it's getting a little embarrassing at this point.

Rafe shakes his head at me as I pull my own pack on my shoulders and turn

towards the front door. And then as a foursome, we start to walk forward.

"Good luck out there," Jesse says, his voice calm as he gives me a harmless little

punch on my shoulder. "You're going to kill it."

"Don't be too jealous when I take first." I say, grinning at him. And then we reach

the door, and Jesse and Rafe start towards their groups — Rafe giving me another anxious look before Jesse drags him

away.

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And then, quite suddenly, it's just me and Luca. Alone..

"What's his deal with him?" Luca asks, frowning after Rafe. "He treats you like

you're made of glass or something."

"It's always been like that." I sigh, staring after my big Alpha brother.

"I'm the

baby. I've always been

kind of...a mascot.”

Luca laughs and turns his eyes to me, and I can't help but burst into a grin when

the full force of his smile hits me. “A mascot?”

“Sure,” I say, wrinkling my nose a little. “I'm the little spunky one. I get them all full

of spirit and then send them out to kick ass while I cheer on the sidelines.

All of

the victory, none of the work.”

Luca laughs again, slinging his arm around my shoulders, and I know we both

ignore the tingles that run through us like...god. I don't know, like twinkling

starlight under my skin, or fresh winter air blowing in the first snow, or something

equally dramatic and wonderful.

“Well,” Luca sighs, starting to walk towards our numbered van and taking me with

him, “no sitting on the sidelines today. Do you know how to do any of this survival

shit?”

“A little bit,” I say, underplaying my knowledge in case it turns out that I forget it all

when we're out there.

“Good,” Luca sighs. “You teach me to start a fire, I'll punch anyone who comes at

you. Deal?”

“Deal,” I say, grinning. But my face falls when we reach out van and the rest of

our group turns to us with cold expressions. I blink, surprised — because while I

don't know any of their names? They certainly know ours, and they're not happy

to see us.

skin. Next to “Well, look who it is,” says the tallest a broadly built guy with dark

hair and pale, pale him stand his shorter twin and another who looks

unrelated,  
with dusky brown hair and freckles. “The Prince's pet, and his pretty boy  
bodyguard.”

I blink in surprise and a little bit of wonder, my mouth falling open a bit.

What the  
what the hell  
is this?

Luca, to his credit, responds much more ably, dropping his arm from my  
shoulder

and putting his hands on his waist, grinning at the three other guys with  
the easy

confidence of a man who can punch their lights out in a second.

Which, granted, he probably can.

“I'm sorry,” Luca says, his words easy though his tone carries just the  
barest

edge, “looks like our reputation, naturally, proceeds us. But I can't say  
the same

for you, as I have no f\*\*king clue who  
you are.”

“Alan Wright,” the tallest says, stepping forward and glaring into Luca's  
face. A

little bit of me is pleased that he has to look just slightly up to do it. “And  
you

should know me, Grant

I'm ranked

Chapter 22

higher than you.”

I tilt my head a little in surprise because I do recognize the name —  
alongside my

two mates, my brother, and my cousin.

It's consistently in the top ten,

“For now,” Luca says, giving Alan an easy smile. “And these two?”

“Perry Gibson and Graham Wright.” Alan growls, and I quickly put  
together that

the slightly shorter pale-skinned guy is related to Alan somehow, though  
I'm not

sure it matters how. “And none of us are pleased with the way that your  
little pet

here has been getting perks because he's connected to the royals, even though

he's clearly the weakest candidate here —"

"Hey!" I protest, stepping forward with a frown because I mean — I'm shit at a lot

of stuff, but I have definitely held my own in marksmanship and the intelligence

exam

"Don't be so jealous Alan," Luca says, stepping forward with some venom in his

voice. "It's not Clark's fault that your own pets are so damn ugly."

I smother the tiny absurd laugh that tries to burst when I hear him say that, and

Alan stares at us in shocked surprise, having no idea how to respond.

"Yeah," Luca says with complete confidence, glaring down into Alan's face and

then flicking his eyes to Perry and Graham — Alan's pets who look equally

surprised. "Nothing to say? That's what I f\*\*king thought."

Alan is still speechless with a confusion when Luca grabs my arm and pulls me

into the van with

him.

"What the hell was that!?" I hiss, following Luca to the back of the van, where we

take the back bench.

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It doesn't matter what you say," Luca

murmurs to me as we watch the

other three climb into the van after

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us. "As long as you do it with the

authority and get the last word. That

guy has no idea what just happened

— it will keep him thinking all night,

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which is what we want.” The content is on ! Read the latest chapter there!

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I shake my head at Luca and laugh a little, kind of impressed with the way he lets his sheer confidence carry him through the word. Honestly, he

> , Do didn't do much, but he definitely got the upper hand in that conversation.

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Why can't I do things like that? The content is on ! Read the latest chapter there!

“That's good,” Luca says, smiling and laughing along with me, his words whispered. “Let them see you laughing – don't let them see that they rattled you.”

“I mean, they didn't –”

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Well maybe they should have a little

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bit, Shrimp,” Luca says, raising his brows and looking forward at Alan, who glares back at us over his

“

shoulder for a moment. “Because that guy could definitely kick your To »

ass, and he definitely wants to.” The content is on ! Read the latest chapter there!

I purse my lips a little considering it. “Well then I guess I'm lucky that I've got my pretty boy body

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guard to keep me safe.” I say, turning to look up at Luca with complete innocence.

His face bursts into a grin as he looks down at me. “Pretty boy, am I?”

“Oh, come on.” I say, my eyelids dropping a little in disbelief, “it can't be the first

time you've been called a pretty boy, has it. Grant?”

“I've endured that particular slur all my life,” he sighs, tilting his head back and

staring at the roof of the van like it's a great burden he's had to bear.

“It's just

been so hard being this good looking.

“Poor baby.” I laugh, shaking my head. I open my mouth to tease him more, but I

don't get the chance, because our Lieutenant climbs into the front seat of the van

and starts to drive us away from the barracks and out into the wilderness.

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The five of us stand in a small clearing of forest in a semicircle around our

Lieutenant who repeats the instructions we were given his morning. I look around

as he talks, only half-listening because I already know what our job is.

I've got a

good memory, after all.

I look up at the sky above the trees, thinking that it took longer than I

thought to get everything ready and get us here. It's already well past noon, which doesn't give us a ton of time before night falls. Our task is pretty simple, though. All we have to do as a group is light a fire, boil water so that it's potable, produce some kind of sustenance for ourselves — fish or edible plants — and demonstrate that we can do basic first aid if anyone gets hurt in the process. Once that's done, we'll be given a compass and a map with our location marked and we'll be required to traverse the ten miles back to the barracks. Anyone who doesn't complete the group tasks, or fails to make it back tomorrow by dinner, receives a failing mark.

I shrug, thinking it will be pretty simple, as the Lieutenant hands Alan our small packet of supplies, which contains the first-aid kit, flint, a machete, and a small spool of wire with some fish hooks. We're strictly forbidden from using anything in our packs to aid us — they're only supposed to carry extra clothing and blankets in case we need to sleep out here before the jobs get done.

“I think.” Alan says, turning towards the group of us, “that our best plan is to get this done and hike through the night. I, for one,” he says, looking at Luca and I with particular venom, “have no true interest in spending more time as a group than we have to.”

“No argument for me,” Luca says, nodding in agreement. I don't say anything at all as Alan begins to parcel out the supplies to his friends.

“How the f\*\*k,” Perry murmurs, “are we supposed to boil water when



they didn't  
even give us a pot?"

Alan looks askance at Graham, who just shrugs, making my eyebrows go up. Am I seriously the only one who knows the answer to this? I wait a second for Alan to volunteer the answer but he just stares at the flint in apparent confusion while Graham grabs the machete and strides over to a tree, starting to hack at the branches. Luca's eyebrows go up as he smirks, and I can tell that he's a little entertained, watching the smaller smack at the branches.

"What – what the hell are you doing?" I ask, my voice ringing through the clearing.

guy

All eyes turn to me, including Graham, who glares. "I'm getting firewood," he says, as if it's obvious.

"Oh my god," I huff, stalking over to him and grabbing the machete out of his hands. "You can't use live wood for a fire – it's wet. Wood has to be dry." Graham shouts and grabs back for the machete but I quickly move out of his way. I sigh and look around. "Do any of you know how to do any of this?"

"I can fish," Perry says, reaching out for the coiled wire and set of hooks. He looks over at the deep

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stream that runs by our clearing. "I mean, I usually use bait, but...I can dig up worms and tie these lines to some poles."

"Great," I say, my voice dry. "Why don't you take Graham and do that. Us other

three will get  
started on the rest.”

“You're not in charge here. Clark,” Alan says, his voice bitter.

“I think he is.” Luca says, crossing his arms and grimacing at Alan. “I mean, if you want to pretend you know what you're doing out of pride, I guess that's fine — but

I'm completely lost here, and willing to take direction if it means not losing my place in the standings. What about you?”

Alan takes a deep breath, so clearly battling his pride and not wanting to admit

that I might have skills he doesn't even if I am a shrimp. But eventually he

exhales and tosses the flint at me. I barely catch it after it bounces off my chest.

“All right.” Luca says, turning to me with raised eyebrows. “What's next?”

“Fire first,” I say, nodding. I give terse instructions, falling into a very pale imitation

of my father, who taught us all of this stuff when we were very young. I mean,

Jesse and Rafe have been going on big camping trips with dad and Uncle Roger

for years, doing much more complicated stuff than this. But dad? He always

made sure I could do the basics.

“Luca,” I say as I begin to gather dry brush, wood, and stones — both flat and

round. “I want you to go see if you can find some berries.” I snap my head up and

hold his gaze, “do not eat any of the ones you find a lot look good but will make

you sick. Just....bring them all back here, in case the fishermen don't have any

success with their worms. Alan, I want you to go into the woods and find the

fattest birch tree you can find. White, with smooth bark — do you know the one I mean?”

