

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy

Read Chapter 241 – 260

Chapter 0241

Chapter 0241

My lip starts to tremble as I listen, tears again stinging my eyes, but Jesse leans forward.

“Rafe,” he murmurs, glancing between us. “Slow down a little, man. I mean, if we’re aware of what they’re feeling, then she’s aware of it double – she can feel it all down their bonds. And that, on top of her own feelings?” He shakes his head, holding Rafe’s gaze, willing him to listen.

Rafe takes a deep breath and sighs, pushing his cake around on his plate, clearly thinking it through. In the end, though, he looks up at me. “Can you seriously feel everything they feel?”

“Not everything,” I murmur, my voice tight as I look down at my plate. “Not unless the emotion is really intense, or they send it to me deliberately. And not...across great distances. Only when they’re nearby, or in the room. Like I can’t feel them now.”

“Weird,” he murmurs, quietly eating his cake as he puts his thoughts together for a second. Jesse does the same.

After a long moment, Rafe breaks the silence.

“I just wish, Ariel,” he murmurs, truly hurt, “that you’d trusted me enough to let me know. I’d have told you, after all.”

My nose starts to sting at the true sadness and hurt in his voice, and then my throat gets tight. I blink fast, not wanting to cry, because I know that they have every right to be mad at me, but...

Well, the tears start to fall down my cheeks anyway.

“Aw, come on Ari, don’t do that,” Jesse murmurs, leaning forward and putting a warm hand on my knee. “We can’t yell at you if you’re crying, and we’re not anywhere near finished.”

“I know,” I murmur, brushing frustratedly at my cheeks with the side of one hand. “I’m sorry, I’m really sorry –“

“No, I’m sorry,” my brother murmurs, setting his plate on the coffee table and getting to his knees as he reaches for me, wrapping his arms around my body and pulling me into his lap. “I’m sorry, sis. I’m fucking livid with you but – god, fuck, I’m sorry you bore this alone. I’m sorry – I wish you’d have let me be there for you.”

I cry harder, letting myself be overwhelmed by my grief and confusion, knowing he’ll see me through it. Knowing he’s strong enough for that.

“Oh, let her go, Rafe,” Jesse murmurs, scootching closer and reaching out to put his his own plate on the coffee table, laying himself down on the couch so that all of our heads are very close together, so that we can talk and hear each other in barely more than a whisper, if we so choose. “We can’t get all the gossip if she’s crying like that.”

“The gossip?” I ask, wiping my away all my tears, kind of appalled.

“Oh, all the gossip,” Jesse murmurs, yawning and turning his head to grin at me. “Jackson’s fine, by the way, thanks to yours truly. Going to show up here to breakfast tomorrow, newly determined to try for your hand. In exchange for your genuine gratitude, my love...I will accept the whole damn story. Right now.”

“Same,” Rafe says, giving me a solemn nod. “Luca’s pissed as hell, and while...well, while he’s not precisely prepared to grovel for you...he’ll be here in the morning. So, madam trouble? The floor is yours.”

And so, with a sigh, I unfold myself from Rafe’s arms and sit on the floor next to him, beginning to tell them the whole story.

“Well,” Rafe says, about an hour later, his eyebrows raised. “Actually, in retrospect, I’m glad I didn’t know any of this. I would much rather have broken up one wolf fight after finals than have had to worry about this the whole term.”

“Such empathy in my big brother,” I say, lowering my eyelids into a half-hearted glare and reaching out my fingertips to give him a shove.

Rafe grins at me, chuckling a little, as Jesse lays on the couch next to us, staring at the ceiling, his head cushioned on a pillow.

“Honestly, Ari,” my cousin says, his voice more thoughtful than it usually is, “laid out like that I’m not sure you could have done it very differently. The only place you really seem to have fucked up was when you didn’t plan this evening – you just let both of them show up here, expecting dinner. It was a powder keg, ready to explode, but the rest of it?” My eyes are wide as I watch him shrug, desperate to know what he’ll say next.

Chapter 0242

Chapter 0242

“Yeah,” Jesse says, considering, assessing. “Yeah, Ari, with all of it - I think you did as well as you could.”

“Really?” I ask, kind of shocked.

“Yeah, I agree,” Rafe says with a sigh. I turn my eyes to him. “I mean, you had to get to know them first to know if you even wanted to tell them you were their mate. And then you certainly couldn’t have told one before the other. And if you had told me, I definitely would have gone running off to mom and then dad would have pulled you out of school. The way you handled this was messy but...” he shrugs again. “I get it.”

“Oh god,” I mutter, putting my face into my tired hands with a shaky sigh. “That...that makes me feel so much better.”

“Maybe you could have used the dreamscape,” Jesse murmurs thoughtfully, “and pulled them both in. And then they couldn’t have hurt each other physically, just their dream bodies...”

“Well, in retrospect,” I say, crossing my arms and giving him a little glare, “sure, that sounds great, Jess.”

“For your next mate,” he says, waving a flippant hand. “Now you know.”

I smirk at him, but turn my head back to Rafe when he speaks next.

“Tomorrow’s going to be hard, Ari,” he says, peering at me thoughtfully. “They’re going to...they’re going to really lay into you for this. And I do think you owe them apologies and explanations but...I don’t think you should let them make you feel too horrible about it.”

“Really?” I ask as Jesse turns, propping himself up on his elbow to hear what Rafe has to say.

“Yeah,” Rafe says, nodding seriously as he looks between us. “I mean, you’re not just some mean girl who is dating two guys and not telling them about it. You didn’t pick this – you didn’t even pick them! The Goddess gave you these mates, and I think it’s pretty clear that she wanted you to have them both at once.”

I perk up a little to hear it said this way.

“That makes sense,” Jesse says, nodding as well. “The Goddess put all three of you on this road together, and just because Luca and Jackson don’t like it doesn’t make it your fault. You have to remind them of that, Ari – and if they give you any shit about it, then we’ll remind them too.” He raises his fist, smacking it against his other palm with a smirk, letting me know precisely how he intends to remind them.

“Yeah, don’t let them push you around,” Rafe says, frowning now at the idea. “Luca, especially, is going to try to convince you to turn away from your bond with Jackson. But you have every right to explore your bonds with both of your mates, to figure out why the Goddess picked them.”

Jesse nods to himself, deep in thought, speaking his ideas as he figures them out. “I mean, mates are supposed to be a gift – and she’s your grandmother, for heaven’s sake. I don’t think you should be ashamed of this, or feel bad about it, or try to stop it, Ari.”

“I agree,” Rafe says, looking at me evenly. “I think it would be a mistake to reject the Goddess’ gift like that – I think she’d be pissed, and you’d do yourself a disservice. I think you should explore it. While being as fair as you can to Luca and Jackson, of course. It’s not carte blanche to be a jerk to them.”

A deep well of warmth runs through me as I begin to smile, staring at my brother, who is so sweet, and so supportive. Tears again spring to my eyes.

“Oh geeze,” Rafe says with a sigh, reaching out and wiping at my cheeks with his thumb as the tears start to spill out. “What’s all this about? What did I say now?”

“Nothing,” I laugh, shaking my head and tilting it back while I sniff. “You’re just being really nice to me.”

“Of course we’re being nice to you, Ari,” Jesse says with a yawn, reaching out to ruffle my hair like he used to do when we were kids. “You’re our little baby trouble. We love you. We’d be bored without you.”

I grin at the two of them, resting my head against the couch and letting my eyes fall half-shut, so grateful to the two of them for their love and their friendship and their eternal support.

Chapter 0243

Chapter 0243

“We got your back, Ariel,” Rafe murmurs, patting my knee. And then we spend the next few hours talking softly, letting our thoughts wander, none of us really making a move to go to bed. Instead, slowly – perhaps simultaneously – we all fall asleep curled up next to each other like we used to do when we were kids. A puppy pile, mom used to call it.

And I think of that, of my mom, and my family, and how much I love the rich warmth of them as I fall asleep next to my two best friends.

Because I get to see the rest of them tomorrow.

And I can barely wait.

I gasp awake when the door flies open behind me, spinning and blinking and trying to figure out if I’m about to die –

“I did it!” Ben shouts, giving a whoop of excited joy as Rafe leaps to his feet, his chest heaving with anxiety. Jesse just groans, turning over on the couch and burying his face in his pillow as I clasp a hand to my throat, trying to figure out if I had a heart attack. “I passed my finals! I get to stay!”

“Too bad you’re going to die in like four seconds, Ben!” Rafe snaps, scowling and striding over to Ben to snatch the piece of paper out of his hand. Ben ignores Rafe, dancing around the room as he pumps his fist in the air.

“I get to stay in school! I passed – I’m an Ambassador now, for real! Or at least, on my way to it!”

“That’s amazing, Ben, I’m very happy for you,” Jesse murmurs into his pillow. “Now shut up. Go away.”

I smile as I watch Rafe collect himself and smile at our friend, reaching out to grab Ben and wrap him into a big hug as he murmurs his congratulations. I grin at Ben, who peers at me over Rafe’s

shoulder, watching him take a surreptitious sniff of Rafe’s scent as they break their quick hug.

I push myself to my feet as well, wincing as my stiff muscles unfold. God, sleeping on the floor – what a stupid idea –

“Congrats, Ben,” I say, holding open my arms as I cross the room to him. Rafe lets him go and Ben steps to me, wrapping me in a hug and rocking me back and forth. “I’m so happy for you!”

“Did you get your results?” he asks, eager, looking down at me.

