

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy

Read Chapter 0261 -280

Chapter 0261

Chapter 0261

I laugh, opening my eye. “Don’t let them hear you calling them cute.”

“Oh, Jesse would kill to hear me call him cute,” she says, her voice heavy with the understatement, which just makes me laugh harder.

“And what about you?” I ask. “What can I do to have your back?”

“You’re already doing it,” she says cheerfully. “I mean, you’re brining me to the palace for winter break, Ari! People would kill for that.”

“It’s just my house,” I say with a sigh, rolling my eyes, wanting to do more, but she laughs at that.

“Well, you’re wearing my clothes,” she says, gesturing towards the dress.

“That’s a favor you did me –“ I protest, confused. “My mom makes sure I have probably the biggest wardrobe in the country besides hers, and here I am, stealing your dress –“

“No, Ari,” she says, laughing, “you’re like...wearing my designs.”

“Oh,” I say, looking down at the dress anew, “oh, like, you made this!?”

“Of course I did!” she says, grinning at me.

“Daphne!” I gasp, amazed. “This is like, a beautiful dress! This is amazing!”

“And think about the gift you’ve given my mom, who will get to hear about you wearing it,” she says, laughing with me and turning me towards the mirror so I can take in the whole picture. Me, again a girl, again a Princess, standing with my friend in the dress she designed. I suddenly feel very warm, and very, very happy.

“More people than that will see it,” I murmur, tilting my head to rest on her shoulder. “After all, the palace steps are going to be flooded with paparazzi.”

“What?” she gasps.

“The crown Prince and the Duke returning from their first successful semester at the Academy with Luca Grant in tow? Not to mention the missing Princess, who has suddenly appeared in this carriage?” I burst out laughing at the shock on her face. “Yeah, Daphne – there’s going to be press.”

“Oh my god,” she says, giving me a little shove. “I have to get changed! I can’t show up like this!”

I grin, taking in her Seamstress uniform, the only thing I’ve ever seen her in except the pretty floral dress she wore to our party the night before the Examination. “I think you look great, Daph!”

“Out, out!” she shouts, flapping her hands at me. “I need quiet! I need to think about this! Tell the boys still no more bathroom, because I need to plan and plot what I’m going to wear!”

“Yes, ma’am!” I say, shaking my head and refilling her glass of wine, sensing that she’ll need it, before I head out the door into the carriage.

When I step out into the main room of the train car, I stop a little when everything goes silent. My eyes go wide as I instantly whip my head around, looking for threats, but then the silence is split by Jesse’s impressed whistle.

“Well look at you, cousin!” he shouts, laughing. “It’s a girl!”

I burst out laughing, blushing and giving a little curtsy as I realize their shock was just seeing me out of my Academy clothing for the first time in months. I smile at Luca especially, realizing that this is the first time he’s seeing me really in girl clothes outside of the dream state.

“Who are you,” he says, his voice mock threatening as he slowly gets to his feet and narrows his eyes. “And what have you done, with my mate, Ari Clark?”

“Aw, I threw him off the train,” I say, twisting my lips in mock apology as I gesture over my shoulder with my thumb. “Decided we don’t have use for him anymore – at least not for the next couple of weeks.”

“Awesome,” he murmurs, crossing the distance between us in two long steps and wrapping his arms around me, laughing. Behind us, Ben, Jesse and Rafe laugh and continue their conversation, giving us a second mostly alone.

“So what do you think?” I ask, wrinkling my nose as I look up at him. “Do you like me all girly?”

“I love you all girly,” he says, grinning down at me as he strokes a hand over my hair. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, I like you all tough in Cadet Black too –“

“Thank you!” I say, quite pleased.

“And I like you all stressed out in your pajamas, moaning in agony over a chemistry textbook –“

I squeak a little, liking this one less.

“And I like you when you’re asleep on the couch cushion, that cute little line of drool dripping out of your mouth –“

It’s a full on shout of dissent now, even as I laugh, smacking my hands against his chest. “Rude!” I snap, though I can’t help my smile.

“I like all iterations of Ariel,” he murmurs, pulling me tighter, and I drop my head back on my neck so that I can grin up at him, at his beautiful face, at the way his eyes crinkle at their corners when he

teases me like this. “But you look very beautiful today, and I’m excited to see this side of you along with the rest of them.”

“Good,” I murmur, standing on my toes and pressing a kiss to his mouth. “Because this train just started slowing down – and you’re about to walk into the Capital with the Princess on your arm. Are you ready for it?”

“Oh,” he murmurs, his voice a low, eager growl. “I’m ready for it, Ariel Sinclair. You just lead the way.”

Chapter 0262

Chapter 0262

A little bell dings in the train carriage, as it always does when we’re about ten minutes away from our destination. My head turns almost automatically towards Rafe and Jesse, who likewise turn towards me. We all nod, confirming that we all understand that we should prepare for our arrival to the capital, perhaps even come up with a plan or a story for how I got here, and why, and so on.

But even as I look towards my brother, Luca’s arms tighten around me, and I look back up at him. “Do you have a second?” he asks, looking down at me with so much true sincerity in his eyes that I’m a little taken aback.

“Sure,” I say, nodding to him, and then I glance back at Rafe and Jesse, silently letting them know I’m taking a minute, before I slip out of Luca’s arms and, taking his hand,

lead him over to a quiet corner of the carriage. There we sit on a tiny little loveseat, so close that I'm basically in his lap.

Luca takes a quiet moment to just look at me, lifting a hand to stroke his knuckles gently down the length of my cheek, his eyes searching mine.

"I wanted to say I was sorry," Luca finally says, quite softly, turning his hand to cup my cheek as he looks into my face.

"For what?" I breathe, raising my hand to cover his. "Luca, I haven't said it enough, but I'm the one who should be sorry – and I am sorry –"

"No," he interrupts, shaking his head. "You were – well, I mean, Ariel, I'm still not thrilled about how everything went down. But I understand it better now – and I get why you did what you did. But...I behaved poorly, didn't I?"

"Luca," I murmur, feeling terrible that he feels so bad – because honestly, I think that all of his reactions were really, really normal. Most Alphas, when they meet their mates, are very volatile and

protective – everything he did and said fits that concept – he was just trying to keep me close, to keep threats to our bond away.

"No," Luca insists, his mouth twisting with disappointment. "Jesse was right when he said I was bullying you, manipulating you. I didn't mean to, Ariel, I hope you can believe me with that –"

"I do," I breathe, nodding fervently and meaning it, passing all the trust I can along the bond to him.

"I just – I was so desperate not to lose you. And I was so scared that that's what was happening. I was grasping at straws, trying to control the situation, and in doing so I was really unfair. Please, please forgive me for it."

My heart breaks when his voice cracks on his final words, and I can't help crawling closer to him now, lifting myself fully into his lap, snuggling close to him as he wraps his arms around me. "It's passed, Luca," I whisper. "Don't think on it anymore – we were all in a terrible situation, we all behaved poorly. We're all forgiven and we can move on."

"Good," he says, burying his face against my neck and taking a deep breath of my scent. "And in the future, I'll...well, I want to say I'll be better, but I think the best I can do is promise to try. I just get very desperate, when...when he's around."

Nodding, understanding, I put my hands on his cheeks and lift his face to mine. "I get it," I whisper, nodding. "I'll try to. Try to be fair. Try to..."

But I have no words then, because even the idea of trying to pick between them, of having to say goodbye forever to one of them...

God, my heart threatens to shatter into a thousand pieces.

So, I don't think on it. And instead I just stare down into Luca's gorgeous face – even despite his black eye and busted lip - into his beautiful brown eyes, into the sweet, fierce spirit that I can see

beneath them. And as I marvel at him a little bit, I smile. And I start to see his eyes crinkle at the corners, and I know that he feels my joy in him and gives it right back.

"I really do think I'm right for you, Ari," Luca whispers, sincerity in every line of his face as he leans close to me.

I pull back a little, not really wanting to go there right now – especially not while half of me is still mourning that Jackson didn't get on the train – but Luca gently reaches out and takes my hand, squeezing it softly.

"No, please – I –" he sighs, and hangs his head a little, shaking it while he gathers his words. Then he raises his eyes again, "I'm not trying to pressure you or convince you of it in this moment. I'm just trying to tell you what I know to be true, all right? That we're a match, Ari – a really good one. I can handle your life, and your family, and your out-of-the-box career choices, because they all match with mine so well. And if you'll let me – just...will you please let me show you how good we can be?"

Chapter 0263

Chapter 0263

A smile slowly grows on my lips, because who on earth could resist such a sweet request? "Okay, Luca," I whisper in reply, nodding to him once, leaning forward again. "You show me, and I'll listen."

"Good," he murmurs, grinning at me. His hand twitches in mine, and a muscle in his jaw feathers, and I tilt my head, wondering what the hell he's resisting when suddenly he gives in and just grabs me to him, laughing and cuddling me close, whipping me around and making me shriek with laughter as he bends me back in his arms and brings his face close to mine.

"Gorgeous," Luca laughs, smirking and shaking his head down at me, "I'm going to have a lot of fun showing you just how good we can be together."

“Oh yeah?” I murmur, wrapping my hand slow around the back of his neck, loving the way the short hairs there brush against my fingers. “Just how much fun?”

“You want me to show you?” he murmurs, his voice lowering and his eyes going half-lidded as one of his hands dips lower on my body, traveling down my back and steadily towards my ass.

Breathless, I nod, tugging him closer, wanting his mouth on mine right now, completely ready to lose myself in my mate -

Lose myself, that is, until I hear my brother clear his throat.