“What the f\*\*k is this,” Alan growls, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Are you

trying to embarrass me, sending me on a mission to find a fat tree?”

I roll my eyes at him, exasperated. “I don’t know what your problem is with me,

Wright, but it

— the bark would be great if you could get over it until we're through this. I'm not

f\*\*king with you can be used to make a container for the water. So will you just go

find it?”

Alan stares at me for a long moment but then turns and heads into the woods,

his hands fists at his sides. Luca winks at me and gives me a little salute before

heading in the opposite direction. I take a glance over at Graham and Perry, who

are busy tying the fishing wire to long sticks. Pleased to see them busy, I get

started with the fire.

After arranging the flat rocks in a circle, I create a small pile of dry brush in the

center. Then, kneeling quite close to the pile of brush, I use the machete to scrape

some magnesium on the back of the flint. Leaning close, I strike the flint with the

metal edge of the blade, sending sparks onto the pile.

The magnesium lights in a flash and when one of the sparks catches, I'm ready

for it. I lean forward, blowing gently on the flame to give it oxygen. I dangle some

dry brush above the baby flame so it has something to consume. It stutters for a

moment, but the flame greedily takes the

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bait, starting to flare. I grin. pleased, and sit back on my heels, starting to add some small sticks.

“Wow,” a voice says, and I blink, looking up at the Lieutenant, who nods at me.

“That was....that was crazy fast.”

“Thanks,” I say, giving a pleased little nod. Fire it's never really been hard for me.

I've always even been faster than Rafe and Jesse with this part. The lieutenant nods again, making a notation on his clipboard, and I grin, realizing that I'm

getting credit for making the fire.

By the time Luca come back with two handfuls of berries, the fire is burning

cheerfully and I've started adding small logs that I've hacked up with the machete. “Holy shit,” he says, his eyebrows going up. “Did you did you do that?”

“No.” I say, looking at him with blank sarcasm. “When you were gone the Lieutenant tossed me a lighter.”

“That is...seriously impressive, Shrimp,” Luca says and I grin, stupidly pleased at

his compliment as I stand up and reach out my hands.

“Show me what you've got, pretty boy,” I say, teasing. Luca laughs as he drops

his haul into my hands. I sigh as I quickly sort through the selection. “No luck,” I

murmur, tossing the berries into the fire. “None of those are edible.”

“How do you know that?” he says, looking mournfully after his bounty.

“Why do you keep asking me these things? I already told you I went camping.”

“With like, the King?” Luca asks, wrinkling his nose a little in disbelief.

“Yes,” I say, grinning at him a little. “Except, we don't call him the King. We just

call him...Uncle Dom.” Or, dad. Uncle Dom is just what Jesse and his siblings

calls him.

“That's so weird,” Luca breathes, shaking his head at me, making me

grin.

“I found the fat tree,” Alan says ruefully, coming into the clearing and renewing

his glare.

“Show me” I say, giving him a thumbs up. Scowling seriously, does this guy ever

cheer up? — Alan leads Luca and I into the woods. I grab the machete on our

way. It doesn't take long to get to the tree Alan selected and I nod it will work.

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Okay,” I sigh, lifting the giant knife,

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this is going to take a while. I need you two to go back and feed the fire while I work. Just... keep giving it more wood, make it burn really high and really hot. And when it gets really hot and there start to be coals beneath the live flames, start putting

: »

those round stones into the embers.

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“Why?” Alan asks, his voice snotty, and I turn to glare at him.

“Because little elves told me to, Alan,” I say, totally dry. “Does it matter?”

Just do

lists

Luca bursts out laughing and Alan glares at me, but Luca pats Alan on the back

and leads him away.

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I shake my head, starting to cut and peel back a large swatch of the birch

bark.

“It's gonna be a long night,” I murmur to myself as I work.

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Yes! My wolf says, trotting back and

o . ) o

forth inside of me. Let's stay all night

under the stars! We can share a

blanket by the fire cuddle up! We can

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“Oh my god,” I sigh, doing my best to ignore her.

il

But honestly? I'd be lying if I said that I don't share some of her impulses.

we can sit with Luca

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Because the opportunity to hang out

with Luca alone, at night, under the

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stars? Well. I'm not going to get very

many opportunities to do that with

Rafe glowering over my shoulder.

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So.....do I take advantage of this opportunity?

Or just let it pass?

And if I did decide to take advantage of it...

What would that look like, precisely? I bite my lip, my stomach fluttering

as I

consider it.

## Chapter 24

Fortunately or unfortunately for me, my wolf has a lot of ideas about how I can take advantage of a night in the woods with Luca. And every single one of them

is incredibly impractical and ridiculous.

Just let down our hair and then he will know and then he will grab us and

press

up against a tree and kiss us and kiss us —  
I grit my teeth as I make the final cut, finally freeing the long, single piece of birch bark that I've been peeling off the tree for hours. Seriously, it's slow, painstaking work.  
“What are you even thinking about?” Luca asks from behind me, and I gasp and jump, dropping the piece of bark to the forest floor.  
“Luca!” I growl, glaring at him and bending over to scoop the bark back into my hands. “You scared me! What are you talking about?”  
“I saw you.” he says, leaning back against another tree and grinning at me. “You were all growly, muttering things to your wolf, shivers running down your spine. What is going on with you?”  
Youuuuu! My wolf supplies internally, howling the answer. We were thinking about you!  
“Why are you being so creepy?” I ask instead of answering, working very hard to hide my terrible blush and failing. “Spying on me like that?”  
“Well, I was just coming to get you,” he says, standing up when I come near. “I didn't realize you were going to put on a show.”  
“It wasn't for you,” I say, my voice low as I step close enough to give him a little shove with my fingertips against his chest.  
Yes it was! My wolf counters, her toes tapping eagerly, but I ignore her.  
“Doesn't mean I didn't enjoy it,” Luca murmurs, leaning close and smirking down at me. I freeze for a second, turning my head and staring up at him.  
Because I mean I don't have a lot of experience with guys —  
But I would swear to god that he's...he's flirting with me...  
Luca stares down at me, holding my gaze, his smile growing incrementally as he blinks his long lashes slowly over his pretty brown eyes in a way that makes my breath catch. But I clear my throat, blushing again as I force myself to turn away, starting to stalk back to where the Lieutenant is waiting.  
“Did we get any fish?” I ask over my shoulder, not taking the risk of looking at

him. Because, honestly, if he looks at me like that again...

Sun, TU Mar

Chapter 24

...I'm at severe risk of throwing myself into his arms.

Do it, my

wolf hisses, and this time I mentally smack her on the nose, because there is too

much at risk for her meddling right now. She gives a little yelp and retreats, just a little.

"We got one!" Luca says, his voice cheerful. "Just one little guy, but it counts, right? Food is food."

"I think so," I say, smiling as I come into the clearing and seeing my other three

teammates sitting around the fire, the tiny fish gutted and sizzling on one of the hot stones nearest to the flames. "Nice job, guys!" I say, grinning around at them

cheerfully.

"Not nice for all of us," Perry murmurs, holding up a bloody finger.

"Oh." I say, gathering two round sticks about the same size and coming to sit next

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to him. "What happened?"

Perry explains about a slight mishap while attempting to gut the fish with one of

the hooks — I took the machete, after all — and I nod to him, saying I'll patch him

up in a minute.

"Don't bother," Alan mutters, flipping open the first-aid kit. "I know how to do this."

I half watch, grimacing as he starts to put a bandage onto Perry's finger before cleaning it, but luckily Luca stops him so I don't have to, stepping in making sure

that the finger is properly cleaned before being covered. In the meantime, I split

the sticks about halfway down their centers and fold the long strip of birch



bark in

half, and then at the edges, wedging the ends inside the split sticks to make a sealed little pocket. It looks for all things like a pillowcase made of bark — sealed

on three sides with one open end.

When it's ready, I take it down to the stream and fill it with water before bringing it back.

“What the hell are you going to do with that?” Luca asks, genuinely interested.

“Fill it with rocks,” I murmur.

“What?” Graham asks, baffled. But I don't answer, asking Luca to hold the pocket

steady and using another pair of sticks to lift the round rocks that have been heating in the embers, dropping them one by one into the pocket full of water.

The boys start to realize what's happening almost instantly. “There's no way that's actually going to work,” Perry murmurs, leaning forward with interest.

“It will,” I reply, glancing up at the sky, which is starting to grow dark. All of this took a lot longer than I thought.

I keep rotating the stones, removing cooled ones and replacing them with burning hot rocks, until the water in the pocket first steams, then simmers, and finally comes to a rolling boil.

“Amazing.” Luca murmurs, lifting his eyes to mine with a very genuine smile on

his face. “That was amazing, Shrimp.”

Chapter 24

“Is it even drinkable?” Alan asks, leaning forward to peer at it. “It's all...dirty.”

“It's just carbon,” I say, giving a little shrug as I study the slightly—cloudy water.

“Like what they use in water filters. It's not the prettiest water, but it won't kill you.”

“And I suggest you pack it up,” the Lieutenant says, pushing off the side of the tree and tossing an empty canteen to us. “It's all you've got for the hike home. Are you sticking with your plan to hike through the night? Or...”

The five of us look around at each other and Alan nods, scowling at me.

“Yup!” Luca says, answering cheerfully for all of us and smiling at the Lieutenant.

“As much as we'd love to sit around swapping fireside stories... think it's best for

us to head home.”

“Great,” he says, dry, pulling a map and a compass out of his pack and tossing it

our way. your fire before you go. Try not to die.”

“Bank

And then he turns without another word and heads for the van, getting in and driving off before the rest of us can say a word.

“Wow,” Perry says, his eyebrows high. “Abrupt.”

“Whatever,” Alan growls, standing up.

