

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy

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“I was a catastrophe of a person,” Jackson groans, laughing softly as he presses his eyes shut and remembers his first few days in the city. “I was...so shocked by the noise, Ariel, and the pavement – god, stone and metal everywhere - and the people. God, I didn’t think that there were that many people in the world, let alone one city.”

I stay quiet, letting Jackson tell at his own pace. He moves pretty quickly through the story of how he was chosen from the ranks of the young men in his community to attend the Alpha Academy, to gain what new military knowledge he could and bring it back to his own world.

Jacks leaves out a lot as he tells me about how they barely prepared him and then dropped him at a boarding house in the city three months ahead of time, I think not wanting to remember all of it. But he tells me how he showed up basically with a spare set of clothing, a handful of cash, and the order to acclimate himself.

“I stayed inside for a whole week,” he murmurs, shaking his head with an embarrassed smile on his lips. “Like, inside my room. I had this little window? And I sat at it all day, just watching people walk by, trying to...to figure out who they were, what their lives were like. I felt like a complete alien – like I was from another planet, Ariel. There were just – men and women, walking together, holding hands, in these weird clothes – and just like, kids everywhere...” he shakes his head at what must have felt so bizarre.

“Well, what changed?” I ask, desperately curious.

“The landlady came,” he murmurs, looking down at me with a smirk. “Demanding the next week’s rent. And that’s when I realized that...I was going to run out of money very, very soon.”

“What!?” I gasp, horrified that he was out of money after a week. “Jackson, how much did they send you with?”

“Like, fifty bucks,” he says, laughing and shaking his head. “Which I’m sure to them felt like an insane amount of money to just hand over – we don’t deal with a lot of cash in the community. I’m not sure they knew how fast it would run out? Or maybe they did.” He shrugs like it doesn’t matter.

I curl up closer to him, so sorry for my mate and feeling guilty that I've never once wondered about paying rent or whether or not I'd have enough money to get by. "So, what did you do?"

"Some of the other guys in the house noticed how miserable and scared I was," he says, smiling at me and stroking his hand over my hair, "and that I hadn't eaten in a week. They took pity - got me a job washing dishes at one of the restaurants in town. It was enough for some food, and the rent, and the utilities. And it made me leave the room, made me go do what I was supposed to do – which is learn how to be in this world."

I'm quiet again as Jackson continues, telling me that he was basically a little mouse of an employee – always on time, reliable, hard-working, but silent. That he spent his days listening to people in the kitchen talking to each other, learning about modern life, starting to pick up the vernacular and get more comfortable here.

"I was lucky," he murmurs, "that pretty much everyone in the kitchen was a man. There were some waitresses, of course," he smiles here and covers his face with his hand like he does when he's embarrassed. "And I realize now that they may have been...hitting on me. But I refused to talk to them – I was terrified."

I laugh along with him at this and press myself closer, secretly grateful that none of those other girls got their mitts on him. As hypocritical as it is, the idea of another girl touching Jackson makes me want to bare my fangs and tear her stupid face off. And even if Jackson has hinted that there was another girl in his past...well. I guess I don't want to talk about her right now, do I?

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"I hate that," I murmur, working to press myself closer to him, even though that's not really possible. "I hate the idea of you scared, and alone, and talking to girls when I was just like...half a city away."

"But you were engaged," he says, his voice strange – I think a little amused? I don't know. I can't quite parse it.

"You knew about that?" I ask, looking up at him wide-eyed.

"How could I not?" he asks, grinning at me. "You were all over the media – and it's all anyone would talk about, especially as it got close."

“Well,” I say, smiling myself a little too and reaching up to stroke my fingers through his hair. “What did you think about it?”

“You’ll be disappointed in me, Ari,” he murmurs, lowering his face and taking a sniff of my hair. “I didn’t really think about it. It was all very far from what I had been instructed to think was important, what I could understand – a royal wedding...” he shakes his head. “I didn’t have a way to understand it, why it was important.”

“Oh, come on,” I say, shoving his shoulder a little, my smile deepening. “You must have thought something.”

Jackson grins at me for a long moment before he breaks, looking away from me like he can’t hold my eyes while he admits it. “Fine,” he says, heaving a little sigh. “I thought you were...very pretty.”

“Pretty!?” I say, grinning and sitting up straighter with a happy squeak. “You thought I was pretty!?”

“Just in passing,” he mutters, still not looking at me, a faint blush on his cheeks. “I saw a few pictures on the covers of magazines –“

“So then how did you not recognize me when we met!?” I shout, laughing and tugging on his shirt, wanting him to look at me again. My mate, ever obliging, turns his head to smile at me.