I gasp a little, and drop my head back so that I’m looking at Rafe basically upside down.

“If you guys could be convinced to wrap up this scandalous display?” he says, arms crossed and eyebrow raised, “we could perhaps...talk as a group?” I blush scarlet as I realize that my dress is indeed riding up shockingly short.

Luca just laughs, grinning at Rafe and then at me as I scramble to sit and then stand, smoothing my skirt now and reminding myself that I’m no longer constantly in pants. God, it’s going to be harder

than I thought to remember how to be a girl.

But Luca gives me a second to straighten myself out, holding out a hand for me, and when I take it he helps me to my feet and we walk with Rafe over to our friends, who are all grinning expectantly and peering out the windows as the train moves through the capital towards the station right at the center. As we move slowly towards the main hub of the city, I can see people outside our car stopping to point at the conspicuous red caboose at the back of the train, gasping and wondering at which of the royals are riding today.

But surely, surely they know, right? Academy is out, after all, and everyone will be waiting for Rafe and Jesse to come home. The big surprise will be me, arriving with them. I turn towards my brother and my cousin, suddenly anxious, and Jesse steps towards us, his face serious.

Together, as Daphne comes out of the bathroom freshly changed and looking amazing in a sage- green wrap dress, Jesse, Rafe and I decide that the simplest thing will be to...not say anything. Like mom and dad so often do, we’re simply going to let the press conclude what they will about me arriving home with Rafe and Jesse, and if anyone pushes on the subject we can just drop some hints about what Aunt Cora said – that I spent my time peacefully in a convent close to the academy.

“Are there even any convents?” Daphne asks, arms crossed, frowning around at us as Ben and Luca bring backpacks over and the train slows further, clearly preparing to stop. “Close to the academy? Or like...any at all?”

I wrinkle my nose in similar confusion, because...I mean, is there? How plausible is our story? But there’s no time to think on it as Jesse interrupts my thoughts.

“It gives me great pleasure that you don’t know the answer to this question, Daphne,” he says, grinning at her and pressing a hand to his chest, giving a little bow. “As it would be a great blow to mankind if you ever decided to join a convent. Also, your dress is amazing and you look great.”

Daphne beams at Jesse while she laughs and thanks him, but I turn my head as I look between them and then glance at Rafe, who I’m shocked to see is...frowning a little bit. What – what’s going on here?

Chapter 0264

Chapter 0264

I glance at Luca, who likewise looks at me curiously, picking up on the same vibe.

Because – I mean – Jesse just said some really nice things to Daphne, but the way he delivered them...he wasn’t hitting on her at all. No flirting, no quiet looks of interest. Instead, he just laid out her compliments like he would to any friend who was feeling anxious about their debut in a new city.

Is Jesse – is he not interested in Daphne anymore, the girl to whom he’s professed his ever-lasting love? Was that all a joke?

Or, because we’re back at the Capital, has he just moved on to other girls, letting Daphne fall to the wayside?

And...

Well, why is Rafe frowning at Jesse for being so nice to Daphne?

He’s iealous, Luca says directly into my mind, and I look with surprise up into his eyes. Quietly, subtly, he nods to me. Rafe, he continues, he wishes he’d said that first.

How do you know that!? I ask, likewise silent.

I know he's jealous, Luca continues wordlessly, giving an accompanying shrug, because that's how I've felt and looked, when someone beat me to saying the things I wanted to say to the girl I liked.

But Jesse's not even hitting on her! I say, casting out a hand in protest. He's just being a good friend!

Doesn't matter, Luca continues, shaking his head and staring into my eyes. He got to -

"Are you guys doing it?" Ben asks from between and slightly behind me and Luca. My mate and I both jump, spinning to see him standing there, looking between us curiously. "Were you like... talking mind-to-mind?"

"Um," I say, glancing up at Luca, not sure if it's a secret or not.

"Kinda," Luca says, giving Ben a little shrug.

"Cool!" Ben says, bursting into a grin as the train comes to a full stop. "Wait, so, what does it sound like? Can you like, hear each other, or is it impressions of words -"

"As fascinating as this is," Rafe says, interrupting, his tone implying that it's the least interesting thing he's ever heard. "I think it's time that we prepare to disembark. And because half of us are new to this...I think that we should prep you for what's coming next."

Luca, Ben, and Daphne go a little pale as Jesse and I sigh. Because Rafe is right - things have changed now, and while we're used to our world it might take them a little time to adjust. I cast my eyes over Ben and Daphne especially, because at least Luca knows what it's like to be in the spotlight.

Rafe spends the next few minutes explaining that we will wait to get off of the train until all the other cadets disembark and a team of guards from the Palace can come and sweep both the train and the platform for any threats. Once that's done, we'll disembark and be surrounded by guards whose job it is to stop anyone who tries to annoy or harm us. There will be paparazzi waiting for us outside of the station, but in general, we'll basically have a bubble of protection around us as we head for the cars.

Jesse, a little bored by the briefing - because of course, we've done this since we were kids - wanders off to the bar and comes back with a few glasses of wine, pressing them into everyone's

hands. I take a cheerful little sip, attempting to give Rafe the attention he deserves but failing a tiny bit. After all, I know everything he's going to say.

When Jesse presses a glass of wine into Daphne's hand, she looks up at him, anxious. "Um," she whispers, tucking her hair behind her ear, "is this the best idea? More to drink?"

"Oh, yes," Jesse whispers back, nodding definitively, his face perfectly serious. "Actually, the best way through any and all royal functions is just to be completely drunk the entire time –"

"It's true," I whisper, stepping close to Daphne and giving her a wink. "Jesse's actually been drunk every waking moment since he was eight years old –"

Daphne bursts into laughter at this, looking up at Jesse, who laughs too and smiles down at her.

"Um, excuse me," Rafe says, frowning over at us, and we all snap our attention back to him. "Am I doing this briefing for myself?"

"I'm listening!" Ben says cheerfully, raising his own glass of wine and then draining it. "You're doing great, Rafe! Very interesting, very informative! Beautifully presented!"

I can't help it - I burst into laughter again. And then we all do. Rafe is the last to join us, but then he groans and gives in, snatching Jesse's glass of wine out of his hands and draining it as Ben did. "That's what I get, for trying to be the responsible one."

"Which is why," Jesse says, slinging an arm around Rafe's shoulders, "I've been trying to convince you to stop taking that role since we were, like, born. If you would just turn into a reckless disgrace like Ariel and me, we could take over the world -"

Chapter 0265

Chapter 0265

Rafe scowls at him, but suddenly the door opens, and a man in a royal uniform steps inside, giving a sharp bow. I burst into a smile as he straightens up, because of course I recognize Captain Conner, who heads up the Royal guard and who we've known since we were babies.

"Your Highness, your Grace," he begins, nodding to Jesse and Rafe, "honored guests," Captain Conner continues, nodding around to the rest of us, but then he stutters to a stop when his eyes fall on me. Conner freezes for a second and then bursts into a smile, bowing low again. "Your highness," he murmurs, and his face is the picture of happiness as he stands straight. "Forgive me, I wasn't expecting you."

“That’s okay!” I say, waving a cheerful hello. “It’s so good to see you!”

He smiles at me but then fights it, working hard to return to his professional demeanor. He takes a deep breath, nodding again, and gesturing towards the door. “If you’ll accompany me? The station has been cleared and the cars are waiting.”

Rafe nods our readiness and Conner steps outside. Then we all grab our backpacks, and Daphne her suitcase, and file cheerfully off the train.

“Wow,” Daphne says, looking around the giant train station with its soaring glass ceilings. Her smile reveals how impressed she is as she walks next to me, my hand in Luca’s. “This is...this is amazing...”

“First time in the capital, Daph?” Luca asks, friendly.

“Yeah,” she says, grinning. “I’m staying a few days – for your fight, of course –”

He beams at her for this.

“And then I’m going to go to my mom’s for the holidays themselves.” Daphne and Luca continue to chat with me in the middle, him asking her where home is, and Daphne letting him know that it’s a little bit north of the capital – just a small town where a fabric mill used to be in the days of industrialization. They chat about family history, but on Daphne’s mention of the north, my mind drifts – predictably – to someone else I know who is from a place much further north.

My heart sinks a little, even as I hold Luca’s hand, and I work very hard to ensure that my emotions don’t travel down my bond to him. Because I’m not sure he needs to know right now just how sad I am that Jackson didn’t meet us at the train, that he didn’t come to the Capital. Part of me wanted him to come so that he can meet my family, and so that they can meet him, but –

I mean, another part just wants him close. He’s my mate, after all. What am I going to do without him for two weeks? How am I supposed to bear it? I mean, I don’t even have any way of contacting him. It’s not like he has a phone at the Academy.

Or otherwise, if we’re being honest.

I sigh, and do my very best to cover my sadness, and I don’t think Luca notices as he continues to chat with Daphne. Her eyes, however, flick to me, her mouth pressing to a sad little line.

But I give her a wink, and force myself to lift my chin, determining to make the best of it.

I look forward, making myself think about how happy I will be when I see my mom, and dad, and my brother and sister – and Jesse’s huge, insane family. They, too, will be waiting for us at the palace when we arrive.

I feel more cheerful as we walk, as I glance around the familiar train station that I’ve been in a thousand times, my eyes sliding over the people who are bustling around, going about their daily business and trying to get home through the cold. And even if my eyes do settle on one particularly

tall figure leaning against a lamppost, his back to us and his shoulders turned in, I know it’s just my imagination – my hopes - getting the better of me.