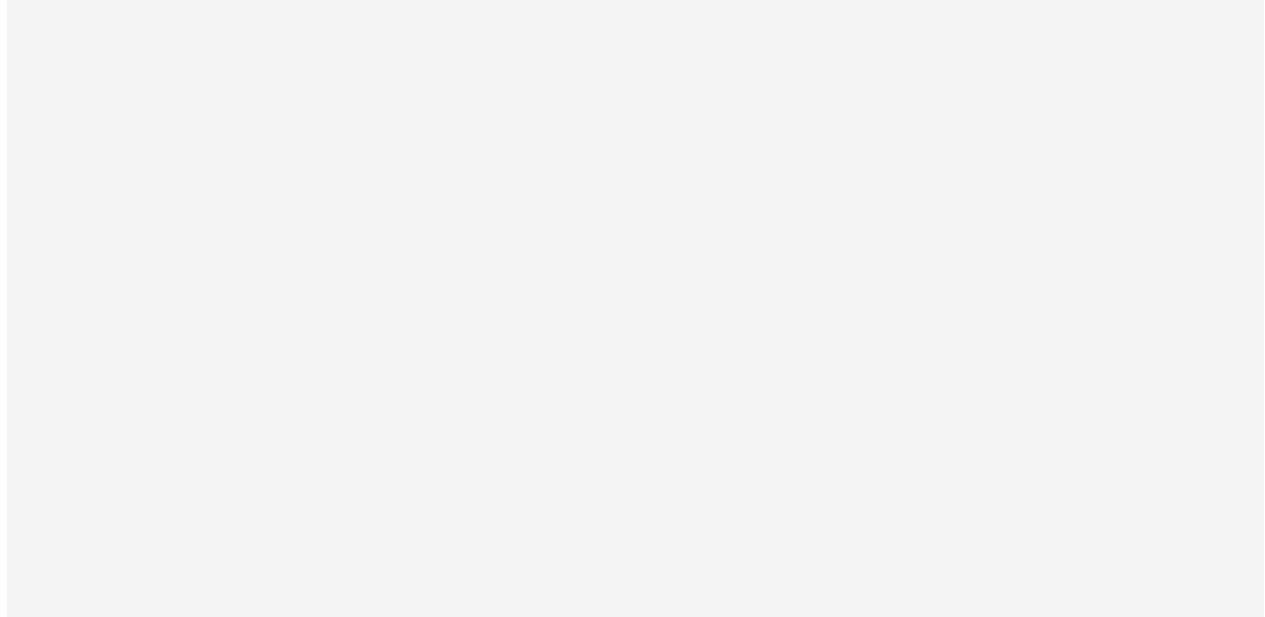
“Let’s go.”

“Why are you so mad,” Luca says, passing the canteen to me and getting to his

feet. I slowly fill the canteen, watching them. “We passed — now all we have to do

is get home.”

“Because your flashy little shrimp did all the hard stuff and took all the credit,”



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Alan growls, leaning into Luca's face. “The rest of us barely had a chance —”

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« ” :

Oh whatever,” Luca snaps, leaning down and grabbing the map and the

“ :

compass. “You want your fair share?”

] 5 ”

Lead us home.” He smacks both

. . 3 ' 1

objects against Alan's chest, shoving him a little as I screw the cap on the canteen. The content is on

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“No one even gets individual credit for that,” Alan retorts.

“Trust me,” Luca says as I stand. “We'll all make damn sure the Captain knows

who got us home. All right?”

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Alan mutters something, turning away as I head to the stream to fill the little birch pocket with water to

“

douse the fire. “Does he even know

”

how to use a compass?” I ask, bending down to dip my little container into the stream. The

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“Better than me,” Luca says, shrugging as I stand and turn to him. I laugh a little

as we head back to the fire and I pour the water over it, kicking dirt on top as well.

“Seriously, Luca,” I sigh, looking up at him when it's all finished. “You should learn

some of this stuff it's survival basics

“Well,” he says, grinning down at me, standing closer than he really needs to.

“Maybe you can teach

Sun, Mar

Chapter 24

me.”

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My lips turn up at him a little as I smile, forgetting to reply as I stare up

into his gorgeous face. God,  
5 yl 2  
seriously, it's so unfair that a boy has  
lips as lush as that with a perfect  
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cupid's bow cresting The content is  
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"Are you guys coming!?" Alan barks back at us, making us jump.

"Yup!" Luca says, his voice oddly tight, and he doesn't look at me again as we start down the road, letting the other three take the lead.

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## Chapter 25

Luca and I chat the entire walk home.  
us down

And though the walk takes us about five hours the terrains rougher than a flat road, which slows the time passes in what feels like a blink. The three ahead of us are relatively quiet, trudging along the miles and tripping on stones in the darkness, but Luca

and I get lost in latighter.

God — he's funny, and he laughs at my jokes too, all of which just twists my heart

a little because as each mile passes my crush on him grows bigger and bigger,  
inch by inch.

He tells me all about his childhood, raised in a big family like mine. How he was

so angry as a kid after his dad left, but how his mom's brother took him into the

gym and taught him to redirect that anger into solid blows at a punching bag, teaching him the art of boxing and keeping him out of trouble. And honestly, it should be a sad story, but the way he tells it — god, my cheeks ache for laughing

so hard and smiling so much.

"Honestly, Shrimp." Luca says, smirking down at me as our final mile begins, "if

any animals were thinking about taking us out, they'd certainly shy away

knowing

we've got a hyena in our group, shrieking into the night.”

“Shut up,” I laugh, swatting him in the stomach with the back of my hand. “It's your fault —”

“It is not my fault that you keep making that shrill noise —”

I burst into laughter again as he teases me, unable to help it, shaking my head at

him. “Stop making me laugh, then,” I say, grinning up at him.

Luca doesn't say anything for a moment, staring at me, connecting with me in that quiet way we've been doing all day. “Stop making me want to make you laugh,” he murmurs, just the corner of his mouth turning up. “Honestly it's... weirdly rewarding, seeing you crack up like that.”

I blush a little, biting my lip, and I look ahead, wrapping my arms around myself

to ward off the goosebumps that are forming on my arms. I don't bother to wonder if they're a result of the growing cold or the butterflies he's sent looping

around my stomach.

“You cold?” Luca murmurs, drawing close.

“Um,” I say, not knowing what to say. Because if I say yes, I feel like he's going

to...

“Here,” he sighs, slipping an arm around my shoulder and pulling me close. I sharply draw in my breath but... I don't move away. Instead, I slowly exhale, leaning into him just a little bit.

Just for body heat, I tell myself, not letting myself consider that we're both carrying backpacks filled with extra jackets and blankets.

WHATEVER, my wolf says on a gleeful exhale, laying on her back and letting her

tongue hang out of her mouth in ecstasy.

Chapter 25

I scowl at her and turn my attention back to the task at hand: getting back to the

barracks safely and ignoring the tingling sensation that passes all along the side

that's pressed close to Luca, and across my shoulders where his arm lightly rests.

We're quiet for the rest of the walk, but when I glance up at Luca I see that there's a smile on his face, his eyes trained on the road ahead, both of us just ignoring the fact that he's walking with his arm draped around me. And I grin, and

keep walking because...

Honestly, it should be more awkward, but it's not. Everything in me just screams

right.

Luca drops his arm from my shoulders as we come closer to the light of the barracks, letting his fingers trail down my back before he moves away. We've dropped back far enough where our other three teammates are unlikely to have

seen us, but...well, we're back in the real world now, aren't we?

We step inside and I notice with surprise that our group is the only one that made

it back this early. "Wow," I murmur. "I mean, I thought we were slow, but..."

"Maybe the other teams didn't hate each other's guts as much as ours did,"

Luca

says with a shrug, walking slowly for his bunk. I follow.

"I don't think Perry hated us," I murmur, glancing towards the bathroom where the

other three have disappeared.

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"Yeah, well. I don't think we'll be swapping recipes with him anytime soon,"

Luca

says, his voice dry. "Not when he's tied up with those two."

I hum a little consideringly as Luca grabs his bathing things and then waits for me

as I grab mine. We head into the bathroom together, but I blush horribly when Luca heads for the showers, stripping off his shirt.

"Are you coming?" he calls over his shoulder.

my

I mumble something awkward about it being late and how I'm tired, and Luca just

shrugs. I turn

back, pressing my eyes shut as Luca drops his shirt on the bathroom floor and starts at the buckle of his pants. I brush my teeth as fast as humanly possible then, congratulating myself for accomplishing the monumental act of personal restraint it takes to not glance backwards when I hear the shower turn on.

Instead, I scurry out of the bathroom, mentally scolding myself to respect my

mate's privacy, especially when he thinks I'm a boy.

Then, denying my wolf's near—constant urge to strip—down and climb into that

shower alongside my mate, I haul myself into my bed and flip back onto my pillow, pulling my cap down over my eyes so I can get some sleep, or at least contain myself marginally.

My rest is interrupted, though, about fifteen minutes later when I hear Luca's voice disturbingly close to my ear.

“Hey,” he says, and I shriek and jump a little, spinning towards him, realizing that

he's standing on

Chapter 24

the edge of Rafe's best his arms looped over the side of my own, the way Jesse

usually stands when he wants a spnet word Lanca grins instantly, laughing at me

“Jumpy,” he comments.

“Tired.” I say, glaring at him a little but turning on my side, propping my head on

my hand and gazing at him “Why do you disturb my slumber, pretty boy?” I try to

inject some teasing into my own voice then, but honestly I think it fails.

Because I

mean with his dimples flaring like that—he really is just so pretty

“Brought you dinner,” Luca says, lifting one of the wrapped sandwiches I'm getting very sick of and placing it by me on the bed. “I figured you forgot to go get

one for yourself.”

“Why did you think I'd forget?” I say, smiling and taking the sandwich, pulling it close but not unwrapping it.