“Um, I don’t know, you kind of woke us up,” I say, looking towards the door. “How did you find out?”

“Slipped under my door this morning,” he says, letting go of me and striding for the still-open door, looking for a piece of paper. He sighs and turns to me, shaking his head.

I scowl, flopping down on the couch and making Jesse yelp when I land on the back of his calves.

“Oh, you baby,” I mutter, “that didn’t hurt.”

“Be gentle with me,” Jesse whines, still burying his face in the pillow and pretending to be asleep. “I’m very delicate and you kept me up all night talking and I haven’t had any coffee –“

I laugh, smacking him on the back even as the dumbwaiter’s bell rings. I turn towards it, eager. “Sounds like coffee’s here anyway.” Even as I watch Rafe and Ben walk eagerly to the dumbwaiter, I can’t help the anxiety that rolls in my stomach.

Why did Ben get his results, but not me?

Is it just because he’s on a different track?

Or...is it because I didn’t pass? Is a different note coming soon, telling me to pack my things for good? Is it going to be –

“Is there enough coffee for one more?”

My head spins immediately to the door at the sound of Luca’s voice, my eyes going wide. Jesse immediately sits up, his sleepy façade gone as he looks at Luca levelly, clearly wondering – as I am – just how upset he still is, and if he’s volatile.

I go completely still, waiting for Luca to give me a sign about how this is going to go.

Chapter 0244

Chapter 0244

As I anxiously study Luca, waiting for his next move ...damn, but I can’t help but notice how good he looks. Luca’s freshly showered, dressed in the Cadet black that makes him look so sharp, his hair falling a little into his face in a way that just begs me to touch it, wanting to push it back. His lip is a little swollen and a bruise spreads beneath his left eye, but I don’t know – something about it really works for him. He just looks tough and sexy and a little dangerous in a way that I really, really like.

“Don’t worry,” Luca says with a smile as he puts up a defensive hand, smiling around at us in a way that makes his dimples flare. I melt, just a little...

Because god, he’s just so cute –

“I’m not going to flip out,” Luca continues, shaking his head at himself like he’s disappointed in how he acted last night. “I’m just...here for breakfast. As promised.”

Luca steps into the room a little more as he closes the door, his eyes moving over Ben and Jesse and Rafe before falling on me like that’s the only place they want to rest. I hold his gaze, a little smile on my mouth. Because, I mean, I really am happy to see him – I’m always happy to see him.

But...what do we do now? Do I...should I get up and hug him? Throw myself into his arms, which is what I really want to do?

“Hey,” he murmurs, the corner of his mouth turning up in a smile that’s just for me.

“Hi,” I whisper back, though I know he can hear me. A quick pulse of joy and anxiety and apology and warmth comes down the bond, letting me know that he’s still conflicted but that he’s really, really happy to see me.

I grin, because I feel the same way.

“Of course there’s enough coffee!” Rafe says, his voice booming and making me jump as he steps around me and plops the silver coffee pot on the table with a loud thump, clearly intent on breaking the vibe between Luca and me. “So,” he says, straightening up and putting his hands on his hips. “Rumor has it that you’ve been secretly dating my sister for months. Are you going to be nice to her today?”

And I burst into a grin when I see Luca grimace a little as he runs a hand through his hair, because I suddenly realize that Luca’s been keeping a secret too. This whole time, he’s been secretly dating his friend’s sister – which I’m pretty sure is against the rules, when it comes to guy friendships.

“Of course I’m going to be nice to her,” Luca murmurs, looking around Rafe and finding me again, taking in my wide grin. Ben laughs as he moves to the coffee table, carrying plates of pastries and cups for the coffee.

“Good,” Rafe says, the words carrying a great deal of weight. “Ariel?” he says, turning to me. I sit up in surprise. “Go get showered and changed – you’re a mess.”

I squeak in appalled surprise, but when I look down at myself I realize that he’s right. I am very rumped. And if we’re going to have a nice big chat, I’m going to want to look and feel my best.

“Fine fine,” I mutter as Ben offers me a cup of coffee made just how I like it. “But if you all eat all the breakfast while I am gone, I’m going to be mad!”

“No promises!” Jesse calls after me as I carry my coffee into the bathroom and work on making myself more presentable.

About twenty minutes later, when I draw the curtain back from my nook, freshly showered and changed with my hair braided onto my head but not yet tucked beneath my cap, I jump when I realize that Luca is leaning against the fireplace about a foot to my left, clearly waiting for me to come out.

“Hi,” he murmurs, immediately slipping an arm around my back and tugging me to his side, lowering his face to my hair and taking a long, slow sniff of my scent. “I like this,” he murmurs, “your scent by itself, not all mixed up with Jesse, of all revolting people.”

I grin, pleased despite my anxiety, leaning into him and putting a hand on the hard muscle of his stomach, looking up into his face. “Still mad at me?”

“Livid,” he whispers, but the way he smiles, and tugs me closer...I have to bite my lip, because I think it means we’re going to be okay. I tilt my chin up, wanting nothing more than to –

Chapter 0245

Chapter 0245

“Enough of that,” Rafe calls from across the room where he’s tossing what few personal possessions he has into a backpack. “Hands off, Luca. Still my sister.”

“Still my mate,” Luca calls back, but his voice is cheerful as he pushes himself up from the wall, letting his arm drift from behind my back so that he can grasp my hand as he tugs me over to the sitting area. Ben’s there too, his already-packed backpack at his feet, but he stands when we approach, going to pretend to help Jesse pack and giving us our space.

“So, I’ve been thinking about it,” Luca says, sitting down on the couch and pulling me with him so that we sit close together.

“Yeah?” I ask, encouraging him to go on. I turn towards him, taking his hands in mine, listening closely. Because I want, desperately, to know what he’s thinking – how he’s feeling about all of it.

“And,” he murmurs, reaching out a hand to tuck a strand of hair back from my face, “we still have to talk about...about you keeping this from me, Ariel. That was deeply unfair, and I...I think it’s going to take a while for me to trust you again.”

I nod, understanding, listening to him and holding back my opinion on the matter. Because I do think that I was in a hard place with that – it would have been horribly unfair to Jackson if I had told Luca that Jackson was my mate before I even told Jackson. But...that’s not really important now. Instead, I just want to hear Luca, to understand how he feels.

“But I didn’t lie last night,” Luca murmurs, his pretty brown eyes intent as he squeezes my hands. “I’m in love with you, Ariel – you’re my mate, you’re...you’re everything to me. I’ll do whatever it takes to make this right with us.”

“Luca,” I breathe, leaning closer, completely overwhelmed at how good he’s being. “Thank you – I feel the same way – I’ll do whatever it takes too, you’re so important to me –“

“So, you’ll reject him, then,” Luca murmurs, tucking that same strand of my hair back again, his fingers warm as they caress the shell of my ear. “And then we’ll move on! It will be amazing, Ariel, I promise – I’ll do everything I can to make you happy, everything, and we’ll be so –“

I sit up straight, rigid, staring at him unblinkingly. Because wait...what? What is he asking me? What...did I agree to something? “Luca,” I say, putting a hand out between us, my palm flat as it presses against his chest. “Luca...no...”

“No?” he asks, likewise sitting up straight and staring at me. “No to...no to what?”

“Luca,” I whisper, horrified, leaning closer. “Luca, I’m not going to reject my bond with Jackson...”

“What!?”

“Hey!” Jesse says, shoving Rafe’s armchair ridiculously close to the couch and flopping down into it. “This seems sufficiently intimate and complicated and like you might start yelling at each other! Thought I’d join in!”

“Get out of here, Jesse,” Luca growls as Rafe comes around the couch and stands on the other side of the coffee table, his arms crossed. “This is between me and Ariel.”

“Oh, I’ll go,” Jesse says calmly, raising his eyebrows and holding Luca’s gaze for a pause before shifting his eyes to mine. “If Ariel wants me to.”

I bite my lip, hesitating, because...I mean, even though Luca is right that this is between us...

God, but I have trouble saying no to him. And quite frankly, I do want my brother and my cousin's support.

"Ariel," Luca growls, leaning closer to me and glaring, "are you seriously going to let them budge in on this!? This is our personal relationship! This is between you and I, and you're going to –"

"Let us advocate for her?" Rafe interrupts, his voice smooth and a little mad. Luca gapes, turning towards him. "Intercede? Not let you bully her, when she's emotional and clearly wants to do things to help you feel better, even when they're not in her best interest?"

I feel a great deal of relief that my family is helping me, but it mixes awkwardly with the sinking pit in my stomach at making Luca feel so bad. God, crap, but this is horrible.

"Bully!?" Luca spits out, dropping my hands and staring at Rafe, truly offended. "Are you seriously saying that I would stoop so low as to bully the woman I love!?"

"You're kind of doing it now," Jesse says, a little dry.

Chapter 0246

Chapter 0246

I lift my eyebrows in surprise as Luca turns to stares at Jesse, appalled at the accusation. Jesse continues, either pretending not to notice or not caring.

"I mean," Jesse says, turning his palm up as he talks it through, "unless I'm mistaken, you've never told her that you loved her before, right? At least not before last night. And now you're throwing that word around a lot in a situation where you're actively asking her for something. It might not be bullying, but it is a little manipulative." Jesse grimaces and gives a shrug, and I can tell that he's genuinely not happy to have to deliver the message.

But my jaw drops a little when I realize that...that Jesse's kind of right on that one. Luca is pulling out the I-word at the same moment when he's asking me for something really big.