I grit my teeth against my second sigh, forcing my eyes up to all of the pretty tilework that rings the borders of the station, making myself admire the artistry of our people but...

Well, my eyes drift back to the tall figure.

And as we get closer and closer...I narrow my eyes.

Because...

But no. There’s no way.

But then suddenly it’s there – the scent of pine, and embers, and the sense of warm cozy things on cold nights –

And before I can even stop myself, I’ve dropped Luca’s hand. Suddenly I’m sprinting – my mate’s name on my lips.

Jackson turns when he hears his name called, his face curious and serious. But the moment he sees that it’s me?

God, the smile that breaks out on his face - it’s the prettiest damn thing I’ve ever seen.

Captain Conner gasps as I burst past him, grabbing for me and shouting my name, but I’m beyond him now, laughing as I dash across the end of the platform and throw myself into Jackson’s open arms.

Chapter 0266

Chapter 0266

“You came!” I breathe, thrilled and relieved and nearly insane with happiness as Jackson laughs and lifts me up, holding me tight against his chest.

“I could get used to this greeting,” he murmurs, his arms wrapped so snug around me, his face so close to mine that our noses brush.

“You scared me!” I protest, half laughing and half shouting as I smack him on the chest with both hands, one after the other. “Why didn’t you come into our train car!? Why didn’t you tell me!? I was so sad! I thought you stayed behind!”

Jacks shrugs, smiling at me like he can’t keep the joy off his face, his blue eyes shining. “I figured my presence in your fancy royal car would cause more trouble than it was worth. You deserved a minute to be calm and happy, and I didn’t mind riding with the other cadets. I just slept the whole time anyway.”

“And you didn’t think,” I say, taking his perfect face between my palms and narrowing my eyes, scolding playfully, “that maybe I wanted you close by?”

“Well, you’ve got me close by now,” he murmurs, lifting his chin towards me in a bit of a challenge. “So, what are you going to do with me?” He tightens his arms, further proving his point as his voice drops an octave to a level that...does dangerous things to me. Emotionally. Physically.

My smile grows slowly, a little devious, but my response is clipped by the sound of Rafe clearing his throat again.

I turn my head and blink in surprise to see my family and friends standing around us now, and the guards grouped around them, all of them staring at us.

Except for Luca. A strong pang of guilt runs through me when I see him staring at the ground to his side, clenching his jaw.

“Ariel?” Rafe says, his arms crossed as he glares at me. “Would you like to...climb down? Before the paparazzi get some great footage of this?”

“Um,” I say awkwardly in response before turning to Jackson and giving him a little grimace. Unperturbed, he smiles at me and slowly lowers me to the ground, careful to ensure that my skirt doesn’t ride up.

“You know, you don’t have to pick her up every time you greet her,” Rafe says softly, frowning at Jackson.

Jackson just stares at Rafe like that is clearly not true.

Rafe just rolls his eyes, laughing a little as he moves on and I fix my dress into less rumpled lines. Captain Conner looks a little frantically between me and Jackson before

moving his eyes to Luca, with whom I was just holding hands. I sigh, realizing that...whatever secrecy I held on to at the Academy, isn't hasn't really disappeared here, has it?

Unless I want the entire nation to know about my complicated love triangle, I have got to learn to cool it.

"Captain Conner," I say, stepping forward towards him and doing my best to be the nation's Princess again. "This is Jackson McClintock. We got accidentally separated from him on the way home, but he'll be joining us at the Palace for break and should have all the rights and freedoms of an honored guest."

"As you will it, Highness," Conner says, giving me a sharp bow. He casts out a hand towards the three-story arch through which the city waits. "If we have our entire party now...?"

His implication is clear and, with another little glare at me, Rafe leads the way out. Luca follows close behind him, not looking at me, and Daphne sends me a little smile and a nod before she hurries her steps to walk with Luca, making a little small talk that I hope will comfort him.

Ben and Jesse fall in with Jackson and I as we bring up the rear, both of them greeting Jackson warmly and likewise telling him that they're thrilled he came along. Jackson's smile in response to their genuine excitement to see him fills my heart with joy, because I'm watching him realize that he truly has friends now.

Chapter 0267

Chapter 0267

It gets a little awkward in the close quarters of the limousine, but Jesse does a good job of breaking the awkwardness by pouring more champagne – god, mom really made sure we were stocked – and pointing out all of the landmarks that we pass on the way to the palace to Ben and Daphne, keeping us all laughing with his commentary.

Rafe, when we got in the car, sat me deliberately on his right with Daphne on my other side, very carefully ensuring that I wasn't sitting next to either of my mates, I think trying to be fair to both of them. But as we draw close to the palace, Rafe turns to Jackson on his left and raises an eyebrow. "You ready for this?" he murmurs, smirking a little.

"Absolutely not," Jackson returns, deadpan. But then he smiles at my brother, and moves his eyes to me, and his smile deepens. "But we'll get through it, right?"

“That’s the spirit,” Rafe says, laughing and clinking his glass against Jackson’s before taking a sip.

Jackson just glances down at his champagne with distaste.

“What,” I say, leaning further over Rafe with a grin, unable to help it. “You don’t like it?”

“What is it?” he asks, baffled, holding his glass up to stare at the pale bubbly liquid.

“It’s champagne!” I say, laughing.

Jackson just shifts his eyes to me like I’m crazy if I think he knows what that means, which makes me laugh more. Jesse, having caught the conversation, laughs as well in a good-hearted way. “What do you like, Jacks?” he asks, flipping open the little travel bar that dad keeps quite well stocked back here.

“I don’t know,” Jackson murmurs, peering over my head with surprise and a little delight at the secret compartment. “Something...brown.”

“Whiskey it is,” Jesse says, pouring him a draft and handing it down the line.

“If he’s not going to have his champagne,” Luca calls, and I turn my head to him with surprise to see him holding out his hand. “I’ll take it.”

Grinning, pleased to see him come back to himself a little more, I take Jackson’s glass and pass it down to Luca, who empties it into his own half-full flute. “No sense in wasting five-hundred-dollar champagne,” he murmurs, lifting his glass to me in a toast with a wink before taking a sip.

“That cost five hundred dollars?” Jackson gasps, almost dropping his glass of whiskey in his shock.

“Whoa, whoa,” Rafe says, putting a steadying hand under Jackson’s glass. “Listen, if you’re that shocked about the champagne, don’t even ask about the whiskey – just...be careful. And enjoy.”

Jackson stares at Rafe, and then at me, and then at all of us in appalled shock, which just makes us all laugh harder. But after a moment he smiles too, shaking his head and taking it in stride. I lift a hand to my cheek, which aches a bit from smiling so much, because this is...this is working, isn’t it?

At least right now it is.

On my other side, Daphne’s leg bounces anxiously.

“You okay?” I whisper, resting my hand on her knee.

“Oh, you know,” she says, her voice high and too breezy. “Just...about to meet the king and the queen. Just a normal day. No reason to be anxious.”

“They’re nice,” I whisper, grinning. And then I tap the bottom of her glass. “Bottom’s up. Liquid courage.”

“You want me to be drunk when I meet the royals!?” she says, aghast, but I catch the corner of her grin and realize that she’s kidding.

“Yes,” Jesse says, leaning towards her with delight, “you’ll fit in just fine if you’re utterly plastered.”

“You’re going to give her the impression that our family is all alcoholics,” I say, rolling my eyes at him as the limo pulls around the final corner to the palace and my home – my home! – comes into view. My face stretches with my smile, my cheeks aching more.

Chapter 0268

Chapter 0268

“Not alcoholics,” he says, with a frown, “just your run-of-the-mill magical lycanthropes who know how to party. Finish up everyone!” he calls, leading by example and draining his glass. “We’re here!”

I can’t help the little squeak of excitement that makes its way out of my mouth as I grab Daphne’s hand and pass glasses back along the line to Jesse, who neatly stacks them on top of the bar. And then, one by one, we climb out of the limousine and onto the steps of the palace.

As soon as Rafe opens the door to the car, the shouts of the paparazzi start and lightbulbs begin to flash.

Rafe goes first, followed by Jackson, and I eagerly follow after him, stepping close to my mate’s side and watching as his mouth slowly falls open while takes in the palace and all the people standing to our right, held off by red ropes, their cameras going mad. I glance once to the entrance and grin, a thrill of joy passing through me when I see my parents standing there, waiting to greet us. But I turn my eyes back to Jackson, wanting to make sure he’s okay.

“You...you live here?” Jackson breathes, not even blinking as he takes in the expanse of the Palace.

“What,” I say, frowning a little and looking where he’s looking. “is it like...big or something?”

Jackson turns his head to me, staring, shocked, and I burst out laughing, unable to help myself from pressing closer to his side just for a moment, even though I don't take his hand or wrap my arms around him, like I want to.

"I'm kidding!" I say, laughing up into his face. "Obviously, it's a ridiculous house. But yes, we live here – and inside we actually just have a really small suite of rooms to ourselves. It's – well," I shrug, "it's cozy, if you can believe it."

"If you're there, it's cozy," he murmurs passively before glancing back up at the palace before us, apparently completely unaware of how damn sweet what he just said was. I beam at him, thrilled, before I feel my other mate come to my side.

And then I turn my attention to Luca, tucking my hands behind my back as I look up into his face, beaming at him in turn. "You ready to meet my parents?"

"Well, your mom I've met," he murmurs consideringly as he looks up the steps towards my parents as Ben, Jesse, and Daphne climb out of the car. "Your dad...does he know who I am to you?"