“Because you always do.” he says softly. “Rafe always has to bring you food, remind you to eat.”

A little smile pulls at my mouth. “Have you been watching me, Grant?”

He stares at me for a long moment. “Can't seem to help it,” he breathes, and my

heart feels like it completely stops as he reaches out a hand, his fingers drawing

dangerously close to my cheek —

But at the last moment his eyes shift to his hand, and he clenches it into a fist, drawing his lips into a tight line. “Good work today,” he says, nodding and shifting

his eyes away from me. "Um. Yeah. Good job." He hops down from his spot and

waves to me over his shoulder. "See you...tomorrow. Today.

When...whenever."

"Night, Luca." I say softly, though I know he hears me.

And I groan as I flop again back on my pillow, holding my sandwich against my

stomach, wondering how the hell I'm supposed to get to sleep while my heart is

racing this fast.

But my doubts are soon proven wrong as I hastily eat my sandwich and rest my

head back on the pillow again, totally beat. I curl up in my blankets, at least content in the knowledge that I don't have to get up early, because candidates aren't even expected back until dinner time.

Still, my last thoughts are inevitably — about Luca, wishing he'd stayed, wishing

we'd had chance to talk more — even for a few minutes or for a few more hours...

il

My dreams tonight are unusually vivid, and I feel more conscious in them than I


usually do. I blink, looking around at the hazy birch forest, which is somehow bright even though it's edged with fog. I turn my head, considering the pretty white trees with their leaves turning golden for autumn, pleased and surprised.

And then I run my hands down over my favorite white nightgown from home —

relishing the soft feel of it beneath my palms. Smiling, I next run my fingers through the long length of my hair, which I never get to do anymore because it's

always tucked up under that





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little cap —

“Hello?” a voice calls, and I go very still.

Who the who the hell is that?

Chapter 25

And suddenly, as I peer through the forest, I instantly recognize Luca, even though he’s standing far away. I groan a little, because of course I can’t stop thinking about him even when I’m asleep — hell. I fell asleep thinking about him,

wanting to spend more time...

“Seriously, where the hell am I?” Luca mutters, his voice carrying through the trees.

And suddenly my eyes go wide because....

Because...

My mind flashes back to what my mom and Aunt Cora have told me before

About meeting their mates in the dream state-

Which they can only do once they've met, and invited them there —

I gasp. slapping my hands over my mouth as I realize that...

“Who's there?” Luca calls, turning towards my gasp..

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Frantic I dart away, hiding behind a

“ » . .

tree. “F\*ck, f\*\*k!” I hiss, peeking out and seeing him walking closer. The

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My breath comes in fast pants as I  
07

panic — because he can't see me  
P ç 5

here — he can't see me like this —  
even if he does figure out that this is  
o' .

just a dream, he'll have seen mein a  
: . )

dress with long hair! And he's not  
> ' Sara :

stupid — he'll remember it in real life  
and put the pieces together! The

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I clench my fists at my side, forcing myself to think  
I press my eyes shut, willing the dream to end.

No, my wolf says, her voice echoing out loud now — because she's in my  
head

and so am I now.

“Let me out!” I hiss, looking around for her.”

No! she says, more cheerfully this time. Play with him! We need this!

Cursing, I listen carefully and panic when I hear Luca's footsteps moving  
closer

“Hello?” he calls again. “Seriously, is there someone there?”

My heart starts to seriously pound when suddenly I realize that...that this is my  
dream, right?

And if it's my dream...I have control.

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I look down at myself, willing my  
nightgown to change....and suddenly,

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it's gone, replaced by my grey  
candidate uniform. I gasp and reach  
up, realizing that my hair has been

tucked into my cap as it always is.

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And, slowly, I start to smile.

Sun, Tu Mar

Chapter 25

That's my girl, my wolf says huffing a wolfy little laugh. Now got

And, smiling, cursing myself for being an idiot and taking needless risks...I

step

out from behind

the tree.

“Hey,” I say, and Luca turns to stare at me.

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## The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy

Chapter 26

Luca lets out a dark laugh and shoves his hands into his pockets.

“Seriously?” he

says, his voice a little exhausted. “You're here?”

I grimace a little, taking a step back behind the tree. “Is that...bad? I can...go.”

“No.” he says, tilting his head and inviting me closer. “I guess...I mean, I'm not surprised. Who the hell else would I be dreaming about.”

I bite my lip a little, smiling and moving closer to him, stopping about five feet

away. “What do you mean?” I ask, tilting my head, my eyes drifting over him and

noticing that he's dressed in cotton sweatpants and a black sweatshirt probably

the sort of things he wears when he's relaxed at home.

Clothes that make him look just...ridiculously good. Like the boxer he is, about to go train for the day.

“Well, it's obvious, isn't it?” he says, sighing and running a hand through his hair.

“You've been on my mind all f\*\*king day, Shrimp. Obviously my subconscious is trying to figure this out.”

Figure what out?” I ask, my smile deepening as I stare at him, my eyes roving over him a little more freely now. Damn, he's so deliciously tall, and the way his shoulders fill out that sweatshirt...

“Whatever the f\*\*k this is,” he says, his voice frustrated as he gestures between us with his hands, a little smile lighting his face.

“What?” I ask, my own smile falling a little bit. Because I mean obviously I know exactly what he's talking about, but to hear him address it so blandly

But, I mean, Luca thinks that this is a dream.

“Seriously, Shrimp,” he says, shaking his head and stepping even closer to me now, so that there's only maybe six inches between us. “What the hell is going on — I mean, I know that s\*xuality is a spectrum, but I've only ever been into girls — I have never, ever been into a guy like this before —”

wide to hear Luca admit his attraction. My mouth pops open just a little bit.

My eyes go

“What,” he says, laughing and Oh my god lifting his hands to cup my cheeks in his palms, staring down at me. “Seriously? I know you feel it too- or, wait, because you're an illusion my subconscious created...” he frowns down at me, “are you trying to talk me out of this or something?”

Luca cocks his head to the side, trying to figure it out as I gape at him, my mouth going dry as my mind whirs, trying to figure out what to say.

But I can't think of anything.

Instead, my body moves beyond me, my hands lifting — shaking a little — and landing on top of his as his thumbs gently stroke my cheeks. I stare up at him, just... completely without words, without thoughts as the tingles that show up whenever we touch flare again.

Except this time, they're not just under my skin they circle in the air all around us — little silver sparks, swirling around in the wind-

“See?” Luca murmurs, shaking his head. “I knew I couldn't deny it. What the f\*\*k is this?”

Luca looks at me, and then all around, and then back at me, his clear brown eyes filing my entire vision as my stomach turns over. My breath quickens, my heart pounding, because all I want

My eyes drift to his perfect mouth..my whole body flooded with sparks and butterflies as I unconsciously move closer to him, our bodies brushing

against  
each other now as I tilt my head.

back in his hands.

Luca leans closer, bending his face over mine, and just the tiniest little  
moan  
stumbles from my mouth, because I – I like this I like the way my breath  
is

coming short, the way my stomach feels just barely pressed against his

I like the way I can feel his breath against my lips

And god. I want more.

My eyes drift half shut and my wolf, somewhere in the distance, gives a  
heady  
howl of joy –

But then I gasp. her howl shaking me out of this, because...

Because this isn't right

I take a stumbling step away. Luca he doesn't even know that this is real  
that we  
are both actually, somehow, here! Conscious! That it's not just him alone  
with his  
subconscious

“Wait,” I say, my voice shaking as I drop my hands, as I take a step back.

“Luca,  
wait –”

“Don't,” he murmurs, stepping forward and closing the distance between  
us, not  
taking his hands from my face, “Stop, Ari, I need to figure this out. Let  
me try this  
And that does it.

He said my name.

Ari. Not Shrimp.

Ari.

“No!” I gasp, tearing my face from his hands and stunibling further away. God, I want this – it feels like my whole soul groans in regret as I give this up I want him to kiss me more than I think I've ever wanted anything –

But I want him to know he’s doing it. I want him to kiss me, not what he thinks is some figment of his imagination. It's not right, and it’s not fair – not to either of us.

He looks at me in shock and surprise, hurt all over his face.

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Chapter 26

“What

what the hell is going on?”

“I'm sorry,” I say, shaking my head and backing into the trees, “I should not have done this- I'm so sorry Luca-

“Ari!” he shouts, starting after me, his steps frustrated, a little angry.

But I press my eyes shut, and beg the dream to end, and my wolf-understanding now, I think lets me go.

And suddenly my eyes fly open. I'm in my bed, my heart pounding, my breath coming fast.

I stare at the ceiling, panting for a moment, and then my head twists, my eyes going immediately

to Luca's bunk..

The barracks are dark, quiet, no other groups coming in this late at night.

As I

watch, Luca sits up in his bed, slowly rubbing his head, the low lights of the room

highlighting his n\*ked stomach and chest. Please bookmark site to read latest content. If you want to read please visit to read fastest content.

My heart aches as he slowly turns, looking over at my bunk. But I don't move,

holding my hoping to hell that he can't see me awake, staring back at him.

Because this..

breath.

This is maybe all moving too fast, getting too real. As much as my attraction to

my mate is undeniable – maybe inevitable...

He still can't know. Not yet – and I don't know what the right time would be but...

it's not now, now when we're candidates, not while we could still be cut.

I clench

my

teeth and press my eyes shut, cursing myself for the fool I am, for letting it go too

far. "Come on, Ariel," I murmur to myself, "get yourself together." And, despite

myself, I spend the next hour or two wishing my big brother were here to



keep  
me in line.

I don't know when I fell asleep after that, though it must have been late because I was up for hours trying to avoid slipping back into the dream state.

I do know when the hell I wake up though, because Jesse launches himself onto my bed shouting "Shrimp!" at the top of his lungs and punching me twice on the shoulder before wrapping me in a big hug. "You survived!"