"I can't believe you're accusing me of not loving her, of saying that just because I want something –"

"We're not accusing you of that," Rafe says, his voice gentler now. "We're just asking you to play fair, Luca. And to let her make her own decisions about what's right for her. Even if that's not what's right for you."

“So, you’re all going to take his side,” Luca snaps, drawing away from me now and standing up, clearly wanting a little space. “When obviously I am the better match for Ariel – I can handle her life as a Princess, I’m already your guys’ best friend, I’m completely dedicated to supporting her through this Academy thing and have been for months. How can you not be on my side, after all of this!? We’re – we’re fucking friends!”

“They’re not taking Jackson’s side,” I say quietly folding my hands in my lap and looking up at my mate, my heart sinking because I know he feels so betrayed. “This isn’t about sides, Luca.”

“Screw that, it is about sides,” Jesse snaps, standing up to glare at Luca. But I watch as his face softens, as he forces himself to be kinder. “We’re not on Jackson’s side, but we’re not on yours

either, Luca. We’re on Ariel’s side.”

“Always,” Rafe says, his voice likewise gentle and a little sad. “Always Ariel’s side, Luc. I’m...I’m sorry if that’s not what you want to hear, but she’s my sister.”

“My best cousin,” Jesse adds, and my heart swells with love at their support.

“And quite frankly,” Rafe continues, his face a little grim. “As her mate? I’d prefer it if you were on her side as well.”

Luca just stares, slack-jawed, at his two best friends before looking down at me. I bite my lip, heartbroken and awkward, my fingers twisted together in my lap. We stare at each other for a long time, and down our bond I feel him questioning, apparently unable to put it into words right now, wanting and needing to know what it is that I’m asking for in this moment.

“The Goddess gave me both of you, Luca,” I say quietly, hoping to hell he hears me on this. “Rafe and Jesse and I – we talked about it last night. And I think it’s right – I’m supposed to have two mates, she gave me both of these bonds for a reason.”

I shake my head, hating that I’m disappointing Luca, but so incredibly grateful that I have my big Alpha brother and cousin here to support me – because if it was just me and Luca? I’m not sure I could find the courage to do this – to deliver the words that I know are going to break his heart.

“What are you saying?” Luca whispers, slow, taking a step closer to look down into my eyes.

“That I’m not going to reject my bond with Jackson,” I whisper, staring up at him, needing him to hear and understand it. “Not just because you want me to.”

Luca groans, tucking his face against his hands like it's the worst thing he's ever heard. I'm immediately on my feet, putting a hand on his arm, unable to just sit and watch him grieve like this.

Rafe takes a step forward like he's worried Luca will snap, and shove me or something, but he doesn't.

Instead, Luca just takes a moment to understand, his body trembling slightly beneath my hand. I stand steadily next to him, letting him process it, bearing witness to his pain. And when he's ready, Luca drags his hands down from his face and looks at me again. "I don't know if I can do this, Ariel," he whispers, shaking his head at me. "I don't know how to do this."

Chapter 0247

Chapter 0247

"Neither do I," I whisper back, taking a step closer. To my surprise, Luca lifts his arm and wraps it around me, tucking me in against his side, where he likes me. "But we can figure it out together."

Luca murmurs something I don't quite hear, raising a hand and cupping my cheek in his palm, staring down at me as he shakes his head in awe and frustration.

"I'm still your mate, Luca," I whisper, sending all the warmth and assurance that I have down the bond. "That hasn't changed. You still mean the world to me."

"It has changed, a little," he murmurs, studying me. "You know that I really do love you, right? That I wasn't just saying it to...to manipulate you. I just...I love you so damn much, Ariel, I'd do anything to keep you."

"I know," I murmur, nodding and pressing my cheek closer into his palm. "I know, Luca. I know."

He lowers his face then, pressing a kiss to my mouth like he can't help it, just as a knock comes at the door.

"Oh, what the hell," Rafe sighs, turning towards it. Luca tightens his arm around me as Jesse steps to my side, taking the hat off his head and shoving it towards me.

Rafe moves to the door and I pull the cap on, taking a small step away from Luca even though he clearly doesn't want to let me go. When I nod to him, Rafe pulls open the door.

And my eyebrows arch nearly to my hairline as I see who is standing there.

“Good morning, Cadets,” Dr. Neumann murmurs, his hands folded neatly behind his back as he nods around to each of us. His eyes settle on me, though, and he gives a firm nod. “Cadet Clark? If I may have a word?”

My hands start to shake a little with the anxiety of it because...because why is he here? Ben...Ben got his pass results on a little piece of paper...

Oh my god.

If you fail, do they have to deliver the results in person? Do they have to –

“Clark?” Neumann says, raising an eyebrow, and I realize that I haven’t moved at all – that I’ve just been staring at him. He turns slightly, tilting his head towards the hall, an invitation.

“Um, that’s okay,” I say, taking a few steps forward so that I’m standing in front of him, but not going out into the hall. “They can listen, I don’t mind.” Because if he tells me that I failed, I am definitely, definitely going to need my family to catch me when I fall to pieces.

Neumann sighs, crossing his arms and narrowing his eyes at me. “You and your social life, Cadet Clark. It’s what’s holding you back, after all.”

My stomach drops and I hang my head, because that can only mean...

“I came to tell you that you came out with the top marks in the Espionage class, Cadet Clark,” he says, his voice brisk, words clipped.

I freeze, because...

I mean, I have to have misheard him, right?

My head snaps up and I stare at my professor, completely shocked.

“Top marks on the Chemistry examination, top marks in your marksmanship class.” He raises an eyebrow at me. “Far and away, our highest-ranking Cadet this year in our program.”

“But I...” I sputter.

“You’re a very promising student, Clark,” Neumann says, and my face bursts into a smile when I see the corners of his mouth beginning to turn up, realizing that he’s rather enjoying his little prank. “We will be expecting great things from you in the spring, and if

you could just concentrate instead of having so many dinner parties you could truly make a difference in this world and in this war –“

But Neumann doesn't get any further in his scolding, because I let out a little shriek and throw myself at him, wrapping my arms around his waist and giving him an impulsive hug. "Thank you!" I gasp, desperately happy and thrilled and excited all at once. "Thank you so much, Dr. Neumann!"

He freezes for a second but then he lets out a slow chuckle and, to my surprise, gently places his arms around me and gives me a little squeeze. "All right, Cadet, that's enough affection," he murmurs. "I'm your teacher, after all, not one of your many friends."

I laugh, loosening my arms and smiling up at him as I take a step back. "Why were you so mean to me all semester!?" I ask, impulsive.

Chapter 0248

Chapter 0248

Neumann laughs at my inappropriate remark, shaking his head. "I was hard on you to push you, Clark. You work harder when you're terrified. Someone has to herd you along towards your potential, after all," he looks around the room now, glaring a bit at my friends and my family, who all beam at me. "These ones, I suspect, pet you a little too much."

"Thank you, sir," Rafe says formally, coming forward, but Neumann just waves a hand at him, turning his attention back to me. I grin, a little pleased to have a professor pay more attention to me than Rafe, who is usually the golden boy.

"Don't listen to what those other Cadets said at the final test, either," Neumann says, stern. "Do you hear me on that? Half of them failed anyway, so they don't know what they're talking about. You're very promising, and we're incredibly excited about your future in the department. Not every successful cadet needs to be a bastion of physical force in order to be useful to the nation's military. Understood?"

I nod eagerly, tucking my hands behind my back and straightening my shoulders, bolstered by the fact that he believes in me. And, quite frankly, the fact that half my classmates failed out.

Jerks.

"And," Neumann says, leaning forward to speak softly to me now, conspiratorial, "if any King has any particular objections on the matter, you can tell him that I said that. And

that if he has any questions about your aptitude and potential, that he can ask me directly. I want you here in the Spring, Cadet...Clark."

My mouth drops open a little as I realize that Neumann... knows. He has perhaps always known.

"Don't disappoint me," my professor finishes, giving a sharp nod and then turning away and striding down the hall. "I wish you all a happy winter break!" he calls to us, "get it out of your systems,

children! When you return in the spring, I will expect you to work!"

I stare after him, shock and thrill pulsing through me.

And then, slowly, I turn to stare around at the group of Alphas standing in the room, all quietly beaming at me, waiting for me to process my surprise.

"I passed!" I shout, punching my fists up into the air, my eyes squeezing shut in my joy.

A roar goes up in the room and suddenly I'm swept off my feet. I laugh, hugging my brother back as he spins me around, and then I'm passed from arms to arms as everyone hugs me, and kisses my cheeks, and tells me how wonderful I am and how they're not at all surprised. I laugh the whole time, barely able to process it, almost knocked out in my wonder and surprise and joy.

I'm still laughing, dazed by the joy of it, when someone clears their throat at the door.

I turn, a huge smile on my face, to see Jackson standing there, frowning around at us. "What's going on here?"

"Just got the news," Jesse calls over to him, and I can hear in his voice that he's pleased and proud. "Ariel passed! Top marks in Chemistry – top student in the Espionage unit."

A wide smile spreads over Jackson's face. "What," he says, slowly, looking around at everyone. "And you guys are like, surprised?"

I burst into a smile, pleased as hell that Jackson's completely unperturbed by the news – that he never, ever thought for a single second that I wouldn't pass.