"He's supposed to," I say, giving a little shrug. "Mom said she'd tell him, so that...well, so that we didn't have a scene like we did last night."

"Well then, Princess," Luca says, surprising me by taking my arm in his own and starting forward after Rafe, leading me up the stairs like he's my escort. Instantly I walk with him, not having enough time to take a moment to think about what it means – or what the press will make of it – if I walk up these stairs on Luca Grant's arm. Because it's already done, isn't it?

So instead of worrying about it I just smile at Luca and walk at his side. Because perhaps he's right – what, really, is wrong with walking into the Palace on the arm of my mate?

Luca and I smile at each other and then turn our faces forward, towards my parents as the seven of us troop up the steps to the palace where the King and the Queen of Moon Valley wait – the Queen with a wonderful smile, the King's expression grim as he moves his eyes slowly between my two mates.

Chapter 0269

Chapter 0269

As we walk up the steps, the paparazzi call out questions to us, asking where I've been and who the new members of our party are. I hear them also calling Luca's name, but Luca is very professional about the whole situation, keeping his eyes focused ahead on my parents, who are waiting patiently for us at the top of the stairs.

Again, I can't help the huge smile on my face. My mom beams at all of us, her hands pressed to her heart, but she laughs aloud when she sees me, so pleased and happy that I'm here, and that I'm safe, and that I've managed to drag my two Alpha mates into what is sure to be a great deal of drama for her to enjoy.

I shift my eyes to my dad after a moment, not letting it bother me that he's looking very stern. After all, he usually always looks stern. But as dad watches me, his eyes flicking for a moment to both Luca and Jackson to let me know precisely what is on his mind, I see the corner of his mouth twitch just subtly.

And I know, in that instant, that the sternness is all a front, and that he's not actually mad at me. That he's probably just as thrilled and excited to see his two eldest children as we are to see him.

Something about that little twitch at the corner of my dad's mouth breaks the final restraints I was keeping on myself and I burst into happy laughter, dropping my hand from Luca's elbow and dashing up the final three stairs into my father's arms. I hug my dad tight around his waist and his arms fold around me, holding me tight. I hear and feel the happy rumble in his chest as he pulls me closer to him.

Out of the corner of my eye I see Rafe embrace mom quickly and then turn, starting to introduce her to our guests, some of whom she's already met.

Dad, however, pulls my attention back to him.

"Hello, little trouble," he murmurs, and I pull back a little to smile up at him. He runs a fond hand down the length of my rose-gold hair. "Looks like you've been up to no good, haven't you?" he says, again looking up to peer over my head at the two young men standing behind me. I quickly glance over my shoulder to see Luca meeting my father's gaze, standing before him with Cadet sharpness – feet apart, his hands tucked behind his back, his face very serious. Behind him Jackson stands just as still.

I turn back to my father with a smile, pointing upwards towards the sky. "Actually, dad, this wasn't my fault. If you're mad about it you'll have to take it up with my grandmother, the moon."

Dad can't help it - he bursts into laughter as he shakes his head at me and unfolds his arms, stepping away and reaching out a hand towards Luca.

"Cadet Grant," my dad says very seriously as I stand at his side, grinning and watching this unfold. "Welcome to the palace. I was looking forward to meeting you before your

fight against the Atalaxians in two days – but now I am eager to get to know you for...other reasons.” Dad’s voice is low, rumbling, intimidating.

Luca, to his credit, stands up beneath it.

“Thank you, Sir,” he says, raising his chin and shaking dad’s hand seriously. “I’m looking forward to the opportunity to both defend the nation’s honor and speak with you about my intentions towards your daughter.” He shifts his eyes to me now, just briefly, a smile forming on his lips. “She means a great deal to me.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” my dad says, and when I glance up to him I’m surprised to see that he’s... impressed? “That’s one hell of a shiner you’ve got there, son,” dad continues, lifting his chin towards Luca’s eye. “You going to be fit to fight?”

“What, this?” Luca says with a frown, gesturing towards his own face. “This is nothing, sir. At least you now know that I can take a punch one day and show up to the Palace on my best girl’s arm the next.” He glances at me, fond, before turning his eyes back to dad. “Whatever the Atalaxian’s throw at me, I can take it.”

Dad bursts out laughing at this, apparently as charmed at the rest of the nation. And I don’t know how Luca knew to say it, but he picked precisely the right thing. My dad even gives him a little smile before shifting his eyes to Jackson.

“Cadet McClintock,” dad says with a nod, holding out his hand. “It’s nice to see you again.”

Luca graciously steps aside, making room for Jackson to step forward. Jackson does, meeting my father’s gaze and taking his hand, giving it a steady shake. “Sir,” he says, accompanying it with a serious nod. “Thank you for...welcoming me to your home.”

My dad nods and drops Jackson’s hand. Awkward silence reigns for a moment and I look between my dad and Jackson, realizing that my dad is studying him and – of all horrible things – waiting for him to continue.

Chapter 0270

Chapter 0270

Jackson just stands, staring, having no idea what to do or say. I panic a little, getting ready to step in and introduce some new topic of conversation, but luckily mom comes to the rescue.

“Jackson!” she says, stepping forward to wrap him in a warm hug, giving him a little kiss on the cheeks as she steps back and beams at him. “Welcome, darling boy, we’re so pleased that you’re here. Are you hungry? Cold? Come inside – we’ll fix you up.”

“But there’s nothing wrong with me,” Jackson murmurs, though he smiles at her in his confusion, unable to help it.

“Oh, sure there is,” she says, wrapping an arm around his waist, smiling up into his face. “And even if there’s not, you should make something up so I have something to fuss over.”

“She’s not kidding on that,” my dad says, his voice lighter than it was a moment ago, “if Ella doesn’t have someone to care for she gets bored – and then we’re really in trouble.”

“Quiet, you,” mom says, laughing a little and giving my dad a playful glare as she turns to the rest of us, keeping an arm around Jackson’s waist. “If you tease me too much I’ll just go and have another baby to shut you up.”

Dad just shakes his head, laughing, as mom reaches her spare hand for Luca. “Luca! Such a pleasure to see you again!”

Luca gives her his most charming smile – which, quite frankly, even stuns me a bit – as he takes my mom’s hand and bows over it a little. “Your highness,” he murmurs, grinning. “I’m hoping to make it a full five minutes before you kick me out of the room this time.”

My mom laughs as Luca stands straight, and I marvel again that he’s apparently said just the right thing – who else would have the guts to tease the Queen on their second meeting? “Well,” she

says, wrinkling her nose at him and glancing at me, “that depends on how many of my daughter’s secrets I’m trying to balance this time. But I’m sure we’ll have lots of time to chat, Luca, love. And this,” she murmurs, stepping forward and peering at his wounded face, taking his chin between her fingers, “don’t worry, Luca, we’ll get you fixed up and looking pretty again in no time.”

And then mom steps forward – somehow managing to keep hold of Jackson even as she leans forward to press a kiss to Luca’s cheek as well. Then she sweeps into the palace, calling everyone to come along with her, because there’s a party upstairs. I don’t miss – at all – that she keeps Jackson firmly at her side.

“Looks like your mom has a favorite,” Luca murmurs, walking slowly at my side as we follow the mom and Jacks into the main entrance, heading almost immediately up a set of stairs that will lead us to the family suite where I’m sure everyone is gathered with food and drinks and a great deal of anticipation.

“Oh, don’t, Luca,” I say with a sigh, pouting at him and glancing behind me to see where everyone else has ended up. Daphne, I’m pleased to see, is being led upstairs on Rafe’s arm, while my dad laughs with Jesse at the bottom of the stairs, apparently being introduced to Ben. “Mom just... knows where her attention is needed.”

“Well, if that leaves me alone with you,” Luca says, grinning at me and raising a hand to my cheek, “then who am I to complain?”

I grin at him, pleased, and take his arm when offers it, proud to be escorted by my gorgeous mate. “You ready for this?” I ask as we reach the second floor and approach the door of our tiny living room, which I know will be packed with people.

“Oh, for sure,” Luca says, nodding eagerly with a big smile. “I love a good party – and I’ve got sixteen cousins who all shout over each other – I was born for nights like this. Plus, a Royal party,

filled with the people who made Jesse?” He grins at me, a little wicked, “this is going to be one for the books.”

I laugh and turn to watch as my mom pulls the door open and steps inside. Jackson almost literally falls back at the shout of joy that comes through, everyone pleased and thrilled to greet us.

Mom laughs, pulling Jackson forward, and he looks back at me – a little panicked – as he slips through the door.

Before we come into sight of the room I grin, and stand on my toes, and accept the little kiss that Luca drops to my mouth just before we, too, step into the living room to a big cheer.

And my eyes fill with unexpected tears the moment they land on the first people I see in the room full of people – my Grandpa Henry, with my little sister Juniper and my baby brother Mark on either side of his chair.

Mark shouts and dashes for me while Juniper hangs back, giving me her trademark scowl.

Chapter 0271

Chapter 0271

“Ariel!” Mark shouts, bounding across the room like the big puppy that he is and grabbing me in a hug.

“Baby!” I shout, dropping Luca’s arm and laughing as I hug my brother back, my eyes pressing shut with the pleasure of it. Mark – he’s not even the baby of the family, he’s nearly two years older than Juniper, but he’ll always be my baby, and he lets me fuss and cluck over him like a mother hen.