I shriek at the start of his assault, but I start to rain blows on him when I figure out it's just my cousin saying hello and not some kind of vicious midnight attack. "Get the hell off of me asshole

you

Jesse just laughs at me, because he knows he's not doing me any harm. He sits back, grinning at me.

back?" "You smell like campfire. No time for a shower? When did you get

"We got back in the middle of the night," I murmur, looking around with a little bit of surprise to

see that the barracks are three quarters full.

"Didn't sleep out?" he asks, interested and a little concerned.

"Nope!" I say, looking around for Rafe.

"He's in the bathroom." Jesse explains, looking over his shoulder.

"Apparently they had to tramp through swampland to get back he's gross."

“Oh,” I say, interested. “Hey, how'd yours go?”

“Good!” he replies. “I'm glad we spent all those nights freezing with our dads in the wilderness, though. Made things easy. What about yours?”

“We did great.” Luca's voice says from our side, and Jesse and I both start and turn to see Luca standing beside my bed. “We were first back.”

“Hey!” Jesse says, his face breaking into a broad grin as he leans forward to smack Luca's raised hand in a high-five. “Glad you made it.”

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Shrimp did all the hard work,” Luca says, climbing up on the side of my bed like he did last night and smiling at Jesse. I note with anxiety that he studiously avoids looking me in the

“ + ae

eye. “The fire and the boiling water

o » 3

thing.” The content is on

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“He's a shrimp of many talents,” Jesse says, turning to consider me with a mock seriousness.

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Get off of me, you big cow,” I growl, smacking at Jesse, who laughs and

jumps down from the bed. Luca makes way, standing with Jesse on

: “

the floor as I climb down too. “I want

. , : ”

a shower too, if Rafe’s getting one,” I say, looking at Jesse significantly, meaning he should take me. The content is on ! Read the latest chapter there!

“Same,” Jesse says, agreeing amiably and reaching into his bunk for his toothbrush kit. “Luca, you're already cleaned up?”

“Yup,” he says, yawning and stretching his arms high over his head.

“Why are you so tired,” Jesse laughs, smacking Luca on his exposed stomach

and making my mate laugh. “Didn't you two get like twelve hours of sleep?”

“At least eight full,” Luca murmurs, still not looking at me and rubbing the back of

his neck, contemplative. “But I had some... weird dreams.”

My cheeks instantly flush and I momentarily go still in the process of collecting a

clean uniform from the compartment under the bunk.

“Really,” Jesse asks, his hands on his hips as he peers at Luca curiously.

“I never remember my dreams. What was this one about?”

“Um,” Luca says, and as I stand up and turn — desperately curious — my eyes go

wide to see that he’s blushing. “Nothing much. Just...weird.”

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And still awkwardly rubbing his neck

: 3 )

and blushing furiously, Luca's eyes quickly dart to me. Frowning Jesse

) 5 Sek

notes Luca's strange disposition and follows his eyes to me — taking in my horrible blush as well. My eyes dart down to my feet and I stay totally still. The content is on  
! Read the latest chapter there!  
But Jesse's gasp is clear. He's put the pieces together. He's finally, finally figured it out “Shower time” I say, a little shrill, pushing past Luca and hurrying towards the bathroom, desperate to avoid this awkward conversation with my cousin. Behind me. I hear Jesse's hurried goodbye to Luca and then his footsteps pounding after me.

## Chapter 27

I hurry my own pace, darting for an empty shower stall now, willing to take whichever is free- however filthy-  
“Ari!” Jesse hisses behind me. “Are you — are you kidding me- is he your  
I squeak a little in dismay. “Don’t know what you're talking about. Jesse!” I hiss,  
darting into the stall and yanking the curtain closed behind me.  
“Ari!” Jesse shrieks, and then he lowers his voice. “Are you with him?”  
— are you f\*\*king using the dream state  
“I can't hear you!” I shout, desperate, flipping on the water even though I'm still dressed. Jesse starts  
al  
to tug at the curtain but I snap it shut. “You can't come in here!” I protest. “I'm n\*ked!”  
“ARII” Jesse shouts, completely freaked out.  
But suddenly he goes silent, and I  
go still.  
“What the hell is going on here?” Rafe’s voice asks, just outside the stall. My eyes dart around as I pray pray that Jesse holds his tongue  
“Nothing.” Jesse says, laughing and playing it off. “Ari just...played a prank on me. Lunchmeat...in my bed.”  
“That's not a prank,” Rafe says, confused. “That's just...gross.”  
“Yeah well.” Jesse murmurs. “He needs to....work on his practical jokes. I guess.”

“Whatever,” Rafe says, sighing, his voice tired as he moves away, heading back to the bunks. “You guys got this? I’ll see you in a few?” Jesse calls confirmation over his shoulder before turning back to my curtain. “This conversation is not finished, Ari,” he says, spitting my name out like it’s a dirty word. I don’t say anything, but when I hear his angry mutters move away, I exhale a deep breath and begin to strip down, using the entire length of my very long, very hot shower to decide what the hell I’m going to say to my cousin. When I finally step out of my stall, damp but dressed and tugging my hat down over my head, I have a plan. I mean, it’s a very basic, stupid plan. But it’s a plan. “Ari,” Jesse growls, standing right outside the stall as I step out, his arms crossed over the chest of his clean uniform, glaring at me beneath his freshly-washed hair. “You need to tell me. Now.”

### Chapter 27

“Fine.” I sigh, looking up at him and giving him my best baby—cousin look. “Just can you scent mark me first? I don’t want to. Jesse scowls but reaches out his wrist, rubbing it across my neck and my own wrists, perhaps a little more roughly than normal. “All right, with Ari, out with it “Can’t talk now, bye!” I shout, and then I bolt—dropping my towel and running as fast as I can for the bunk room and the safety of Rafe’s side. “Ari!” Jesse shouts after me, pissed now- but the element of surprise did its job, as well as his week of training me to run faster, and by the time he reaches me? I’m already throwing myself into Rafe’s bunk alongside him. “What the hell is going on?” Rafe asks, jumping a little as I dart behind him. “Nothing!” I say, laughing and panting a little. “Just a race! I win!” “Ari!” Jesse shouts again, skidding to a stop between our bunks and glaring at me, his eyes flicking to Rafe. And I look over Rafe’s shoulder at my cousin, my eyes pleading — because he did promise he’d keep my secrets, and even if I am desperately avoiding this conversation, I do trust that he’s not going to break that promise.

Not right now, at least.

“You’re such a little rat,” Jesse growls, reaching behind Rafe to smack at me. Rafe bursts into laughter as I shriek and Jesse, figuring out my plan, continues to

wail on me half-heartedly until, laughing, I cry mercy and Rafe pulls me safely to

his other side, protecting me beneath his well-muscled arm.

“Enough,” Rafe sighs, though he smiles at both of us. “We’re supposed to stick

together

“I’m not sticking with that rat cousin,” Jesse grumbles, giving me a little kick as he

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settles against Rafe’s pillow.

“Rat or not, you’re stuck with me,” I say, peeking out from behind Rafe and grinning at him, trying to make peace.

Jesse shakes his head at me a little, but he smiles, and I know we’re all right. on

We spend the next hour or two comfortably in Rafe’s bed, telling about our days

in the woods. It’s quite cozy, really, pressed warm against my brother’s side.

Ben

comes over too, sitting on the edge of the bed and telling us the story about how

they couldn’t catch any fish and almost came up the time limit, but then he suddenly remembered that dandelions are edible and found a few sad little plants

growing by their edge of their camp.

We grin, congratulating him on his last-minute pass. Ben looks down, though, even if he smiles. Because, technically, his team didn’t fully pass — they didn’t

make the ten-mile hike home. Anxiety is tight in my chest as I consider what this

is going to do to his ranking, which was already on the

Chapter 27

cusp of failure.

But the doors to the dining hall open, and we stand up, all hungry and ready for

dinner—and the rankings that are going to come along with it.

Spirits are high in the dining hall that evening at least, amongst the 80% of candidates who are relatively sure that they're going to be admitted as candidates. Ben does his best, keeping his head high and laughing along with Jesse's jokes as we move along the food line, filling our tray with a selection of food that makes my mouth water-

Seriously, this is the best yet- tonight must be some kind of celebration because

there is tender steak, and gravy, and baked potatoes, and flounder so flaky and

buttery it falls apart when you lift it onto the plate-

My stomach absolutely rumbles as I sit down at our table, and I don't even notice

who sits down next to me until his arm brushes against mine and that familiar tingle runs through me.

When I whip my head up to look at Luca, his eyes are already on me. "Hungry tonight?" he asks, flicking a humor—filled gaze towards my heaping plate.

I can't help my smile. "Starving."

We stare at each other for a long moment — before

which is just becoming our thing, I guess — someone across from me clears their

throat. I turn my head to see Jesse looking at both of us with a raised eyebrow.

Luca blushes beet red and looks down at his food, digging in, while I purse my lips and give Jesse what I hope is a very subtle, very fervent shake of my head.

Jesse just narrows his eyes at me before rolling them and turning back to the group, seamlessly slipping into the conversation. Luca and I do the same after a

moment, and honestly the dinner is a good time. We all have full bellies and high

spirits by the time the Captain stands at the front of the room.

"All right," he says, clapping his hands twice for silence. "Tomorrow is the last day

of your candidacy and your final examination. Your semifinal rankings will be posted in just a moment. This is your last opportunity to know your spot before you go through the obstacle course one last time."

My stomach sinks as he reminds me of what's coming tomorrow — the obstacle course which I still can't get through, not completely. That stupid chain climb... “I suggest you get a good night's sleep,” the Captain continues, a little bored. “You'll have a chance to clean up tomorrow before final rankings, which will be announced in person, in order, and those who make the cut will be invited immediately into the Academy. Those who don't will be sent home.”