Finally, his eyes land back on me. "Get your ass over her, Clark," he growls, beckoning me with a wave of his hand. I laugh and suddenly my feet are flying across the room. I throw myself into

Jackson's arms, where he wraps me up and lifts me off the floor, turning me once in a circle as he holds me tight.

“So proud of you,” he murmurs into my ear, which makes me squeal a very tiny happy noise. “My clever little spy.”

I laugh, grinning down at him, running my fingers through his hair and losing myself a little in his blue eyes.

My smile fades, though, when I hear Luca’s rough snarl across the room.

“For the second time in as many days,” Luca snaps, “get your fucking hands off my girlfriend.” I turn my head, knocked out of my mental bubble where only Jackson exists, to see Luca taking a menacing step towards us.

Chapter 0249

Chapter 0249

To my surprise, Jackson makes absolutely no move to put me down. Instead, he just looks at Luca evenly for a second. “Your girlfriend?” he asks, the words low and light with disbelief. He hums consideringly and then turns his face back up to mine. “What do you think, Clark?” he murmurs, nodding over to where Luca stands, not bothering to look his way. “That your boyfriend over there?”

I can’t help it then, loving the assurance in his voice, the calm way he dismisses Luca’s jealousy. A slow, happy smile spreads over my lips as I stare down at him, not saying a single word regarding whether Luca’s my boyfriend or not.

Because honestly, I don’t know.

But Jackson’s right – Luca doesn’t get to boss him around on this, does he?

“Didn’t think so,” Jackson murmurs, low enough that maybe only I hear him. But then he grins at me and lowers me to the floor as Luca strides to my side, grabbing my hand.

“Okay, okay,” Rafe says, stepping forward with a sigh. “Clearly, clearly we need some ground rules here.”

And I sigh, glancing up at both of my mates, before crossing the room to Rafe’s side.

Because my brother is right – it’s time we got some things straight and I might need some physical distance from them to do that.

“What are you even doing here?” Luca growls at Jackson, his arms crossed as they stand about a foot apart.

“Came for breakfast,” Jackson says, giving a calm shrug. “I was invited.” He glances at Jesse now, who grins at him.

“Coffee?” Ben asks, starting to pour Jackson a cup.

“Sure,” Jacks says, crossing the room to take it from him.

“Look, can we cut this bullshit,” Luca snaps, clearly worked up. “What is all this happy family nonsense!? Are we all just going to pretend that McClintock and I didn’t try to kill each other last night? That we’re not going to do it again if we don’t get this two-mate nonsense figured out!?”

“I’m not going to kill you,” Jackson says evenly, taking a calm sip of his coffee. I blink at him, a little surprised, wondering where all this confidence came from. This is, in some ways, a very different Jackson than the grief-stricken wolf who stormed out of here last night. “Are you going to kill me? Or...try?”

Luca sputters, not wanting to seem like the aggressor now that Jackson has proclaimed himself neutral. Then Luca grits his teeth, storming over to Jackson. Rafe grabs the back of my shirt, not letting me go to them, knowing that my first instinct is to stand between them, to negotiate.

“Let them figure it out,” Rafe murmurs when I look back at him. “This, weirdly, is not actually your problem.”

“Yes it is,” I mutter, crossing my arms. “I’m going to go from two mates to none if they tear each other to pieces.”

Rafe laughs lightly, but we both just watch as the argument unfolds.

“You think I can’t see what you’re doing?” Luca snaps, glaring into Jackson’s face. “You get to come in here all calm, pretending you’re fine with this, looking like the good guy – making me look like the bad guy. But I’m the only one being honest here – you don’t want her with me just as much as I don’t want her with you.”

“True,” Jacks murmurs, shrugging and looking down at his coffee before taking a sip. “But, getting into a fist fight isn’t going to fix it.”

“Sure would be fucking nice though,” Luca growls, his hands balling to fists, “to knock you into next week –“

“Enough –“ Rafe says, stepping forward now with a frown. I gape at him a little, pissed. What happened to letting them figure it out!?

He glances at me with a tiny shrug before turning back to Jackson and Luca.

“So,” Rafe says, his voice calm and considering, “despite your insistence on fighting, I want to point out that you two actually...agree.”

“What?” Luca asks, his face screwed up in a confused frown as he turns towards Rafe and me. I look up at Rafe, my face mimicking my mate’s.

Chapter 0250

Chapter 0250

“You just said it,” Rafe says with a shrug. “Luca, you have admitted that you don’t want Ariel to be with Jackson. Jackson, you agreed, saying you felt the same way – you don’t want her to be with Luca.”

All three of us just stare at Rafe like that’s obvious. Actually, all five of us if you count Ben and Jesse too.

“Well, I mean, I think it’s kind of simple,” Rafe says with a sigh, heading to the couch and lifting his coffee off the table as he sits down like this is the most casual conversation anyone has ever had. “If that’s what you guys want, you just have to decide where your boundaries are.”

“What?” Ben asks, confused. We all turn to him and he puts his hands up. “Sorry, sorry,” he murmurs. “I’m just...I’m too involved. I’m sorry. I’ll shut up.”

Rafe laughs a little, but nods. “No, you’re right, I can be clearer. But honestly, I think it is really simple. Ariel?” he says, and I stand up straight, a little wary about what’s coming next. “You declared this morning that you’re not going to reject your mating bond with Jackson just because Luca wants you to, right?”

“Right,” I say instantly.

“Really?” Jackson asks, and I turn my head to see a wide smile on his face. I smile back at him, sending a sense of faith and happiness down our bond, as well as a very tiny scolding that he should be at all surprised. His smile deepens.

“And,” Rafe says slowly, drawing my attention back to him. “Are you willing to reject Luca, because Jackson wants you to?”

“No,” I say instantly, my hand going to my chest, my heart breaking at the very idea. My eyes move to Luca’s and I can feel his own horror, his incredible sense of impending

fear and loss. I shake my head, fervent, letting him know that I would never. Slowly, he grits his teeth and nods, believing me.

“Okay,” Rafe says, nodding again and turning back to the boys. “Well, is either of you willing to break your bond with Ariel?”

“No!” they say in unison before turning to glare at each other, I think a little pissed to finally agree on a point – any point – in this complicated manner.

“Okay, cool,” Rafe says, giving a shrug and lifting his coffee to his mouth. “Then, obviously, we have to find a way to deal with this. Figure out where your boundaries are and...how to live with this situation as it is – because clearly, you’re all stuck in it.”

“Look at you, cousin,” Jesse says, pleased as he sinks into his armchair with a donut in his hand, taking a bite. “What are you, on Therapy track, instead of Warrior? That was good.”

My eyes narrow at Jesse. Donuts? Where the hell did he get one of those?

Rafe just grins at our cousin before Luca steps forward, pissed.

“No way,” Luca says, shaking his head and jutting out a hand. “I see what you’re doing here – this is...this is all what Ariel wants, but what I want is important too. I don’t – I don’t want to live like this.”

“Valid,” Rafe says, nodding to him. “So, tell us what you want, Luca.”

“What I do not want,” Luca says, glaring at Rafe and then at me. “Is a polyamorous relationship. I do not want a girlfriend who has another boyfriend. I can’t...I can’t live like that.”

“Well, then that sounds like your boundary,” Rafe says quietly. “What about you, Jacks?”

Some of Jackson’s confidence has left him now that he’s not dealing with a confrontation with another Alpha and is instead doing what is probably his least favorite thing in the world: talking about his emotions. “Um,” he says, lifting a hand to rub anxiously at the back of his neck. “I don’t know. I mean...whatever...”

My eyebrows go up because...well, did Jackson just admit that he’s okay with me having two boyfriends?

“No, Jacks,” Jesse says, his mouth full of donut as he points an accusatory finger in Jackson’s direction. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?” Jackson growls, clearly displeased to be countered.

“You’re lying to be easy, to make Ariel happy,” Jesse says, perfectly casual like Rafe is. I blink, my eyebrows going up as I look at Jackson again, surprised to see him scowling and looking away. “I saw you last night – you were devastated at the idea of her being with someone else. Tell the truth, Jacks – that’s what we’re trying to do here. Get it all out on the table so we can figure out what to do.”

Ben sits down on the couch next to Rafe, watching everything unfold like a television drama. I sigh, scowling and crossing my arms, feeling oddly out of place and like a pawn. I mean, don’t I get a say in this?

Chapter 0251

Chapter 0251

But also...what is it that I want? Do I actually want like...two boyfriends? How would that even work? And what does that look like in twenty years – do we all just...live in a house together? Would we...have kids?

God, this is so weird.

Jackson blushes deeply now that he’s been put on the spot, his mouth twisting as he looks down at the floor.

“Well?” Rafe asks. “Speak now, Jacks, this is your chance to say what you really want. Are you cool with Ariel dating Luca too? Or...”

“Fine, whatever,” Jackson snaps, unhappy to be pressed into telling his truth and not looking at me. “I want what Luca wants, if you really want to know. I want my mate to myself, I don’t want to share her with anyone.” He raises his eyes to glare at Luca a little, like it’s all his fault.

“All right,” Rafe says, sounding satisfied. I turn to him in confusion now, my hands spreading at my sides because...I mean, we didn’t decide anything –

“It looks like you’re going to have to choose, Ari,” Rafe says, his face even and his voice controlled.

My mouth pops open in horror.

“Well, they don’t want to be in an open relationship,” he says, gesturing towards my mates with my coffee mug.

“But we said -!”

“I know,” Rafe says, nodding, reading my mind. “And I still stand by that. You have a right to explore both of your mating bonds, which the Goddess gave you – a gift from our grandmother.”