“I’ve missed you,” my Markie murmurs, hugging me close and tucking his head down against my hair. “June’s been so mean to me and there’s no one to stop her –“

I laugh, pushing back a little so I can look up into my little brother’s sweet face. Mark favors Rafe and my dad, of course, but he’s more of a mix than Rafe and I are. While Rafe and I are our parents’ twins, Mark has some of mom’s softness in the curve of his cheeks, in the lighter highlights in his hair.

“Mark, you’re bigger than June,” I say, grinning up at him and shaking my head. God, when did baby get so tall? Has it always been like this, or did he grow in the couple of months I’ve been gone? He’s Rafe’s height now, or at least almost. “Just shove her over _”

But before I can finish giving Mark my very best sisterly advice, a screech sounds in the room and all of our heads whip to the left, where five kids charge for Jesse the second he steps through the door.

“No, no!” Jesse sounds, deliberately dramatic as they leap all over him. “Not the piranhas! They’ve got me! I’m being eaten alive! No, NO! They’re taking me down!” All of Jesse’s siblings grab onto him, shrieking and laughing, pulling him to the ground despite his mock protests, piling on top of him, shouting his name and how much they’ve missed him.

I grin, watching Jesse fake fight his siblings for a second, pleased to even see Caleb, who is thirteen now and pretends he’s too cool for fun and games, shrieking and getting in on the fun. After a second of pretending to fight them off Jesse starts to grab each of his siblings by turn, giving them each what they need to feel loved and seen – a big kiss, a hug, a ruffle of the hair, a brotherly punch on the arm.

“Whoa,” Luca says, his eyes wide as he takes in the chaos before him.

“Yes, they’ve missed their human jungle gym,” Grandpa Henry says, wheeling up next to me and smiling over at Jesse’s continuing scene, as I am. “It’s been murder on me and my chair – they’re always wanting rides up and down the hallways. Playing horsie and piggy-back-chauffer is usually Jesse’s job.”

I grin at my grandpa, whose eyes sparkle as he shifts his gaze up to me, and I bend down quickly to give him a kiss on the cheek, murmuring how good it is to see him. Grandpa laughs and tells me that he feels just the same as Mark comes to stand close to us, not wanting to miss a thing. Juniper steps close too, her scowl deepening for no reason.

Something about my sister's scowl kindles something in me, and I can't help it – I grin, and leap for her. “Junie Junie!” I sing, dancing around Grandpa Henry's chair and reaching for her, taking two handfuls of her long now-black hair in my hands and holding it up like pigtails as I bounce around her, singing the song she hates so much. “Our little goonie! She loves the moonie! It makes her swooonie!”

“Oh my godddd,” June groans, swatting at me with her hands and trying to back away, though I keep up with her, laughing and still playing with her hair. “Stop it, Ariel!”

“I can't!” I return, laughing my ass off and dropping her hair before snatching her into a big hug. She struggles against me, but Junie's even smaller than my mom and me, and I've spent a whole

semester training at Alpha Academy, so she's got no chance. “I just missed my little sissy so much!” I plant a series of big kisses on her head.

“You are literally so embarrassing,” Juniper groans as I continue to kiss her gratuitously, her face flushing as she slumps in embarrassment, flicking her eyes towards where Luca is watching with delight. “You seriously want your mate to see this side of you!? The abuse you rain on your sister!?”

“Aw, no! It's cute!” Luca says, grinning at us. “Sisterly love!”

Chapter 0272

Chapter 0272

“You,” June says, narrowing her eyes and pulling one arm free to point at Luca, “you just made an enemy, sir. Where's the other one? Maybe I'll like him better.”

I laugh at my little sister and loosen my arms a bit, a little tickled that she already knows about my mate situation so I don't have to awkwardly explain why I brought two boyfriends home. Mom must have told her, and whoever else she thought needed to know, to avoid some weird scene.

I step back a little from my sister, still holding her so she doesn't run away, and beam as I look her over. “I like your new hair!” I say, meaning it and nodding eagerly as I take in the hair that she's dyed pitch black, covering up the rose-gold that matches mine and our mom's. “You look so cool. You're all spooky now.”

“I'm not spooky,” she protests, scowling and raising an anxious hand to her head.

“You look like Rafe,” I say, grinning, meaning it. Juniper – lucky girl – got our dad’s beautiful green eyes, and with her hair all dark now? Her familial connection to Rafe, dad, and Mark is more prominent now than it’s ever been.

“Ariel,” Juniper says, appalled, her mouth dropping open. “That’s the cruelest thing you’ve ever said to me –“

“No one is paying attention to meeee,” Mark moans, dropping his head back on his neck dramatically and making me laugh. I immediately drop June and move to his side, wrapping my arms around his waist.

“You are nineteen, Mark,” Grandpa Henry says on a sigh. “You cannot whine like a pup anymore.”

“No, he’s not,” I murmur, “he’s just a little baby, he can cry all he wants.”

“Don’t encourage him, Ariel,” grandpa sighs, shaking his head at both of us, even if he can’t help smiling. “Or he’ll never grow up.”

I hug my brother close as Juniper and Luca step near, making a little family circle even as the rest of the people in the room – family and close family friends, dozens of them, honestly – surge forward and greet Rafe, and Jesse, and all of our guests. I steal a little glance to the side and am relieved to see that mom still has Jackson pinned to her hip as she beams at Ben, getting to know him. Jackson stands stoically next to her, in good hands.

Then, I remember my manners.

“Everyone,” I say, straightening a little and smiling around at my family. “This is Luca Grant,” I say, gesturing towards my mate with a warm smile. “Luca, this is my sister Juniper, my brother Mark, and my grandpa, Henry Sinclair.”

“His reputation precedes him,” my grandfather says, holding out a hand, which Luca shakes eagerly, murmuring his hello’s and letting his dimples shine. “Welcome to the family, son. I’m eager to see you box in two days’ time. I hope you show the Atalaxian champion what Moon Valley is made of.”

“I fully intend to, sir,” Luca says, perfectly earnest.

“I’m excited too,” Mark says, beaming at Luca, and as Luca stands straight and turns towards Mark I see that my little brother’s eyes are already filled with hero worship. “Dad finally talked mom into letting me go to the fight. I can’t wait.”

“You’ll have to come sit ringside,” Luca says, grinning at Mark and shaking his hand too. “Get the really good view, see all the blood –“

“This is somehow both gross and boring,” Juniper sighs, stepping closer to me as grandpa wheels his chair away, probably off to greet his eldest grandsons. “I don’t know how you managed that, but you did.” She crosses her arms, glaring between Luca, Mark, and me like we’ve done her a true disservice.

“I missed you, June Bug,” I sigh, slipping my arm around her shoulders and tugging her close. Juniper and I – we have a weird relationship, and we’re certainly not besties, but she does crack me up with her constant bad mood. And now that I have her back in person, I realize that I did miss her, in my own way.

“I guess I missed you too,” she says on a sigh as Luca and Mark continue talking about boxing, Luca explaining his strategy for the next two days of training before the fight. “Why did you go and get all badass and cool the moment you left?”

I scoff at my little sister and her words, which are – in classic Juniper style – as much insult as they are compliment.

Chapter 0273

Chapter 0273

My mouth pops open in mock indignation as my sister fights her urge to smirk. “I have always been badass and cool, Juniper!” I protest, laughing.

“Ariel, believe me,” Juniper sighs, rolling her eyes but letting her smile run free. “You have been the opposite of badass and cool. You were like, a pink bubblegum fairy glitter princess –“

“And I still am,” I return, laughing. “Except now I can shoot a tin can off of a tree stump from half a mile away.”

“Ugh,” she groans. “Nevermind. Still not cool. Plus, now you’ve brought your mates home,” she murmurs, looking at Luca and then around to where Jackson is standing with our mom, clearly intuiting that he’s the other one. “Like this family needed more Alpha men around, all gigantic and eating everything in sight –“

“Not my Alphas,” I counter, grinning at her, my arm still around her shoulders. “I got them trained up real good.”

“So that’s the other one?” she says, raising her chin towards Jackson, her voice dubious.

“Yup,” I say, unable to keep the pride from my voice. That’s my man over there, standing awkwardly at my mom’s side with her arm around his waist as she happily laughs with Aunt Cora and Uncle Roger, introducing them to Daphne and Ben.

Juniper is quiet for a moment, her eyes flicking between Jackson and my mom. As we stand observing them, Jackson’s eyes move over to us like he can hear us thinking about him.

“Are you sure he’s your second mate?” Juniper asks, her voice low with doubt as her eyes focus on mom’s arm around Jackson’s waist. “Because right now, it kind of looks like he’s mom’s.”

I go absolutely still with shock, staring at my sister, before I burst into laughter.

“June!” I gasp through my laughter, and then I look back at where mom is leaning into Jackson’s side – being so nice to him, wanting him to feel comfortable in this big room full of people – but... yeah. Maybe looking a little too close to my mate to the eye of one who doesn’t understand how empathetic mom is as well as how incredibly awkward Jacks feels. I can’t help but laugh harder now that I’ve seen it.

“I mean, she’s all over him!” Juniper says, laughing with me, throwing out a hand towards them. Jackson frowns a little, not knowing what’s going on and clearly wanting to know.

“You’re so gross,” I groan, shoving my little sister playfully away from me before grabbing her hand and tugging her towards Jackson and mom. “She’s just being nice to him.”

“A little too nice, if you ask me,” June murmurs, letting herself be dragged along, moodily pretending she isn’t having as much fun as she is. “Don’t let dad see this – he’ll get all jealous, and then we’ll have a body to clean up. Which will be interesting, but messy.” I grin, ignoring her words. Because as much as she likes to pretend she’s a black sheep, Juniper is very much a part of this family, and she likes joking and teasing as much as the rest of us.