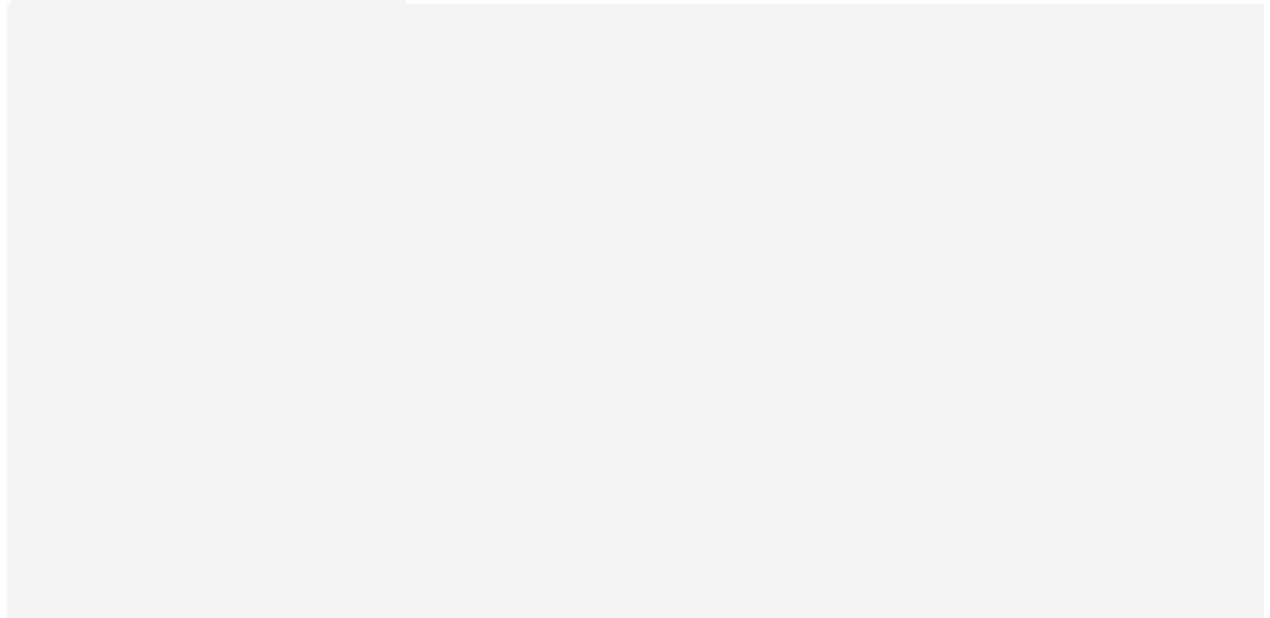
He nods once and walks away from the head table as our rankings flash onto the screen above him.

12:40 Sun, 10 Mar

Chapter 27

Every set of candidate eyes moves immediately to it, searching for their name and the names of their friends.

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I scan down the middle of the list, knowing that I in there somewhere,



,  
and I exhale when I see that I'm ranked at 70—a respectable spot. My eyes move next to the top of the list, ensuring that my loved ones are still up there- and I smile when I see Rafe and Jesse in the top ten, though Luca- to my surprise has fallen to 11.

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My heart stops, a little, when I see Jackson ranked above him at 8 because — God, Jackson — I forgot all about him today. I mean, I had Luca to distract me

but...

Am I happy that my other mate is going to be in the Academy? Or...

But I'm distracted by the thought when I see my brother and my cousin turning to

Ben, patting him warmly on the back. "You're gonna have to bolt through that obstacle course tomorrow," Rafe murmurs.

I turn back to the screen, a little ashamed of myself for not looking for my friend

first — but there he is, at 101.

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« .

Maybe I can climb on your back,

” 3

Rafe,” Ben murmurs, working hard to

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keep humor in his voice. “You can carry me through like a little monkey on your shoulder. Might be my only

” :

chance anymore.” The content is on

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“You're not slow, man,” Luca says to Ben, his voice kind. “I think you just get in

your head. You just

— no hesitation.” need to go full wolf tomorrow, tear it to pieces.

Ben puts on a brave smile and nods to us before half-heartedly tucking into his

food again.

“You do too,” Luca murmurs to me, giving me a nudge. And my stomach drops a

little as I look up at him, because he’s right.

70- it's not a bad spot, but it's not in the clear, and the obstacle course tomorrow

is heavily weighted in the final ranking. And considering that I consistently come

in last?

I am absolutely in no way safe.

I nod and swallow against the lump that forms in my throat, looking down at my

food.

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You're going to do it, Ari,” my brother says, and I look up to see his steady gaze on me. He holds my eyes with his green ones, nodding to me once.

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You didn't come all this way to fail daar

now. Don't even let it into your head.

" .

Yes?" The content is on

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chapter there!

I nod to him, forcing myself to smile, and then I square my shoulders and exhale

a deep breath.

Because Rafe’s right.

Even if tomorrow is the trail of my life? There's absolutely no way I'm letting this

beat me.

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## Chapter 28

Our group sticks together as we head into the barracks for our final night, which

pleases me because even though Jesse sticks close to my side clearly wanting a

word with me there's not opportunity for it with everyone around.

The five of us hang out for another hour or so around the Sinclair bunks, which

pleases me, because honestly I think I'm starting to get an idea of what it would

be like to all be together in the Academy. It feels like it would be really fun, honestly a lot of friendship alongside the incredible amount of work that we're expected to perform. As I lean back against Rafe's pillow, smiling around at my

family and my friends, I think that...well, it kind of sounds great.

My mind wanders, dreaming a bit about what it will be like inside. Will there be like, gathering spaces for us to hang out like this? Or will our rooms be like little

stone cells... I mean, it is an ancient castle retrofitted into a school. Where the hell do they put

at everyone?

Are fresh candidates relegated to the dungeons?

The lights flash once, letting us know that it's very near time for lights—out, and

Rafe curses as he sits up on the other side of the bed. "I need to brush my teeth,"

he murmurs and we all agree, getting to our feet and gathering our wash—up supplies for one last trip to the bathroom before sleep.

Apparently, every other candidate in the barrack was likewise distracted, because

it's kind of a mad rush in there. Rafe, standing stoically by my side, finishes brushing his teeth first and glances anxiously at the urinals.

"Just go," I mumble, waving him off with my mouth still full of toothbrush and toothpaste. "I'll be ten feet away

"Fine." he growls, glancing at me. "Stay right here, Ari," and then he dashes off.

I sigh and continue brushing my teeth, my eyebrows going up when my gaze catches on Alan Wright, of all people, standing in the middle of the room, glaring

at me. When our eyes meet, he frowns and draws a finger across his throat, a clear threat.

My face crinkles in distaste as I turn away from him, wondering what the hell his

problem is. I mean, he's still top ten with my brother and cousin —

But then my mind flashes back to the ranking list, and I remember seeing Perry

Gibson and Graham Wright listed below me

Shit.

I bend over, spitting my toothpaste out, trying to move past the not-so-veiled threat at Alan Wright is making against me

Honestly, I'm just not used to people not liking me — as a Princess it was kind of

my job to be well- liked, and whether or not people faked it they were generally

pretty nice to me —

Chapter 25

Mar

I sigh as I straighten up, feeling Rafe's large form coming back to my side.

"Rafe." I sigh. "I've got to tell you about Alan Wright —"

But as I turn, and his pine—and—ember scent hits me, and I tilt my head back to

look up up and

up

I realize that...it is not Rafe standing next to me.

forms

and

My eyes go wide and my mouth forms into a little o as I stare up into the gloomy

face of my other

mate.

"Alan Wright's been messing with you?" Jackson asks, his voice rumbling in his

chest.

"Um, are you one to talk?" I hear myself spit out at him, and then I gasp a little,

shocked that I would say that say anything to make him mad-

I step back, looking anxiously towards the door, when suddenly his hand wraps

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around my upper  
arm.

It happens again, as it always does — the pulse that moves through the air-  
and

my head spins back, staring up at him, wary —

“No.” he says, frowning at me, stepping closer as I pull back, “don’t =

“Don’t what?” I breathe, my voice starting to shake a little as I tug against his  
hand. I mean, Alan Wright draws a finger across his neck, but Jackson tried to  
choke me yesterday —

“Don’t be scared —” Jackson says, his words faltering as he looks at me  
anxiously,

almost like he’s fumbling for words.

I hesitate, but then tug again at my arm still in his hand. “Then let go of me,” I  
say, a little bit between my teeth.

He does, instantly. “Please don’t run,” he murmurs.

And I shock myself by...complying. Instead of bolting, I peer up at him,  
confused

as hell but curious. “What the hell is going on, Jackson?” I hiss. “Yesterday  
you

try to kill me and now you’re asking me not to run?”

“I wasn’t trying to kill you,” he says, frowning down at me like I’m a little stupid.

“If

I was trying to kill you, Clark, you’d be dead —”

“Great!” I say, my voice heavy with sarcasm as I look up at him with wide  
eyes.

“Well, in an attempt

my bunk-” to avoid your next attempt, I’m going to go hide in

I start to move away but he takes a step forward. “God damn it,” he growls,  
angry

but putting a hand out towards me, almost pleading — “would you just stay  
still?

I’m trying to — to apologize...”

My eyes go even wider if that’s possible — god, they must be like saucers  
now —

12:40 Sun, 10 Mar

Chapter 28

“You’re what?” I breathe, fascinated.

“I'm trying to say I'm sorry!” he says, all in an angry rush. “And I'm not good at this — and you're not making it easy-

“Oh, my bad for not making it easy, Jackson,” I growl at him, still thinking of the

bruises that still blush purple on my neck.

Jackson loses a long, angry breath and shakes his head at me. “I am sorry,” he

says through clenched teeth, pushing forward even though...well, yeah, I am not

being exactly receptive to this, am I?