“Wait, what?” Jackson asks, stepping forward a little, confused.

“We’ll explain that later,” Jesse murmurs, waving a hand at Jackson, his eyes trained on Rafe.

“But,” Rafe says, holding up a finger, “I don’t think that it’s fair for you to have unlimited time to explore those bonds. I think that, in deference to what your mates have stated they want...that you should take the time you need to make your decision, but that in the end...” he holds my eyes now, knowing that it’s breaking my heart, “you should choose one of them, Ariel. It’s...it’s not fair not to, if that’s not what they want.”

My mouth pops open as I stare at my brother and then over at my two mates, my heart breaking at the idea of not having one of them.

Because –

I mean –

They’re – they’re mine –

They’re both mine!

“Rafe,” I say, my voice thick with my grief at the idea, “I can’t...”

“Well, we can’t,” Luca says, folding his arms and staring at me, hard. I feel all of his sadness, all of his grief as he does. “I mean, I don’t speak for Jackson, but I can’t live like this. Not forever. For a little bit...” he sighs, hanging his head, thinking about it. “Maybe. Maybe, Ariel. Because I think I’m better for you than he is, your true mate, but because you might need time to figure that out? I think...I think I could live with it. For a while.”

Shocked, my eyes move to Jackson next.

But he doesn’t say a word, just holding my eyes.

And as I stare at him, I realize what the emotions are coming down my bond with him – just...a desperate desire, an open yes, absolute horror at the idea that he could lose me and a determination to keep me on any terms.

As I realize that that's how my sweet mate is feeling – so desperate, so ready to say yes to whatever keeps me by his side no matter what the terms - I set my jaw and raise my chin, determined to do what's right.

Because it's not fair to Jacks. Even if he hasn't said it aloud, he wants me so badly that he's willing to take me however he can get me, even if that means sharing me with Luca, which is not what he wants to do. And Luca – he knows how to fight for himself, knows how to ask for what he wants, to insist upon it.

But Jackson...

And I can't...suddenly, I can't anymore. I can't insist on both of them letting me have them forever, even if it's what I want, because it's just not fair. If it's not what they want, not what they can give, then it's not fair.

"Fine," I say, my lip shaking and my eyes filling with tears as I raise my chin and move my eyes back to my brother. "Fine. I'll...I'll choose. If that's what's fair, then that's what I'll do."

Chapter 0252

Chapter 0252

My brother, seeing the very real grief on my face, stands and moves to my side, pulling into a hug. "You're getting the best end of this deal," he murmurs after a moment. Then Rafe loosens his arms and stands between me and my mates, not letting them see the sadness written in every line of me because he knows I need to stand strong in this decision – that I need to make it myself, without them.

"I know," I whisper, my heart breaking as my brother wipes the two tears that fall quickly off of my cheeks, not wanting them to see. "I get it...it's just...god, Rafe, I can't imagine..."

"I know," he murmurs, leaning forward and pressing a kiss to my forehead. "But neither can they. I think it's right, Ariel – or if not right, then the fairest. We can – we can talk to mom and Cora when we get home. Maybe talk to the Goddess? See...see if we can get a better perspective. But for right now, this makes peace."

I take a deep breath, looking up into my brother's face, and then I nod, working hard to steady myself. When he sees that I'm in control again, Rafe turns around, slipping a protective arm around my shoulders and looking between Luca and Jackson. "So, we're good with this? We're agreed?"

"Well, what's the timeline?" Luca asks, frowning, his hand sunk into his pockets.

“No set timeline,” Rafe replies, looking down at me with a nod. “When Ari knows...she’ll know.”

“So what, we could do this for years?” Luca gasps, appalled.

“It’s enough, Luc,” Jesse snaps from the couch, glaring at him a little. “You’ve already asked her to choose one mate today, and it’s already breaking her heart. Stop trying to pin it down more. She’s given enough.”

Luca huffs a sigh, hanging his head, but after a moment he nods, giving in. “Fine.”

“Jacks?” Rafe asks. My mate doesn’t reply to him, just holding me with his dark-blue gaze. Then, just once, he nods.

“Wow,” Ben murmurs, I think not even realizing that he said it aloud as he looks between all of us. And I have to admit, I share his sentiment. It’s just all...a lot.

And we all stand very, very still, I think none of us having any idea, at all, what to do next.

Suddenly, we all give a collective flinch as the sound of bells peels out from somewhere in the castle.

“Shit,” Rafe gasps, turning towards the sound. “Shit, shit.”

“What is that?” I ask, turning my head almost as if I could see them, though obviously I can’t. “Since when does the castle have bells!? Since when do they ring them!?”

“It’s tradition!” Jesse shouts, jumping up from the couch and hopping over the back of it, darting for his bed. “End of term! Shit, the train is going to be here in like ten minutes, and we haven’t even packed!”

I gasp, suddenly realizing the gravity of this – I haven’t packed at all, not a stitch – and I spin towards my nook. But as I rip the velvet curtain back, I turn with a frown, because there are footsteps –

“Where are you going?” I call, seeing both of my mates heading for the door.

“To get our stuff!” Luca calls over his shoulder, worried. “I’ll meet you at the train, Ariel! It’s fine!”

Jackson doesn’t say a word. I bite my lip, glancing between my possessions and the door, and then decide that I don’t have anything here that I can’t reproduce at home except my homework. I grab

my textbook, tossing it to Ben who – already packed – sits casually at the coffee table, sipping from his mug. “Pack that for me!” I shout, darting for the door.

When I get to our open doorway I look left and right, a little grateful when I see that Luca and Jackson have taken different sets of stairs down to the single dorm floors. I bite my lip, shooting a glance in Luca’s direction before darting after Jacks.

“Jackson!” I call, starting down the spiral staircase after him. I’m moving so fast that I almost have to skid to a stop when I realize he stopped in the middle of the stairs, where I couldn’t see him.

“Whoa!” he says, catching me with an arm around my waist before I slam into him or careen down the steps and break my neck.

But there’s no time to think about any of that.

“Jacks,” I say, taking his face in my hands, worried. “You’re still coming, right? To the Palace? For break?”

Chapter 0253

Chapter 0253

Jackson hesitates, glancing away from me and looking down the stairs.

“Jacks!” I gasp, pulling his face back to look at mine, aghast at the idea that he wouldn’t come. “You said you! You told my mom!”

“Ariel,” he sighs, shaking his head and wrapping the arm around my waist tighter, pulling me closer so that my feet are barely on the stairs anymore, my weight all on him. “It’s just...it’s been a lot, okay? And I’m no good with this...people stuff, and there are going to be a lot of people there for winter break.”

Understatement of the year, but I don’t say anything that will encourage him on this ridiculous idea not to come.

“Maybe it’s better for me to not go?” Jackson says, soft, hesitant. “To just take the next two weeks to get my head together, and stay here where it’s quiet, and then I’ll see you when you get back?”

“Jackson,” I cry, my heart breaking at the idea. God, not seeing him, for two weeks? After everything we’ve been through in the past few days?

He groans, clenching his teeth at the sound I make. “Don’t ask me, Ari,” he whispers, shaking his head, his eyes exhausted and sad. “Don’t ask me for more today, because if you ask, you know I’ll give it – I can’t say no –”

“Baby,” I murmur, taking a hand from his cheek and running it through his hair, not knowing where the pet name came from, not worrying about that now. But Jackson closes his eyes at the sound of it, hardly able to bear it. And even though he’d probably die rather than let anyone hear me call him that...

...I know that he likes it. He likes it a lot.

“It will be good, Jacks,” I whisper, a promise in every word. “I promise it will be good, we won’t push you too far – we’ll...we’ll make sure you’re happy. All of us.”

Jackson opens his eyes, staring up at me, and the bells start to peel again.

Worried, he glances down the stairs, and I know he has to get to his room to get his things.

“Just meet us at the train,” I whisper, again turning his face back to me again before pressing a kiss to his mouth – fast, too short, not at all what I really want to do. I pull back, staring into his eyes. “Just meet us at the train, all right? Jackson?”

“I’ll try,” he whispers, looking up into my face. And I nod, knowing that’s the best I’m going to get right now, and that he means it. He will try, but if it’s too much...

Well, my mate has a tendency to run, doesn’t he?

Jackson kisses me again, just as swift as the last, before carefully putting me on my feet and letting me go. “Get back to your brother,” he growls, narrowing his eyes a little. “Don’t go wandering around this castle by yourself –”

“Oh, they’re ten feet away,” I snap, rolling my eyes and turning to dart up the stairs. “The train, Jacks!” I call over my shoulder. “I’ll see you there!”

But as I hurry up the stairs, he doesn’t call anything after me, and my heart sinks. I hope to the ends of me that he comes, but part of me knows...well, I know that if he was going to come, he would have told me so. He would have promised.

“Ari!” Rafe shouts as I reach the top of the stairs, frowning furiously at me. “Come on!”

I dash to his side, trying to get back into the room, but Jesse and Ben are already at the door, backpacks over their arms.

“I tried,” Ben says, apologetic as he hands me a woefully under-packed bag. “I don’t know which of your things you wanted –”

“It’s fine,” I say, trying my best to give him a smile and slinging the pack over my shoulder.

“Let’s go,” Rafe says, pressing me on the shoulder and turning me back towards the stairs. “We are not missing this train. We are getting home, tonight. To see our parents and our insane passel of siblings.”