“Ugh, my two little girls!” mom says, dropping her hand from Jackson’s waist so that she can reach for Juniper and me when we come near. “I love seeing you two get along! It’s so rare, to have you not tearing each other to pieces!”

“Yeah, well, you’ve got about five more minutes of us being nice,” Junie sighs, letting mom fold her into a hug on one side. “So, enjoy it.”

“Welcome home, infant danger,” my uncle Roger says as Ben and Daphne step away, heading to the little bar in the corner for drinks. Roger lets out a booming laugh at his own joke as he wraps me into a hug. I squeak a little, laughing and leaning into him.

“Hey, uncle Rog,” I say, beaming up into his face.

“You’re in trouble, young lady,” he says, his face falling into mock-serious lines. I cock my head, curious. “You cost me a great deal of money.”

I burst out laughing, remembering suddenly the bet that the Captain placed on me at the beginning of the semester to come out tops in marksmanship – a bet he placed against Uncle Roger’s bet on someone else.

“What?” Cora asks, stepping closer and glaring between us. “What’s he talking about?”

“That’s what he gets,” I say, stepping away from my uncle and giving my aunt a kiss before moving subtly to Jackson’s side, intuiting that he’ll be more comfortable if I’m there. “For betting on Cadets.”

“Roger!” Cora gasps, swatting Roger on the chest. “You bet against your niece!?”

“Well, I didn’t know it was my niece!” he says, grinning and throwing his hands out. “I put my money on the one with the widest wingspan - I wasn’t going to bet on the one they called the Shrimp!”

“How much did you lose?” Cora gasps, ignoring his excuses.

Chapter 0274

Chapter 0274

“Baby,” Roger murmurs, stepping close and tucking a strand of Cora’s hair behind her ear. “What even is money, in the end, when we have such love between us, such beautiful children –“

“No, Roger Sinclair,” Cora snaps, stepping back and pointing a finger up into his face. “You are not getting out of it by seducing me – not this time -“

“Is it always like this?” Jackson murmurs, and I turn my head to grin up at him as Roger and Cora begin to bicker. He looks around the room, I think a little concerned about the number of people all talking at once, the pack of children screeching happily as they dash around the room, mostly following Jesse like the pied piper. My smile deepens, because even though Jackson is clearly one of the most powerful wolves in the nation at this moment, it’s so cute to see him freaked out by a welcome-home party.

“Yes,” June says on a deep and tragic sigh, drawing our attention to her. “It’s always like this. It’s horrible all the time.”

“Oh, my little drama queen,” my mom croons, stroking June’s face in a loving way that she knows is only going to bug Junie further, and which Juniper completely ignores.

But Jackson just nods slowly at June, like he completely understands. My sister holds his gaze for a moment, a little smile creeping onto her lips.

Juniper flicks her eyes to me. “I like this one,” she says, grinning a little, which makes me smile too. “He’s quiet. He gets me. You should keep this one, throw the loud one in the trash.”

She lifts her chin to where Luca is already surrounded by a group of our Alpha family and cousins, talking animatedly and showing off his boxing stance, clearly enjoying the attention.

Jackson just grins at Juniper as he wraps an arm around me and pulls me close to his side. I grin, deciding not to counter, pleased for Jackson and Juniper to each have found an ally in this family. They’ll need them, after all.

“Come come,” my mom chirps, happy and finally in her element now with her all of her children and her family gathered warm around her. She steps towards the bar in the corner, waving us to follow. “It’s a party, after all – let’s have some drinks and get things started.”

The little party goes on for hours, with a great deal of laughter, and drinking, and everyone saying hello. I let Rafe and Jesse take center stage, telling stories about the academy as Jesse’s three youngest siblings run around the room with some of the children of our other guests, chasing and playing with each other, their little shouts filling the air around the sound of our laughter and our stories.

As Rafe and Jesse talk I sit on my favorite ottoman at my dad’s feet, where I always sat as a little girl, a glass of wine in my hands. Daphne has settled on a pillow at my side. Dad puts out a hand, passively stroking my hair as the chatter carries through the room, everyone asking for more and more details about the story.

Mom settles into the corner of the couch, beaming as she watches Rafe – her favorite – tell the story of Academy life. There are significant gaps, of course, because while I’m sure my whole family knows where I’ve been for the past few months, we’re not telling all our friends yet. So, Rafe and Jesse riff a little, leaving out what they need to.

Luca, already comfortable, sits with Rafe and Jesse, adding in his own details and making everyone laugh with his wry quips. I watch him, impressed with the way he handles himself, the way that he adds to the story but still lets Rafe and Jesse take center stage.

But even as Rafe and Jesse talk, and Luca ingratiates himself with everyone else in the room, my eyes move inevitably to Jackson. He perches slightly on the back of the couch behind mom, a glass

of whiskey in his hands, and he smiles and laughs with the rest of us as the story goes on. But when my eyes fix on him he immediately looks to me and passes a pulse of happiness down our bond, letting me know that he gets it – that he’s warm, and happy, and he understands now why I love my family so much, why it’s so important to me.

And I beam at him, truly glad – because it’s his family now too. And I want him to know that, and to feel it, and to love it as much as I do.

He simply nods, telling me that he’s on his way to it – even if he needs a little time to adjust. And then he takes a sip of his drink, and turns his attention back to the story, which is as much his story as the rest of ours.

Chapter 0275

Chapter 0275

As time passes our friends start to filter out until it’s finally just the core family here – my family, Jesse’s family, and the new addition of my mates and Ben and Daphne. Our parents dig into the more complicated questions now, asking us about the details of getting me into the Academy and keeping me alive there, and we all happily fill them in on the delicious details.

As we do, mom pulls Luca aside for a moment, fussing over him and patching up his black eye and his busted lip. When he comes back I can tell by his smile that Luca’s likewise under mom’s spell now, and that he no longer has any ridiculous ideas about mom having a favorite between my two mates.

Mom curls up at dad’s side on the couch, where he moved after his last refill, probably so that she would come and sit with him. They’re ridiculously attached to each other, even after all these years. And even if I know that I should be grossed out by how affectionate my parents are...well, honestly I just think it’s kind of sweet.

The youngest Sinclair kids, of course, ignore everything, but I watch with real pleasure as they continue to dash around the room even as the hour grows late. Jackson watches them with fascinated curiosity, clearly wondering where the hell they get the energy. But eventually they settle down too.

It's only when the clock strikes midnight, and I'm sitting in dad's armchair with two of Jesse's siblings passed out in my lap – Bella sleeping blissfully, her head pillowed against my shoulder, and little Chase actually in puppy form stretched out over my leg, his head hanging off my knee – when Cora gasps and starts.

“Oh my god,” she says, looking up at the clock. “Is it seriously that late?”

“No, you're imagining it,” Roger murmurs into his glass of whiskey, clearly enjoying himself too much to want to go. “Have another drink, love, it's barely five o'clock –”

“Nooooo,” she says, instantly getting up from her spot curled in Roger's lap and tugging him up with her. “We are getting these children home, because if we don't they'll never get up tomorrow –”

“Just stay here!” my mom says, as she always does, sitting up from her place curled at Dad's side. But Cora just rolls her eyes, because she never takes mom up on her offers to stay in the palace, preferring to be in her own home. “Or, at least leave the children!”

“No, stop trying to steal my kids, Ella,” Cora sighs, clapping her hands and rousing Bella and Chase from their spots on my lap. Her other four – Jesse included – moan, knowing what that sound means. Chase shifts back into his little boy body so that he, too, can join in on the group moan.

“Your mom's right!” Roger says, hauling himself to his feet and giving a sharp whistle. “Line up, minions! Time for role call!”

“What...” Jackson murmurs, glancing between me and Rafe, “what's happening?”

“They have too many kids,” Rafe sighs, not bothering to whisper. “So, in order not to lose them, Roger makes them line up in size order and march in a line, like ducklings.”

“Plus, they hate it,” Roger says, grinning over at Jackson, Luca, and Rafe. “And I take great joy in embarrassing my children. Why else have them? We had five more because torturing Jesse was so much fun.”

Each of Cora and Roger's youngest five kids moan and drag their feet, but line up they do, and I laugh to see them all standing there slump-shouldered, clearly tired but not wanting to go. It's been an amazing night, after all.

“It used to be worse,” Jesse murmurs, catching Luca's eye and communicating with his expression the true horror of his childhood. “They used to make us do a little goodnight song and dance, before I realized it was child abuse and started refusing to do it.”

Luca bursts into laughter and so do I, remembering how cute it used to be. God, I'd been so jealous and had begged them to let me in on it, but Roger insisted it was a sibling-only thing. I'd cried for weeks.

“Please,” Luca begs, grinning at Jesse. “Please do the song for me, just once – I’ll never tell a soul.”

Jesse’s about to counter, to refuse to the ends of him, but Uncle Roger interrupts.

“A-hem,” Roger says with deliberate emphasis, turning towards Jesse and gesturing towards the empty spot at the front of the line. “And where is my eldest, my pride, my heir and my joy?”

Jesse squeaks and sits up straight, pressing a hand to his chest. “Dad, I am a grown up now. You cannot expect me to line up with the ducklings, I –“

Chapter 0276

Chapter 0276

“You’re coming home, son,” Cora says, crossing her arms and glaring at her eldest child. “Because if I let you stay here, you’ll drink yourself silly with your cousins and then be useless to me in the morning.”