“...I'm not really used to this,” he continues, frustrated, “and I'm not good at talking to people, and... and I was confused about a lot of stuff and I still have questions!”

My expression softens as I look up at Jackson, watching his confused face, the

way he looks down at the floor instead of at me, like he's a little kid stumbling through his first formal apology after getting in trouble.

“But,” he continues, flicking his grey—blue eyes back to me now, “I am...sorry.

For

hurting you and scaring you. I shouldn't have done that I lost my temper, and I'm...” he sighs deeply, and shrugs helplessly, shaking his head like he doesn't know what to say. “And I'm not going to do that anymore. Okay? So, you don't need to be...afraid of me.”

Finished, he hangs his head, looking down at his shoes, clearly ashamed.

My anger drops away from me in a flash and, in its wake, my heart breaks.

Suddenly my mind turns back to all the times I've watched him, consciously or unconsciously, and my wolf whines inside me with pity. Because Jackson — he is

always alone. He eats every single meal alone, and he doesn't talk to anyone before lights out. He always just sits in his bed, silent, by himself.

And while I always thought that was a choice...


Well, what if it wasn't? What if Jackson doesn't have any friends...because he doesn't know how?

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I, . »

You're forgiven,” I say, the words

falling from my lips instantly, easily,



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ad

and his head snaps up, his face the picture of surprise. I nod, reassuring : am :

him. "It's okay. I forgive you. Um, we can just..move The content is on ! Read the latest chapter there! on."

"Okay," he says, fighting a smile. "Thanks. Good." He starts to move away, but I

shock myself by reaching out and grabbing his sleeve.

Jackson stops, turning to me with equal surprise.

"Hey, why don't you eat breakfast with us in the morning?" I say, my words rushed.

"Really?" he asks, his eyebrows going up. He turns his head a little then, hesitant. "I'm not sure that your... friends are going to be happy with that."

12:40 Sun, Tu Mar

Chapter 28

"Leave them to me," I sigh, dropping his sleeve and crossing my arms with a shrug. "Just...come. If you feel like it. It's not a big deal."

He stands for a moment, staring at me, and then he nods once and turns, walking slowly out of the bathroom.

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I turn then, looking for my brother, and I breathe a sigh of relief when I see him busy, distracted by a group of candidates who are talking to him over by the urinals. Because...well, , 3 5 ;

Jackson's right Rafe is not going to be happy about my impulsive invitation if Jackson shows up tomorrow. And I did break my promise to Rafe not to talk to him again. The content is on ! Read the latest chapter there!

But...well, he is my mate.

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And he's really hot, my wolf whispers unhelpfully, brushing up warmly against my heart and wiggling with

: , Ne

excitement. He's hot in like...a mean way — but did you see how cute he was when he apologized!? Go after p ) : ;

him- maybe he'll do it again — The content is on ! Read the latest chapter there!

I groan audibly, closing my eyes against her impractical — but admittedly tempting

— impulses. But suddenly I'm broken out of my reverie by my brother's voice at my side.

“You good?” he asks, his warm hand coming to rest heavy on my shoulder..

“Yup,” I say, my eyes flashing open as I grin up at him.

“Good,” he says, slinging his arm around my shoulder and leading me out of the

bathroom and towards our bunks. “Because we all need a good night's sleep.



You've got to bust your ass tomorrow.”

“Aye aye, Captain,” I sigh, walking with him and then climbing into my bunk just

as the lights flick off, truly intent on getting a full night's sleep.

But Jesse?

Jesse has other ideas.

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Chapter 29

“Wake up!”

My eyes fly open as a hand slaps across my mouth, accompanying the whispered words. I gasp in a quick breath of air through my nose, but as soon as

I realize that it's Jesse —

“Asshole,” I breathe, though the word is muffled against his palm. I start to swat

at him, wanting to back to sleep.

go

“No way,” he whispers, grinning at me over the edge of my bed. “You're coming

with me — we are having this long-delayed chat.”

And before I can even protest, Jesse grabs me by the collar and starts to drag me from my bunk. I give a little gasp of surprise but then nk my uniform from his

hands, turning and find my c way down before Jesse hauls me bodily to the ground. Because while Rafe will probably sleep through a couple of whispers, he

is not going to sleep through my sound of my body hitting the floor.

And Rafe — he cannot know what Jesse knows. Not after yesterday's surprise.

So I glare at my cousin as my feet hit the floor, scowling as I snatch my boots out

of his waiting hand. He's still grinning at me as he nods his head to the right and I

nod, following him away from the bunks and towards the front of the barracks. I glance over my shoulder at the bulk that is Rafe, sleeping soundly in the bottom

bunk of our bed, and when we get far enough away that we probably won't be

heard I give Jesse a hearty shove on the shoulder.

“What the hell were you thinking,” I growl, stopping by the door to tug my boots on.

“I was thinking,” Jesse says, pushing the door open and gallantly bowing me through into the night. air, “that we need a little cousin time, just to ourselves, to

discuss a certain little secret

“Okay fine,” I hiss, pushing the barracks door hastily shut as soon as Jesse skirts

out of the way, looking around to make sure that we actually are alone.

Because,

I mean, these doors are unguarded, and other candidates could be anywhere.

And this conversation? I desperately want it to be private.

“Come on.” Jesse says, still gleeful, and he heads for the path that we usually take in the morning when we go for our run, leading me to the top of a sparse hill

where we can see for about fifty feet in every direction.

Up here on the top of the hill? We definitely, completely know that we're alone.

“Jesse, I sigh, trying to figure out how I want to navigate this —

But he just shoves me, hard, on the shoulder. “Is Luca Grant seriously your mate!?” he demands.

Chapter 29

glaring at me.

I heave a deep sigh, closing my eyes, realizing that Jesse is not going to give me

any control of this conversation. He's here to make demands.

So... just give in.

“Yes, Jesse.” I say, hunching my shoulders and hanging my head a little bit.

“Luca's my mate. I'm sorry-

But before I can get any further, my eyes fly open because Jesse lets out a ridiculous whoop of joy.

“Yes!” Jesse shouts, pumping a fist up into the air. “This is amazing! This is the

best, Ari! I'm so excited!”

My own face bursts into a grin because I mean — this is not what I expected.

“What — Jesse —”

“Ari,” he e says, smiling so hard it seems to stretch his face in two directions

“don't you see how great. this is!?” He strides forward, putting his hands on my

shoulders and giving me a little shake, “I mean, Rafe and I — we already like Luca

— he's already our friend! You could have been mated to anyone in here — a real loser, or a jerk! But it's Luca!" I laugh too — Jesse's joy is infectious. But also because — I mean — I really like Luca too. I never dreamed that if I had a mate it would be someone who is so

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fun, and funny, and gorgeous.

"Soo..." I turn my head a little, looking Jesse up and down. "You're not pissed?"

"Oh no, I'm pissed," he says, laughing a little as he takes his hands from my shoulders and puts them on his waist, "you have been sneaky as shit, and you should have told me as soon as you knew, but I mean — I'll get over that. But Luca — I mean, he's going to be part of our family — he's going to be, like, our

brother-in-law! I love it!"

I blush when I hear Jesse's words, and then I go completely red all over because

I mean

I have not thought that far ahead.

— a mating ceremony. And while I guess that's the natural conclusion of these things mate, Luca becoming part of our family, I mean — it makes sense — with my fated

"What's wrong?" Jesse asks, his voice suddenly all concern.

"Can we just...slow down, Jesse?" I say, looking up at my cousin, whose face falls when he realizes his mistake. "I mean —"

"No, I totally get it," he says, reaching out a hand for my shoulder again, "I'm so

sorry, Ari — that was very uncool of me, you just met the guy-

"And he doesn't even know that I'm..." I hesitate now, and then gesture at myself

from top to

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bottom-at everything Lawa doesn't know I am: his mate, a girl, a princess, the daughter of a seriously powerful Alpha who is not going to react well to meeting

anyone who has a romantic claim on his little girl no matter how cute their dimples are.

"Wait, what?" Jesse breathes, his face lightening suddenly at the drama of it. Jesse, much more than Rate, loves a little gossip "He doesn't know he's your mate

"He doesn't know anything. Jesse." I say, raising my eyebrow at him and crossing

my arms. doesn't even know I'm a girl"

Jesse's mouth drops open and then he bursts into laughter, running a hand through his hair and turning around to stare out into the sky, putting the pieces together.

"Wait," he says, turning to look at me again, "but I thought you were using the dream state with him

"Well, that was an accident," I mutter, looking down as I scuff the toe of my boot in the dirt.

"An accident!?"

"Well, I didn't know I invited him to the dream state, Jesse." I say, looking up and

rolling my eyes. "Until it was too late! And then my wolf wouldn't let me out!"  
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Jesse stares at me for a long moment before cracking up again.

And his laughter is so infectious that he gets me going as well, so much so

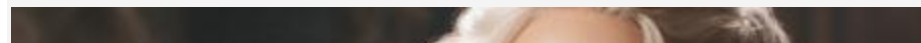
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that for about a minute or two we're both just cackling on the top of a hill outside the barracks of the most elite military academy in the nation the night before we find out whether or not we'll be admitted. The content is on ! Read the latest chapter there!

And, honestly. It's kind of the stress reliever I need. I laugh with my cousin until my stomach

And, honestly.

It's kind of the stress reliever I need. I laugh with my cousin until my stomach



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ad

aches with it, his arm wrapped loosely around my shoulders in a brotherly hug.

“Okay okay,” Jesse says, catching his breath and sitting down on top of the hill,

tugging on my arm so that I sit down across from him, our knees almost touching.

“You’ve got to tell me everything right from the start. I need all of the details, little cousin.”

And so...I do. I tell him everything, only leaving out the details about Jackson

—  
because honestly, it’s such a relief to talk to Jesse about Luca that I don’t really

want to spoil it by adding that information in. And Jesse he’s thrilled for me to have Luca as my mate. For a moment, I just want to concentrate on that.