“And to drink our faces off.” Jesse murmurs, shooting me a wink as I laugh and the four of us hurry down the stairs. “And get back in touch with all of Ariel’s friends –“

I gasp at that, but Ben laughs and gives me another little shove, making me move forward.

Forward to the train, where I’m supposed to meet my mates – both of them.

And bring them home to meet my family.

Chapter 0254

Chapter 0254

We basically have to sprint across the field where the candidate barracks are to get down to the train tracks in time. The sleek train is waiting there, puffing steam, filling with cadets all eager to get home for winter break. As we run I mentally thank my mother again for her healing powers – who would have thought that two days ago I was basically dead over Jackson’s shoulder, and now here I am dashing across a field with my best friends, a mostly-empty bag bouncing on my back?

When we get down to the tracks I see that the platform itself is getting sparse, pretty much all the cadets already having boarded, and I dart immediately for a door to the train, wanting to get in and get a seat. But before I can even grab the little handle to lift myself into the closest train car, Jesse grabs my arm.

“Ari, what are you doing!?”

I spin, stumbling a little as I look up at him. “I’m getting on the damn train, Jesse!”

My cousin just grins down at me and gestures down the tracks. “Come on,” he says, laughing. “Our seats are back here.”

“What?” I let myself be lead down the line, frowning the whole way, but then my face shifts quickly into surprise and delight when I see the bright red caboose attached to the end of the train.

Because of course. Of course mom and dad sent the royal car for us to take back to the city.

“Oh my god,” I murmur, my hands going to my cheeks, my embarrassment competing with my pleasure and losing immediately. “That’s...that’s so nice of them.”

“Whoa,” Luca says at my side, and I jump a little when I realize that it’s him standing there. And then I burst into a grin as he slips an arm around my waist and pulls me tight for a second before turning his gaze back to the train itself. I watch his eyebrows raise as he takes in the beautiful coach with its

cheerful, shiny red sides, its gilt details. “We are traveling in style today.” His voice is a little breathless.

“Wait till you see inside,” Rafe laughs, glancing at Luca and Ben, who is also staring at the coach, dazzled. But before we can get any further a group of guards step onto the platform in front of us, a handcuffed cadet between them.

And all of us simultaneously go still because...

Well, because it’s Wright.

And god, but he looks like shit.

Wright’s face lifts at the sudden silence before him and he flinches immediately back when he sees Rafe, Jesse, Luca, and Ben at my side – all of my Alphas, who bare their teeth and take defensive stances, ready to spring at him if he even takes one wrong stumbling step in my direction.

But when his eyes fall on me, Wright can’t help the cruel snarl that twists his face. He doesn’t say a word, but the hate radiates off him, nearly palpable in the air. As he stares at me I know without a doubt that he doesn’t regret a damn thing. In fact, if he had the chance? He would absolutely try to murder me again, his reasons for committing the crime now only compounded in his mind.

Still, despite his venom and his determination, something about this – about Wright shackled and beaten while I stand, healthy and hale, with my best friends and my family all around?

I realize, now, my power. That even if Wright can kill me with his bare hands...

Well, I’ve got much more than bare hands to defend myself with, don’t I?

“Hey, Wright,” I say, far too cheerful as I put on my best Princess smile and step forward to greet him, my hands innocently tucked behind my back. I purse my lips a little in mock pity as I look him

over, taking in each and every one of his bruises. “Did you have...a rough couple days?”

The snarl that rips from Wright’s mouth is vicious and deadly, but one of his guards just cuffs him over the back of the head and he stumbles forward, moving along.

“Have a nice winter break!” I call over my shoulder as my enemy walks away, a little gleeful at my victory over this terrible man. Luca, pleased, laughs and puts an arm around my shoulders giving me a squeeze.

“He’s going to have an absolute shit winter break,” Rafe murmurs, slipping his hands into his pockets and watching Wright go as Jesse and Ben climb up the little set of gilt stairs and into our train car. “He’s being incarcerated over the holidays, so he’ll be in a cell while we’re all celebrating. But his trial will be held after the holidays pass, but before we return to school.”

“So, even though he was accused – and he totally tried to murder me - he was allowed to take the candidate finals?” I ask, looking up at my brother, curious.

Rafe slowly nods, meeting my eyes. “It’s all still allegations at this point, Ari. If he is declared innocent, he’ll return to school. They had to let him take the tests to see if he’d pass.”

Chapter 0255

Chapter 0255

A little worry curls in me at this and I open my mouth to ask more questions, but suddenly the train emits a loud whistle that makes me leap nearly out of my boots.

“Come on!” Jesse calls, sticking his head out from inside the coach. “There’s champagne in here! I am not waiting for you! If it’s all gone by the time you get in here then you only have yourselves to blame!”

I laugh, moving eagerly forward, Rafe and Luca following close behind. But just as I put my foot up on the prettily-wrought golden stair, I hear someone shyly clear their throat behind me. I gasp, recognizing the sound somehow, and spin, my eyes wide.

“Daphne!” I shout, thrilled to see her standing there, a tiny suitcase anxiously clutched in her hands, her auburn hair curling prettily over her shoulders.

“Um,” she says, biting her lip, looking at me with sad and sorry eyes, her whole body tight with unease. “Is it okay? I mean...does my invitation to the Capital for midwinter still stand?”

“Daph!” I shout with a laugh, dashing away from the train car towards my friend and almost knocking her over in my eagerness as I hug her tight to me. She gasps a little at the force of me and then laughs too, wrapping one arm around me, her suitcase pressed between us. “Of course it stands! I’m so happy to see you! I’m so happy you came!”

“I’m so sorry, Ari,” she whispers, and I can tell by the tightness in her words that she’s on the edge of tears. The train emits another sharp whistle and starts to rumble. “I didn’t want to do it, but they made me – they said I wouldn’t be allowed to keep my job if I didn’t –“

“This is all very nice!” Luca shouts, and I jump a bit, turning to see him leaning from the edge of the gilt stairs, already boarded, a hand out towards us. “And I hate to interrupt a sentimental moment, but you two need to get on now, because this train is leaving!”

Almost as if Luca’s words themselves made the train move, it gives a sudden jolt and starts forward. I gasp, shoving Daphne in front of me, and she stumbles towards Luca’s hand, grasping it. Luca pulls Daphne upwards with ease as I start to run alongside the train, but my powerful mate handles the situation like he’s done it all his life. After Luca safely hands Daphne off to a waiting Jesse, who, beaming, helps her into the car, he reaches out for me.

I grab Luca’s hand he Luca laughs as he pulls me upwards, settling me against his chest as the train pulls away from the platform and picks up speed. I turn towards the carriage, eager to get inside, but he holds me still for a moment, smiling down into my face.

“Almost too late, Princess,” he purrs, putting a hand on my cheek and running his thumb over my lower lip just briefly, just once.

“Never too late,” I say, lifting my chin and shaking back my head in a way that would send my hair cascading over my shoulders if it weren’t tucked up under my cap – a very girlish, very Princess sort of gesture. “I am royalty, after all. This train leaves when I say it does.”

“Yeah right,” he mutters, laughing at me. “We almost left you crying on the tracks, and then you’d have had to run home -.”

But when I start to sputter a protest, pounding him ineffectually on the chest with my fists, Luca just laughs harder, and so I do, and he lowers his face to mine and presses a kiss to my mouth like he can’t help it. And I know I should care, should worry about who might see us kissing out in the open like this – but as the train begins to speed through

the countryside, and the air whips around us, and my mate kisses me all alone – just the two of us – on the little platform on the caboose of the train taking us back to the Capital?

God, but I can't bring myself to care. Because it's just so perfect, and just so wonderful, to be here and wrapped in his arms.

But as we speed away, and I lose myself in Luca, my little wolf raises her snout in my soul and looses a tiny, mournful howl, sniffing the air.

Her little nose works hard, trying to find any trace of the scent of embers and pine, leather and whiskey and cold winter nights.

But sniff as she might, we both know it's not there.

And she lets out another tiny, mournful noise.

And then tucks her head down against her paws.

Chapter 0256

Chapter 0256

"Come on," Luca murmurs, smiling down at me, and when I open my eyes I can't help but smile back. "Let's get inside – they're probably eating Daphne alive in there."

"Oh, no they're not," I say, dismissive of the idea and unwilling to go inside just yet, relishing this moment alone with my mate. I leaning closer against him for a warm moment, enjoying the hard muscle of his chest against my cheek, knowing that Ben and Rafe and Jesse are being perfect gentlemen inside. Or, at least, Ben and Rafe are, which should be enough.

But Luca gives me a nudge, and when I look up at him, he wrinkles his nose at me. "Come on, gorgeous, let's get you some of that champagne."

"You trying to get me drunk, mate?" I murmur, smiling.

"Oh, absolutely," he growls, dipping his face closer to mine for a quick kiss. And I laugh, but look over my shoulder, newly eager to get inside and see what my parents have set up for us. "Come on," I say, grabbing Luca's hand and turning to tug him inside, wanting him to see it. Because the train car – it really is something special.

As we duck through the door and I place my backpack on the little luggage rack next to the door, I do my best to tuck my anxieties about the missing Jackson away, not

wanting Luca to feel any of it. Because I am excited to be here with him, and with the rest of my family and friends, and none of them deserve to have their excitement spoiled by me worrying about where my second mate is.

But I have to admit – it's very difficult. Because where is he? Did he seriously choose two weeks of solitude over winter break with me, just because he's overwhelmed?