“Mom!” Jesse begs, sending an anxious glance towards Daphne, who pretends not to notice the whole conversation.

“Jesse,” Roger says, his hands on his hips, his voice low and dangerous. “Get in line. Your mom wants you home, so you’re coming home. If it were up to me I’d leave you here, because you always rile the small ones into rebellion, telling them all sorts of nonsense about free will -”

“They deserve to know the truth!” Jesse protests.

“But your mother wants you home. So?” Roger points emphatically to the front of the line.

Daphne, to her credit, does her very best to suppress her smile and pretend that she’s incredibly interested in the trim that adorns the bottom of dad’s armchair. Ben has no such grace and watches eagerly, laughing. But Jesse, realizing that he’s lost this battle, just groans and pushes himself to his feet, slumping to the front of the line.

“Good boy,” Roger murmurs, patting Jesse on the head. Jesse just scowls and smacks his dad’s hand away.

Then Roger whistles again and each of my six cousins straightens their shoulders, standing at attention, and then – at their father’s signal – begin to march out of the room.

“Bye!” Cora calls over her shoulder towards us, completely ignoring the military precision with which her kids are swept out into the hall. “Love you, see you tomorrow or the next day or whenever!”

“Bye!” we all call, and it’s only when I look over at Luca and Jackson’s shocked faces that I realize how weird it is. I burst out laughing myself, because I mean – I’m just so used to the way that Cora and Roger handle their wild pack of kids that I don’t even notice it anymore.

“You guys are such a weird family,” Ben sighs, pulling himself up into Roger and Cora’s abandoned chair. “I love it.” Daphne grins, nodding along with him.

“Who needs a refill?” Rafe asks, smiling happily and getting to his feet. “Daphne?” He raises an eyebrow at her empty glass of wine.

“Nope, nope!” Mom says, getting to her feet herself. “You’re all off to bed!”

“What!?” Rafe gasps. “Mom, it’s our first night home, we’re not going to bed –“

“Oh yes you are!” she says, giving him a super sweet grin.

“Why!?” Rafe protests, throwing out his hand.

“Because I am sleepy,” mom says, pressing a demure hand to her chest and making dad laugh. “And if I don’t stay up to supervise you, Cora is right – you’ll drink yourselves silly and be all useless tomorrow. And we have things to do!” She reaches up a hand, ruffling Rafe’s hair. “Haircuts, first of all.”

“Mommm,” Rafe groans, slumping his shoulders and looking around with embarrassment. “You can’t just make everyone go to bed because you’re tired.”

“Nah, I should go anyway,” Luca says with a sigh, getting to his feet. I sit up straight in surprise.

“What?” I say, staring at him. “You’re not staying here with us?”

“Nah,” he says, giving me a pretty smile and a shrug. “I have my own family here in the city, after all. And I have to get to the gym tomorrow, let my uncle yell at me and beat me into shape before the fight. And her Highness is right,” he says, nodding in deference to my mom, who smiles at him, “if I stay here, I’ll have way too much fun. I have to concentrate.”

Guilt sinks in me as I watch Luca thank my mother for her hospitality and shake my father’s hand, realizing that unlike Jackson and Ben and Daphne, Luca does have family here – and I’ve kept him from them on his first night back from the academy. God, how selfish am I?

“Luca,” I say, getting to my feet as he turns away from my parents. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t even think -”

“No worries, Ariel,” he replies, shaking his head at me with a smile as I move to his side. He wraps an arm around my waist as he nods to the door. “Walk me out?”

I nod, eager, wanting to finish my apology even if he says it’s all right. We walk together out into the hall and I pull the door to our cozy living room shut behind us, standing with him in the darkness of the corridor. There are guards, of course, at either end – but otherwise we’re alone.

Luca’s face breaks into a devilish smile.

Chapter 0277

Chapter 0277

“Luca, I’m so sorry for not even thinking about your family and making you come to see mine,” I murmur, taking little handfuls of his shirt in my fists as I lean my weight against him, looking up into his face. Luca smiles at me, his arms loose around me.

“Don’t be sorry,” he murmurs, “I wanted to meet your whole family. It was important for me too.”

“Good,” I say, nodding. And then I hesitate. “And are you...ready? For the fight?”

“I will be,” he says, nodding. “Though it’s important for me to see my uncle – he trained me, after all. He’ll get me back in the right headspace over the next day or so – don’t worry. But will you come tomorrow? Come see my gym, and then come to my gran’s house? Meet everyone? I’m dying to introduce you.”

“Oh!” I say, surprised but then thrilled at the idea. “Yes!” I say instantly, beaming at him, but then I remember that I’m a princess again and I glance back at the door, wondering what my parents have planned for me.

“It’s okay,” Luca says, lifting a hand to my cheek and turning my gaze back to him. “I already cleared it with your dad – he says you can have the afternoon off from Princessing.”

“Oh,” I say, a little surprised at this. But then, I suppose there’s nothing wrong with that – Luca’s very thoughtful, isn’t he? And proactive. “Okay, then yes, I’ll come. Of course I will. I can’t wait.”

“And you’ll come to the fight too, right?” he says, giving me a little frown.

“Of course!” I say, laughing up at him, because why would he ever think that I wouldn’t?

“Good,” he murmurs, dipping his head and pressing a warm kiss to my mouth. “I’ll need my best girl there for moral support.”

“Nowhere else I’d be,” I murmur back, my lips still brushing against his, letting my hands sink into his hair, pleased at the idea that my presence would help him.

Luca smiles at me again, and then kisses me deeply, pulling me tight against him like he can’t let me go. We stay like that for a long while – long enough that I lose myself in him, that I forget where I am, and that there’s a room full of people behind me probably waiting for me to come back inside so they can go to bed.

But eventually, his arms loosen. “You make it very hard to say goodbye, Gorgeous,” Luca sighs, shaking his head at me.

I just laugh, standing on my toes to press one final kiss to his mouth, and then I push him away. “Get out of here, then!” I say, playful. “You’re the one sticking around.”

Luca just laughs, pulling me close for one last peck before letting me go and stepping away.

“I’ll see you tomorrow!” I call as Luca walks backwards down the hall, unable or unwilling to take his eyes off me.

“I can’t wait,” he replies, dimples flashing. And then he turns, and jogs off towards the front of the palace, and I sigh as I push open the door behind me and head back into the living room.

My eyes of course fix immediately on Jackson, who doesn’t look sleepy at all.

“In in,” mom says, opening my bedroom door and flapping her hand towards me and Daphne, herding us into my bedroom. “Daphne, we’ll have another room made up for you tomorrow, we just didn’t know how many were coming tonight – and I thought you might want to be in with Ariel anyway, on your first night in a strange place.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Sinclair, this is perfect,” Daphne says, turning once she’s walked into the room to smile gratefully at my mother. “It will be nice to have some girl time, one-on-one.”

“Oh, don’t be too grateful, Daphne,” I say, turning to glare playfully at my mom as I follow my friend into the room. “Half the reason she’s putting you in here is so that my mates don’t sneak into my room in the middle of the night.”

“My little girl is so clever,” my mom says, wrapping an arm around me and giving me a big kiss on the cheek as Daphne and I laugh. “You two go straight to bed! And call me Ella, Daphne, please!” Mom smiles and waves as she pulls the door shut behind her. “I love you! See you for breakfast!”

“Your mom is so nice,” Daphne says, flumping down onto the twin bed that’s made up for her next to my own big fluffy Princess bed. “I thought the queen would be...I don’t know, stuffier? More rigid and judgmental?”

I grin at Daphne, moving over to my dresser and pulling out a set of pajamas to change into. “Mom doesn’t have a stuffy or judgmental bone in her body,” I say with a smile. “She’s the best. Do you need some pajamas? I have like...a million sets. Mom’s a shopping addict – she just buys everything she thinks is cute and it appears in my wardrobe like magic. Dad told her to stop but... she just laughed at him.”

Chapter 0278

Chapter 0278

“Nah,” Daphne says with a big yawn, reaching for her suitcase and lifting it up onto the bed to flick it open. “I brought my own.”

We get ready for bed pretty quickly, with Daphne’s face cracking with yawn after yawn. We chat a little bit, winding down from our day as we brush our teeth, get changed, and climb into bed. I’m even a little jealous when I flick off the light, because Daphne’s eyes are already fluttering shut. I’m pleased because I think that this means that she enjoyed herself, but also...damn, I wish I was sleepier.

My mind is still buzzing with everything that happened today. Not only did my mates bizarrely come to an agreement to tolerate each other this morning, but then I had an identity swap and became a girl again, and left the Academy behind, and got to see my huge insane family that I love so much. I sigh, content but eager for tomorrow. It will be so exciting to meet Luca’s family and see where he came from, but I also want to spend some time with Jackson, make sure that he’s fitting in here okay.

Having two mates – it’s a great deal of work, isn’t it?

As I lean back against my pillows and close my eyes, I sigh, ready to settle in for the night. But even as I begin to do that, I feel a little nudge in my soul.

My eyes fly open because...well, what the hell was that?

My wolf, eager, jumps to her feet. It was Jacks! She says, her tongue lolling a little as she spins in a circle, looking for the source of the little bump. I go still, trying to figure it out, when it comes again. My wolf gives an eager yip, excited.

He...hello? I say in my mind, passing the words down the bond. Jackson and I haven't figured out the mechanics of speaking mind-to-mind to each other the way that Luca and I have, but we've had

much less time to practice, haven't we?

There's a pause, and then another nudge comes, accompanied – of all things – by the mental image of the outside of my own bedroom door.