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So I tell him about Luca finding me in the hot spring, and then him asking me hard questions about where his mate is, and how that struck up a

friendship. Then I move on to describe the way that Luca and I are drawn to each other. Jesse smiles when I tell him about how well we connected during the survival test, , 5 2

but he can't contain his laughter when I tell him about Luca admitting his attraction to me in the dream state when I again appeared as a boy. The content is on

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"Oh man." Jesse says, "you're probably giving him a serious crisis about his s\*xuality, Ari. And I

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shouldn't laugh, bun damn, that's funny. I did not expect that."

"I know." I say, laughing too, wrapping my arms around my knees. "I feel really bad —"

"But you can't tell him." Jesse says, still smiling, cocking his head to the side.

"I

mean, right? You've got to keep this a secret"

"Jesse." sigh, sighing a little "I mean, I'm certainly not going to tell him like, tomorrow, when we're both still candidates — but I can't keep this under wraps

forever. I mean, I feel like even if Luca is confused and struggling with this, he's

not going to let it drop. Even if I don't tell him, he's going to figure it out."

Jesse's shoulders slump a little at this.

"What." I say, considering my cousin closely. "Why is that bad?"

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Because," Jesse says, with a little wp + )

shrug. "I just... know Grant's reputation, Ari. And as much as I

: , +

think that he's going to respect you

5 , 5

when he finds out that you're his mate, I did kind of like the idea that you two were getting to know each other as friends first. Luca — he's an Alpha. When he finds out you're his mate, you're going to be like...his

” :

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

I sit up straight at that, frowning. “What do you mean by that?”

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### Chapter 30

I stare curiously at my cousin, waiting for my explanation.

“I mean he’s going to be possessive,” Jesse says, shrugging. “The same way Rafe would be if he found his mate, and me too, to an extent. He just won't want

anyone else's hands on you, will want you all to himself. And, considering that you're taking a very independent and somewhat dangerous path in your life...”

“Oh,” I say, thinking it through. Luca — his instincts are going to be to keep me out

of danger. And if here I am, running off to war...

Jesse shrugs again, twisting his mouth to the side. “Maybe that's another reason

why our dads decided, at least initially, not to let girls into the school. Wolf affections — especially with our mates — they're more complicated and aggressive

than humans.”

“Well, I certainly don’t want Luca to like...hold me back.”

“Or push you into things you're not ready for,” Jesse says, raising an eyebrow at

me, and I immediately know he’s talking about s\*x even if he’s not saying it.

“How do you know what I'm ready for?” I ask, narrowing my eyes at him even as

my red.

cheeks grow

“Because, Ari,” Jesse replies, leaning forward and grinning at me, “you blush even at the inuendo. Which kinda suggests you're not ready.”

I scowl and kick him a little, but Jesse just laughs at me and looks back to the barracks. “We should probably go in,” he murmurs, “get some sleep.”

“Well now I'm all awake,” I sigh, leaning back on my palms. “So, thanks for that.

It'll be your fault when I'm a mess at the course tomorrow.”

“Nah, that's on you, Shrimp,” Jesse says, pushing himself to his feet and offering

me a hand up, which I accept. As we turn back to the barracks, he slips that arm

around my shoulder. “I really am happy for you, Ari,” he says quietly, smiling at me in the dark..

“Thanks, cousin,” I say, wrapping an arm around my waist. “Since you like him so

much, it'll be your job to protect him when I finally have to introduce him to dad.”

Jesse laughs at this and agrees, but even as I smile at the joke....

Something picks at the back of my mind. Because even if everyone likes Luca and will be willing to convince my dad to let him have a chance...

Who would stand up for Jackson?

And...will I ever have the chance to introduce him to my dad as well? Do I even

want that?

Chapter 30

We're all tense at breakfast, and I stifle a yawn even as I pick at my pancakes. Even though they have chocolate chips in them today my favorite — I can't really

convince myself to dig in. My stomach is already filled with anxious butterflies Jesse and Rafe, of course, are chowing down across the table from me and Ben,

who likewise picks. at his food. I glance to my right at Ben and he rolls his eyes

towards the Alphas across from us, and then snorts like a pig, making me laugh.

But before I can add on to Ben's joke, Laica slaps his tray down on my other side, making me almost leap out of my skin. I scowl as I look up at him. “Do you

mind?” I ask.



“What, are we feeling jumpy today?” he asks, grinning at me and leaning close to me so that only I can hear his words, “didn’t get much sleep after sneaking out in the middle of the night with our favorite cousin?”

I gasp a little and then shove Luca on the shoulder with the tips of my fingertips, which tingle as usual from the touch. “Creep,” I say, narrowing his eyes at him.

“What, are you watching me?”

“You were clomping your way down the aisle in the middle of the night!” he counters, grinning at me as he takes his first bite.

“I wasn’t even wearing my boots!” I object, my jaw falling open.

“What’s this?” Rafe asks, suddenly narrowing in on our conversation. Both Luca and I turn to Rafe, him grinning, me searching my mind frantically for

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an excuse -But, both fortunately and unfortunately, a convenient distraction arrives.

A mountain of a distraction, actually, his full tray balanced between his two gigantic hands.

As I look up at Jackson, my mouth falls open because I honestly didn’t think he’d

take me up on my invitation to come to breakfast.

And...also because I kind of forgot that I issued it.

“Can I sit here?” he asks, his voice quiet but tense with what I now realize is anxiety, not aggression.

“Sure,” I say, my face breaking into a hesitant smile at the same moment that Rafe says “absolutely not!”

I spin to look at Rafe, who is already glaring at me.

I narrow my eyes at my brother though, frowning, and then turn back to Jackson.

“Of course you can sit, Jackson,” I say, waving a hand to the last chair next to Jesse.

Jackson starts towards it, but Rafe throws out a hand. “No way,” he says, shaking

his head. “You can

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“Rafe.” Jesse interrupts, staring at my brother, his expression shocked and a little

appalled, “Aunt Ella raised you better than this.”

le’s eyes go wide with surprise and shame, but Jesse ignores him and turns a warm smile Jackson. “Please,” he says, nodding to the empty chair. “Have breakfast with us. I’m Jesse.”

up to

Jackson hesitates for one more second, but then puts his tray down and sits, introducing himself and shaking Jesse’s hand. Jesse goes through a bit of a farce now, introducing Jackson around to the table even though we’re all well aware of who he is, especially Rafe, who glares at me again even as he mutters

a bitter hello.

But I just shrug at my brother, who has clearly figured out that I’m behind this but

hasn’t yet figured out why. I know I owe him an explanation, but...well, there’s really no time for that now, is there?

But it’s actually Luca’s cold voice that brings my attention away from Rafe.

“Hey, McClintock.” Luca says, looking Jackson up and down in a way that clearly

communicates his distaste. “We haven’t really had the opportunity to interact since that first night, have we? Can’t really say that I’ve missed you.”

I go very idea.

still as I remember yet another reason why this breakfast might not have been the best

Jackson and Luca — they’re searching for the same girl, aren’t they?

Which, actually, is me.

And that...does not really make them potential friends, does it?

I sigh a little, turning my attention back to my plate, realizing that I have officially,

truly stuck my foot in it this time.

“I guess we haven’t, Grant,” Jackson says, his low voice rumbling.

“Cool!” Jesse says, too cheerful in the awkward silence that reigns at our table now. But Ben laughs, and I look up to see — —

him shrugging because I mean what else is there to do? “So, Jackson,” Jesse continues, using his skills as a natural conversationalist to drag us all back

together. "Anxious about the obstacle course today?"  
Jackson replies that he's not, and Ben asks Rafe something about best  
methods  
for low crawling through the sand pit, and I exhale a long breath, thinking that  
we  
might get through this breakfast without a brawl after all.  
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Luca stays tense and quiet beside  
me, but eventually things get lighter  
. )

as the minutes pass by. Rafe doesn't  
say anything to Jackson either, but  
Ben and I do, and honestly by the  
3 )

time breakfast draws to a close I'm  
much more worried about the final  
trial instead of whether or not my  
brother is going to beat up my mate,  
or if my mates are going to find out  
about each other, or any of the other  
thousand things that could potentially  
" Ta

go wrong with my personal life."Did  
" 5

you eat enough?" Rafe The content is  
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asks, breaking out of my reverie, and I look up to see him looking at my full  
tray  
with concern.

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I glance down at my plate and realize that well, I probably didn't. But I sigh  
and

push the tray away  
from me

Rafe sighs and pushes a carton of chocolate milk in my direction, but I just  
push

it back, sticking out my tongue. “Rafe, unless you want me to barf chocolate milk

up all over myself in about half an hour...”

Laica, at my side, laughs a little, clearly listening.

Rafe just grins and takes the carton back. “I just want you to have enough energy

to get through the

course,

“We've got enough nervous energy to propel us,” Ben says, bumping his shoulder against mine. “Don't worry about that, Sinclair.”

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Rafe just shrugs, opening his mouth

to say something else, but Luca

: PA 3

beats him to it. “What about Beast

” : :

Mode over here?” he says, his voice a

dry and honestly a little bit nasty as

he looks Jackson up and down. I

frown at Luca, not sure that I like this

side of him. The content is on

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) . :

Jackson — he's been quiet and a little

awkward during breakfast, though

not impolite. He answered who

questions when asked, and he did his

best — but overall? He just struck me

as kind of a shy guy is feeling out his

place in an established group made

mostly of Alpha males, which is not

the easiest thing to do. The content is

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And Luca? He seems quite determined to make sure that Jackson feels as uncomfortable as possible.

“Come on, McClintock.” Luca says, smirking at him as he pops a grape into his

mouth. “You're the only one giving Sinclair a run for his money on this course today, what's your secret?”

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