I put a determined smile on my face, though, shoving these worries away as I wave Luca into the beautiful train car, enjoying the way that his mouth hangs open as he turns around, taking in the gorgeous woodwork, the red leather and velvet seating all around. But even as I smile at Luca, my

eyes catch on Rafe, who stands by the window with his arms crossed, watching me with a raised eyebrow.

Rafe and I don't have a mind-link, obviously, but I can read the question all over his face. He's intuiting that I have definitely noticed Jackson's absence, as he has, and he's asking me silently if I'm okay.

I give my brother a short nod and a shrug when Luca's back is turned because what am I supposed to do about it now? Go to pieces, and ruin everyone's good mood? Rafe holds my gaze for a long moment and then nods once, steady. And in that, I know that he's telling me that he hears me, and he understands, and that whatever he needs me to do – he'll do it.

And I beam at him, loving my brother anew for his secret, steady empathy, for his willingness to already be there.

Bolstered, I turn my attention back to the room, taking a further step in and deciding to dedicate myself to this moment, and to turn my mind to Jackson when I can. Because there's already enough here drawing on my attention.

"This is amazing..." Luca murmurs, his eyes wide as he finishes looking around at the long row of windows on both sides of the car that allow us to look out over the countryside, the rich warmth of the wood-paneled walls. A little overwhelmed, he sinks onto a plush velvet seat by the window, leaning his arm against the adjoining table and staring over at the bar at the far side of the room where – of course – Jesse is already pouring drinks, Daphne at his side being helpful and setting out the glasses.

Behind Jesse is a set of glass-lined refrigerators and cabinets that display an insane amount of delicious food – far too much for the six of us to eat and drink on the journey to the Capital. But mom's hand is all over it, and I can see that it's her gift to us, her hearty congratulations. She's

stocked all of our favorites, after all – all the sandwiches we like, all the treats, all the things we like to drink.

Only wine and beer, I note with a grin, because she wants us to show up to the capital sober enough to walk. But, she also wants us to have a good time.

“Do you like it?” I ask, stepping closer to Luca with a smile and running a hand through his hair, unable to keep from touching it.

“Um, obviously,” he says with a laugh, grinning up at me and slipping a hand around my hips. “Do you seriously travel like this all the time?”

“This,” I say on a sigh, trying to sound as snobby as possible and make him laugh. “Or the private jet, or the helicopter, if we’re only going short distances – but the bar cart on the helicopter is just terrible –”

Luca bursts into laughter, as I hoped he would, and pulls me into his lap, wanting me close. I press a kiss to his cheek, nudging him with my nose a little, so incredibly happy to be here. “Do you mind if I talk to Daphne?” I whisper, my eyes darting over to her behind the bar where Jesse is finishing up pouring out champagne. “I want to make sure that she knows that we’re okay –”

Chapter 0257

Chapter 0257

“Of course, Gorgeous,” Luca says, frowning at me a little, like he’s ashamed that I felt like I had to ask. He loosens his arm around me. “You don’t have to –”

“I know,” I say, interrupting and looking at him quite seriously. “But Luca, it’s not like we haven’t had our own challenges these past two days too –”

He smiles at me, at the understatement of it all, and I can’t help the matching smile that takes my lips.

“I just don’t want you to think you’re not important to me,” I murmur, pressing a warm hand to his cheek and sending a great deal of warmth down our bond. “Or that she’s more important, or –”

“I get it,” Luca says, nodding to me and pressing a kiss to my cheek. “We’re good, Ari – go check in with your friend! Friendships are important!”

A great deal of love swells in me at Luca’s support and I hug him tight for a moment, so grateful for him. Because there’s something in me that knows that he came off as the

selfish one in this whole thing – that he was the one to first say he wanted me to give up Jackson, that he wanted a timeline on me making my choice between them.

But really, overall, Luca has been so supportive of me at every turn. Hell, he was eager to have me even when he thought it meant changing his entire understanding of his sexuality. He just...loves me, and wants me to himself like everyone else with a mate does, and he isn't shy about voicing that. But when it comes to what I want, and what I need?

At every turn, Luca has been on my side, even if it takes him a moment to get there.

I'm just so, so lucky to have him in my life.

"Love you," Luca murmurs, holding me tight for a second before he lets me go. And I beam at him, pressing another kiss to his mouth before I stand up and move over to the bar. Ben – angel that he is – takes two glasses of champagne off the little tray next to Daphne and carries them over to Luca, wanting to keep him company.

"Hi," I say, almost skipping to Daphne's side, where she hands me a glass of champagne and gives me a shy smile.

"Hi," she replies, laughing a little.

"Be careful with that," Jesse calls to me with a studied frown, peering over Daphne's shoulder. "I poured this champagne, and checked to ensure the bottle was sealed before I opened it, but Daphne may have slipped something in that when my back was turned –"

Daphne groans, covering her face with her hand and shaking her head, even as she laughs a little at Jesse's teasing.

"You could wake up on the floor of this train twenty-four hours from now, or absolutely anywhere else, completely under Daphne's control –" Jesse continues in mock-seriousness, grinning at me now that Daphne can't see.

"Will I never live this down!?" Daphne calls, her face still buried in her hand.

"Oh, when you've given him ammunition like this?" Rafe asks, laughing and stepping close, taking his own champagne glass from Jesse. "Daphne, this is enough for years worth of teasing. He may spin this one out until the end of time."

Daphne sighs, dropping her hand to look up at the Prince and the Duke with a little good-humored exhaustion.

"Greatest midwinter gift I've ever been given," Jesse says, grinning at her and lifting his glass of champagne in her direction. "I'm eternally grateful, Daph."

“Yeah, yeah,” she murmurs, flapping a hand at him, “saves me from having to buy you a sweater, doesn’t it?” We all laugh as the train chugs along, our little car rocking softly from side to side as we go.

“To Daphne,” Rafe calls out, raising his champagne glass. We all do the same, everyone smiling – even Daphne, who blushes a warm and pleased red. “Who has knocked us all out with her poison, yes, but especially with her warm presence and rich company. We’re so pleased you’re here, Daph.”

And as I raise my glass to my friend, I don’t miss the way that Rafe smiles at her.

It’s a smile that I’m not sure I’ve seen before on Rafe, a very...rare sort of smile. That he perhaps saves for a very rare sort of girl.

Anxious, my eyes dart to Ben, who I see...

Well, I see that Ben doesn’t miss it either.

And that his own smile looks more forced than it usually does.

Chapter 0258

Chapter 0258

A cheer goes round the train car and we all lift our glasses higher, toasting our friend and making her feel at home, before we each take a sip. Daphne, a little embarrassed but clearly pleased, struggles to take a sip because she’s smiling so hard. A little rush of joy moves through me as the rich taste of the champagne moves across my tongue, the bubbles echoing the effervescent happiness of my soul in this moment.

“Well, thank you,” Daphne says, nodding her head around to all of us. “But the true celebration is your success at the Academy this first semester –“

We all cheer round at this too, laughing and shouting, I think needing this outlet after the stress of it all.

“To making it through!” Daphne says, raising her glass again, and we all toast to this as well, sipping more. When it’s all done, I frown at mine and Daphne’s half-filled glasses and move around her to grab the second bottle of champagne out of Jesse’s hands the moment he pops it open.

“Hey!” he shouts in protest, but I know that he doesn’t really care as I take the bottle by the neck and move back to Daphne’s side.

“Sorry, this is girl champagne,” I say, giving a little shrug and carefully looping my arm with Daphne’s, grinning at her and nodding towards the door to the bathroom at the far end of the room. I turn my smile on her alone now. “Want to take a second, just me and you?”

“Well, if there’s girl champagne involved,” she says, giving a happy little shrug. “Who am I to protest?”

“I know there’s some boy champagne back here,” Jesse murmurs jokingly, ducking beneath the bar and pretending to search.

“Boy champagne is just whiskey,” Rafe mutters, dry, as Daphne and I move along to the bathroom and I push open the door. “Is there any of that back there?”

“Yes!” Jesse shouts, victorious, popping back up with a tiny bottle that our dad either forgot to have removed or secretly hid there, knowing Rafe would want it. It’s his drink, after all. “Boy champagne, all around!”

And, as the boys start to pull out cut crystal glasses to drink their own toast, I shut the door behind Daphne and I and prepare myself for a much-needed bit of girl time.

When I turn around, prepping to pour both of us more champagne, I smile to see Daphne looking around a bit in awe.

“Um,” she murmurs, taking in the wide pink cushion that stretches along the length of the window, the crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling, the marble finishes to the sink and the tucked-away toilet area. “This was...not what I was expecting when I thought ‘train bathroom.’”

“I know,” I say, laughing and gesturing over to the window seat. “This was...all mom. But she knows that a bathroom is for more than bodily function.”

It’s true, though. As Daphne and I settle ourselves onto the pink cushion and I refill our flutes, I consider that while mom and dad designed this caboose together – as they do most things – she really took the reins in here. The main room of the train car has much more dad in it – dark colors, masculine lines, polished wood - all rich monied elegance. But here, with rose-gold details and lilies and soft bright lighting?

Yup. Dad probably didn’t even think about the bathroom, and mom snuck this in. Which is probably why it’s my favorite space.

“Ari,” Daphne sighs, and I open my mouth to stop her saying that she’s sorry – but she puts out a hand towards me. “Will you please let me get this apology out? It’s important to me.”

“But I’ve already forgiven you,” I say, smiling softly as I rest my head against the wall. “If there’s anything to forgive.”