I send a request for patience down the line, wordless and emotional, as I grin, getting excited. I look over at Daphne, but she's curled up neatly in her little bed, breathing peacefully, so I decide to risk it. I do my best to be sneaky and silent as I scootch to the end of my bed, and swing my legs out, and then patter over to my bedroom door.

When I pull it delicately open, my face bursts into a grin when I see my mate standing there, leaning against my doorframe and looking impossibly sexy for someone who is just...leaning against some wood.

"What are you doing here!?" I hiss, stepping out of my room and pulling the door shut softly shut behind me, a move that conveniently brings me so close to him that I can feel his body heat even though we're not touching. My eyes flutter half shut as I'm overwhelmed by his rich, heavy scent.

"Are you tired?" Jacks murmurs, looking down at me and running a hand over my hair, tucking it back behind my ears. "Were you sleeping?"

Grinning, I shake my head no.

"Well," he says, giving a little shrug. "I'm not sleepy yet either. So...let's hang out."

I laugh a little, silently, and then press one finger to my lips as I grab his hand and pull him along with me down the short hall to the living room of our family suite, where we had the party tonight. The room is dark and still messy from all the fun – mom will clean it up in the morning, I know – and luckily silent. I stop at the doorway, peering around for a second, casting my wolf hearing out to the door on the far side of the room that leads to the Royal Suite where mom and dad sleep.

But luckily, there's nothing. I grin up at Jacks and then pull him across the room to the hall door, where we slip out. But once I close it behind us, I know that speed is more important than stealth.

"Run!" I whisper, spinning and starting down the hall at a sprint.

Chapter 0279

Chapter 0279

I move fast down the hall, Jackson at my heels, and I hope desperately that we're lucky enough to evade the guards who prowl these halls at night. I mean, we haven't had a problem with being attacked in our own Palace...ever? So the guards are few and far between. But still, we've got to move fast – because if they see us, they're definitely going to tell my mom that I'm out of bed.

And I really, really want nothing more right now than a few stolen hours with Jackson.

My mate runs after me, shaming me a bit with his speed and his silence, and I can feel the joy pulsing through him as we go. He's checking his steps, I know, to let me take the lead – but then again, I'm the one who knows where to go. When I get to the end of the hall I fling open a door and wave him through, whispering “to the top! All the way up!”

Jackson sends a gorgeous grin over his shoulder before he starts to run up the stairs, so sweet and handsome that it makes me stumble in my steps a bit. But I recover quickly, dashing up after my mate. When Jacks gets to the top of the fourth flight he pushes open the only door there, and steps out onto our rooftop garden.

“Whoa,” he says, going still so fast that I almost bang into him.

“Move!” I say, laughing, not bothering to be quiet anymore as I give him a playful shove out of the doorway and press the door shut behind us. Jackson obliges, stepping out into the garden and looking around.

“What is this place?” he whispers, a bit in awe, turning and taking in the four ancient, gnarled olive trees that stand in the four corners of our garden. Scattered fruit trees grow between them, as well as lots of pretty little potted roses and herbs, creating the effect of a very charming little orchard garden. Along the southern wall there's an outdoor kitchen all set up and fully stocked, and next to that a little shed that contains everything we need to make a picnic.

“Mom was worried we weren't getting enough sunshine when we were kids,” I say, moving to the shed and pulling out some blankets and pillows, handing them to my mate, who follows. “So, she built us this little garden. She said kids are like plants – they need sunshine to grow.”

Jackson murmurs something that sounds like assent as I move to the kitchen. “Are you hungry?” I ask, pulling open the little fridge and pulling out a bottle of white wine, pouring us each a glass. “There's food, if you want it.” I nod towards the cabinets and the fridge, which I know will be packed with food.

“I’m not hungry,” Jackson says, watching me curiously and peering around. “You guys keep...food up here?”

“We keep food everywhere,” I say, grinning at him and nodding my head to the side, silently asking him to follow me to the center of the garden, where you can see the stars between the branches of the trees if you lay down on the ground. “Mom didn’t grow up with much, so she has kind of a scarcity mindset. She stocks snacks all around the Palace so that if anyone ever feels a single hunger pang, she can be on it. Plus, growing up, Rafe did eat pretty much constantly. So it was kind of necessary. And Markie’s doing the same.”

I trade Jackson the wine for the blankets and spread one out on the thick plushy grass before I scatter the pillows around. Then I sink down onto the blanket, patting the ground next to me, inviting Jackson to sit. He does, handing me one of the glasses. “Your mom didn’t grow up with much?” he asks, a little confused. And I guess that makes sense – mom wears her Queen status like she was born to it.

“Mom was an orphan,” I say, peering at Jacks, curious that he didn’t know this. I thought everyone in the country knew mom’s story. “She and Aunt Cora grew up together in the orphanage – it was only when they were all grown up that they found out that they were biological half-sisters. Daughters of the moon goddess.”

“Yesss,” Jackson says, narrowing his eyes at me a little in a playful way. “This bizarre little bit of trivia was mentioned earlier with a promise of an explanation later. Can I have that now?”

I laugh, nodding and scootching close to Jackson so that I’m pressed to his side, and Jacks winds his arms around me as I give him the quick version of mom and dad’s history – how they thought mom was a human, how she was accidentally pregnant with dad’s baby due to some shenanigans at a sperm bank, how they fell in love and uncovered a world of secrets while she was pregnant with Rafe. Jacks listens carefully as I speak and I lean against him, curling into his side and looking up into his handsome face as I tell it.

“That’s really weird,” he says when I’m finished, stroking my cheek with his hand, and I laugh at the simplicity and the understatement of his chosen three words. “So, your magic comes like... immediately from the moon goddess? A gift from her?”

Chapter 0280

Chapter 0280

“I think so,” I say, giving a little shrug. “That’s what she called it when mom and Cora talked to her, after all. A ‘gift.’ She said all of her grandchildren would be likewise gifted. Do you know where yours comes from?”

Slowly he shakes his head. “No idea.”

“Well, maybe it’s also a gift,” I say, considering it as I stare up into his blue eyes, his dark head framed against the night sky. “After all, she clearly knows about you, if she picked you out as my mate.”

“That’s so weird,” he whispers, his eyes going a little distant, “to think that the Goddess...knows about me. I’ve always felt so...anonymous and inconsequential my whole life. I never in a million years would have thought the Goddess had an eye on me.”

“Of course she does,” I say, lifting a hand to idly stroke his chest. “You’re like...really good looking, Jacks. And she’s a woman after all.”

“Don’t be creepy,” he murmurs, his eyes focusing on me as he smirks. “That’s your grandmother.”

I burst out laughing, shaking my head at him. “I don’t like you thinking of yourself as inconsequential, Jacks,” I say with a sigh, nuzzling closer. “You’re everything.”

Jackson smiles at me, I think touched, and strokes my face with his thumb. “The city makes me feel more inconsequential, I think,” he says, lifting his head to peer around, though we can’t see the city around us from this part of the roof. “Though...being around these trees helps.” I nod, understanding. Mom was very careful in selecting the placement of our little roof garden – it feels very secluded up here – like our own little bit of nature. And I’m well aware that Jacks feels more comfortable in natural spaces than surrounded by stone.

I tilt my head to the side, wondering if I’d subconsciously considered that when I decided to bring him up here tonight. There’s a whole Palace’s worth of rooms to hang out in, after all. And I picked the roof.

“Do you hate it? The city?” I ask quietly, genuinely wanting to know. Because, I mean, for better or for worse the city is my home, and if I’m going to be a part of this royal family at least part of my time will be spent here. If Jackson hates it...well, that will make things difficult, won’t it?

“I hated it at first,” he murmurs, thoughtful. “It’s better with you here.”

“Wait,” I say, sitting up a little and peering at him. “It was worse for like...the fifteen minutes you waited for me to get off the train? What was so bad about that?”

“No, Ari,” he says, shaking his head and laughing a little. “It was worse for the three months when I lived here.”

“What!?” I squeak, starting back a little and then smacking him on the chest, making him laugh harder. “Jackson! You lived here!?”

“Well, yeah!” he says, still laughing, pleased that he surprised me and made me squeak. He likes doing that, I know – I can feel it down the bond. “Did you think I went straight from my weird cult up North to the Academy?”

“Well, yeah!” I say, fascinated now and dying to hear this story.

“Nah,” he says, smirking and shaking his head. “I would have been...a disaster, if I’d have done that, and the men who sent me to the Academy knew that. I would have been so shocked at the way people act and talk, so...out of the loop of the culture. They sent me to live in the city for three months first, so I could become acculturated, not stand out so much.”

I hesitate, grimacing a little, putting my hands flat on my sweetheart’s chest. “I hate to break it to you, Jacks,” I say softly, “but you...still kind of stood out. As a complete and total weirdo.”

He laughs, grabbing me to him and pulling me tight against his chest, muttering all sorts of dark things about how dare I call him a weirdo and how he’s going to make me pay for that slander. But I just laugh, because his joking threats are nonsense to me, and I climb into his lap and let him wrap me up warm against him, so pleased and happy to be here in his arms.

“I know,” he says with a sigh against my hair, nodding and holding me tight. “I was a disaster at the Academy too, which is why you were my only friend, even after I tried to kill you a little bit. But if you think I was bad then, you should have seen me when I first arrived in the city.”

“Tell me,” I whisper, raising a hand to cup his cheek, loving the way the start of his stubble feels against my palm.

And, to my delight, Jackson begins to tell me more of his story.