“I know, and I’m grateful for that,” she says, nodding, “but...I mean, it’s unforgiveable, isn’t it? I feel like you may never trust me again. You should be able to trust me implicitly – know that I’d never, ever slip something into your drink or betray you in any way. Because, I mean, if I can be bought so easily...well, why would you trust me in the future?”

“What do you mean, bought?” I ask, frowning.

“They were having trouble figuring out how to knock you all out before the trial,” she says with a worried frown. “Most of the cadets were eating alone or in two’s, so they just slipped it into the food, but you guys, with your party.... They came to me last minute and told me the plan. I refused at first, but they said if I didn’t do it then they’d fire me.”

“Daph,” I say, shaking my head. “That was unfair of them, not you – you were just doing your job. And it was absolute crap for them to make you do something you were uncomfortable with and threaten your job if you didn’t.”

“I know,” she replies with a frown. “But still...I don’t want anything to be damaged between us.”

“And I promise you, it’s not!” I say, reaching out and putting a hand on her knee, willing her to believe me. I watch as her eyes flick to the door too. “And they’re not mad either. Honestly, Daphne, we’re good! If anything, I’m going to have a talk with my dad about how they threatened you at work. That’s not right.”

Chapter 0259

Chapter 0259

Daphne sighs and we talk through some further protests, but finally we get to the point where we both feel like we’re on even terms. The champagne helps, I think, unwinding our tongues and our inhibitions, and after long I think we’re feeling even again, renewed.

Which is how I know that it’s time to blow up our world again.

“What?” she asks, frowning at me, sensing that I’m prepping to tell her something as she holds out her glass for a refill. I oblige her, filling my own as well.

“I’ve been keeping secrets, Daph,” I say with a sigh. Her eyes go wide and I laugh little, shaking my head. “Nothing to do with you, but...”

And then, with another big sigh – honestly, I’m getting kind of tired of sighing – I spill. I tell her everything – about having two mates, and Luca and Jackson figuring it out last night, and how everything went to pieces, and how Jackson didn’t show up for the train today.

Daphne is an amazing listener, scooting immediately closer to me and wrapping an arm around my shoulders. She quietly listens to the whole story, nodding her understanding and hugging me tighter and tighter as I go. “Wow,” she murmurs when I’m all finished. “Ari – that’s...that’s insane.”

“I know,” I groan, shaking my head.

“I can’t believe Jackson didn’t come home for winter break,” she murmurs, looking over her shoulder out the back window of the caboose, almost as if she’ll see him running back up the tracks behind us or something. “What a jerk.”

I laugh a little, straightening up and shaking my head at her. “He’s not a jerk, Daphne, he doesn’t have it in him to be a jerk –“

“All men do,” she says with narrowed eyes, and I laugh, which just makes her laugh in turn.

“No, Jacks is...he’s just delicate in this way,” I say on a sigh. “I guess he just...needed a minute alone to figure out how he feels about all of this. But at least Luca’s here.”

“Yeah,” Daphne says, patting my shoulder warmly. “But I get it. You wanted both of them – you want both of them. It’s hard for everyone, I think.”

She takes a moment to consider me, tilting her head a little bit. “So,” she says quietly, “they want you to choose between them?”

Slowly I nod, sipping my champagne.

“And are you...leaning one way or another yet?” Her question is hesitant, careful.

My eyes go wide and my mouth pops open. “No!” I say, shaking my head vehemently.

“Really?” she says, leaning forward, pressing but doing so delicately. “Like, not even at all? Not even a little bit of you liking one more than the other, or seeing a...a better life

match? Or..." she wrinkles her nose a little bit here before lifting her champagne to her lips, "who might be...better in bed?"

I burst out laughing at this and cover my face for a second with my hands. "No, Daphne," I say with a sigh, dropping my hand and smiling at her. "I mean, honestly, they're both really different and bring different things to the table – but maybe it's because I'm mated to both of them? But I'm absolutely not leaning towards one or the other right now. They're both...mine."

I sigh, hoping it makes sense, even though I know it's probably impossible unless you're in my own heart.

"Well, then that just makes it all harder, doesn't it?" Daphne says, twisting her lips a little as she stares at me with empathy.

I nod, leaning my head against the wall, grateful that she understands.

Daphne's eyes move over me now, taking in how sad and exhausted I am by all of this. I mean – it's been a big couple of days. I think it makes sense that I'm tired and stressed by it all, even if we are celebrating today.

"You know what might make you feel better?" she says, soft and encouraging. I lift my head, curious. She grins, leaning closer. "Turning you back into a girl."

I sit up straight, laughing "What!?"

"Come on!" she says, her smile deepening. "Don't you want to go back to the Capital as a girl!? You can borrow some of my clothes, and I have make up –"

"Yes!" I shout, immediately enthused. "Oh my god, yes!"

That's enough for both of us. We jump off of the window seat and hurry for the door. The boys all turn to us in surprise as we burst through it, but we ignore them. Daphne heads immediately for her suitcase as I dash behind the bar, getting a bottle of wine instead of champagne so that we're thoroughly fortified for our mission.

"Important Princess business!" Daphne says loftily as she strides back towards the bathroom, her case swinging in her hand.

Chapter 0260

Chapter 0260

“Yes, pay no attention!” I call to all the boys, chin high, as I head back into the main room of our train car after Daphne. “However, the bathroom will be off limits for the next hour, so you can all just...deal with it!” I’m about to close the door behind me when I hear Luca’s next words.

“Do I even want to know?” Luca murmurs to the boys, a little shocked and fascinated as he watches us go.

I grin, pressing my eye to the crack in the door and watching this unfold.

“Nope, it’s girl stuff.” Rafe says, clapping a hand on his shoulder. “So, you definitely do not.”

“You poor thing,” Ben says, resting his hand supportively on Luca’s other shoulder. “I always forget you don’t have sisters, so you’re completely unaware of the rules and codes of girl time.”

“Welcome to this land of mysteries,” Jesse says gravely, raising a glass of whiskey towards Luca. Luca responds with a smirk, raising his own glass and clinking it against my cousin’s. “There’s a lot of glitter here.”

I laugh, rolling my eyes at all four of them, and press the door firmly shut. And with that Daphne and I lock ourselves away and get to work.

My brows arch when I see the incredible amount of clothes that Daphne has packed into such a small case.

“I know,” she says as we lean over cache together and she quickly sorts through it. “I’m a great packer. Plus, I really like these thin fabrics that really save space –“

Daphne quickly explains the logic behind her packing choices while pulling out a few options that she thinks will suit me. Daphne is taller and a little fuller-figured than me, and certainly more gifted in the chest, so she picks a few options that are not quite as fitted. I admire each of them in turn, but

a soft “oohh” slips from my lips when she pulls out a mod-style navy dress with white trim and gold details.

“Yeah!?” Daphne says, grinning at me. “You like this one?”

“Can I?” I squeak, taking it gently in my hands. Daphne laughs and pushes it towards me and I quickly change as Daphne pulls a pair of white booties out of the bottom of the case. As I pull the dress over my head, I bless our luck that our feet are miraculously the same size.

When I turn to look at myself in the large mirror above the sink, I give a little gasp. Because, I mean, it's just a chic little day dress – it's certainly not the most dramatic thing I've ever worn. But in the mirror I see a girl looking back at me –

And god, god I've missed being a girl.

"Yup, this is the one," Daphne says, coming to stand beside me and tugging at the dress in her seamstress way. "Let's just fix the hem a little –"

I laugh and wave a hand at her. "It doesn't need to be fixed, it's perfect –"

"It's an inch too long!" Daphne protests, horrified, even though the hem is already a little past mid-thigh. "And if this is my first time dressing a Princess, then it's going to be perfect!"

"You've been dressing a Princess for months," I remind her, dry. But Daphne just laughs and ignores me, getting her needle and thread and rapidly making the changes she wants to ensure that the fit is, as she said, perfect. That done, we move on to my hair and my makeup – just light touches, but things that make me feel more and more like my former self as the time passes.

But as my image in the mirror transforms, I have to admit – I'm not sure how I feel about it.

"What?" Daphne asks, leaning back a little as she takes in my frown, the little stick of eyeliner suddenly still in her hand. "You don't like this color?"

"No," I murmur, shifting my eyes to her from my reflection in the mirror. "It's just...I don't know if I want to be Princess Ariel again. She was kind of a pushover. Cadet Ari Clark is...tougher than she is."

"I hate to break it to you," Daphne says, leaning in with a false grimace. "But Ariel...they're the same person."

I burst into laughter, cheered, and she does too. "No, but seriously, Daphne! I'm afraid I'll fall into all my old ways – I used to be so pleasant and obliging. I was willing to do anything – get married, even! Just to make peace and help the country. I guess I'm afraid that now that if I'm stepping back into that role, I'll step back into those old habits."

"Yeah, but now you're also a kickass marksman who knows a lot about poisons," she says, shrugging and turning my face so she can finish the make up on my other eye. "So, if anyone tries to make you do anything you don't want to, you can just smile pleasantly and slip something terrible into their dinner."

“Good point,” I murmur, but my mind still turns on it, wondering what it’s going to be like to go back the life of a Princess. Being a cadet – being a boy – there were so many freedoms there, even if there were a great deal of secrets.

“Well, I’ve got your back,” Daphne says quietly before she blows on my closed eyelid to dry the liquid eyeliner. “And so does your cute little pack of Alphas out there –“