“Because you were a boy, Ariel – and you smelled like a boy, and I had no reason to equate the lowest-ranked Candidate at the academy with the pretty girl I’d seen on a magazine cover –“

“You thought I was prettttty,” I sing, a little delighted, wiggling victoriously in his lap.

“And I was right,” he growls, snatching me closer and bending me back a bit in a way that makes heat coil in my core. “You are pretty. Much prettier in person, and not dressed up in all that bride-y gauze.”

“Yes, all that bride stuff really was crap,” I say with a sigh, staring up at him, starry-eyed and swept away by how wonderful he is – at once handsome, and powerful, and cute. God, how does he manage it?

But there’s still so much more I want to know, and I’m being selfish, turning this conversation away from him.

“So,” I ask, quieting down, sitting up straighter and resolving to be good. “How’d you spend your time off? Did you hang out with the guys that you lived with?”

All I want in the world right now is to sit right here in my mate's lap, listening to him talk for hours, spinning out the story of his life. I'd listen for days, if time and circumstance would let me, even though I know they won't.

"In my time off," Jackson murmurs, thinking back on it and raising his hand to my hair, petting me again, "at first, I just sat alone in my room. But then the guys I lived with – they were kind, but...a little rough, you know? They told me I'm a sad sack and that I was being a creep, just sitting in there

in the dark. They made me come out into the communal living room, which is where I discovered... television."

"What!?" I gasp, unable to keep from laughing a little. Jackson laughs along with me, though, giving a self-deprecating little shrug. "You didn't know what television was!?"

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"I mean, there was a tv in the living room of the boarding house," Jackson says on a sigh, even as he starts to laugh. "But...before they showed me what it was for, I thought it was a computer."

"So, you knew what a computer was," I say, grinning, "but not a tv?"

"Yup," he says, smiling down at me, nodding because he knows how ridiculous that sounds in my world. "We used computers sometimes as part of our education – we had a few in this building in the Community. Ones that I now realize are very, very old. But tv? I'd never watched tv in my life. And I was completely freaked out when they turned it on and showed it to me, but then I became... obsessed."

"You did!?" I squeak, kind of charmed by the idea of my sweet Jackson just spending three months before the academy rushing home from his job to watch TV. "Jackson, what did you watch?"

He sighs, deep and contented, and grins at me again. "Ariel, I watched women."

"What!?" I gasp, completely not understanding. And then my eyes go wide. "Jackson," I whisper, "do you mean that you watched...like, a lot of porn?"

Jackson bursts out laughing and covers his face again. "No, Ariel, no," he says, shaking his head, unable to help his smile. Then he drops his hand and looks back at me. "I mean, the guys I lived with showed me that too – and it was..." his own eyes go wide and his cheeks puff out with his breath, "it was a...a lot, wasn't it? God..." he shakes his

head as if to scare the ideas away. “But no, I wasn’t ready for that – I’m not sure I’ll ever be. No, I mean, I just watched a bunch of shows with women in them. And I was fascinated.”

My heart swells completely as I stare up at him, even as my stomach drops to my feet. Because how – how does this man exist? On one hand Jackson is so brutal, and so powerful – and on the other...

God damn it, he’s just so sweet.

“What did you watch?” I ask, my voice a whisper.

“Anything I could find that had women on the screen,” he says, completely honest. “I mean, you have to understand, Ari, we were always fascinated by girls and women when we were growing up because we were forbidden to talk to them – even looking at them was discouraged. Women were these great, entrancing mysteries. And there were like, rumors? Passed down between the boys? About what girls were like, and that you could kiss them – whatever kissing was - and that there was once a guy in the military training who had found his mate, whatever that was, and he tried to run away with her, and they killed him for it.”

My face goes pale at the idea of it, but Jackson just strokes my cheek.

“I don’t even know if that was true,” he says softly, shaking his head. “But you have to understand how forbidden women were. And then to come to a place where I just got this magical box where I could stare at women? And listen to their stories, and hear them talking to each other?” He exhales deeply, shaking his head. “God, I...I couldn’t get enough.”

I smile up at him, nodding, doing my best to understand as he starts to laugh, remembering something else.

“The guys I lived with,” Jackson continues, “they were pissed, because I was always hogging the tv, and I never wanted to watch sports. I liked the boxing – that’s where I first saw Luca, too – because I understand fighting. But the other sports,” he screws his mouth to the side and shrugs, “I mean, who cares? Why would I want to watch another guy play a game instead of playing it myself? I was shocked that they wanted to watch them – like, didn’t they know that there were stories about women? I mean, I know these guys liked women, sometimes they even brought them home. But they didn’t want to watch the kinds of shows I watched. It never made sense to me.”

“So, what did you watch?” I ask, soft.

“I liked sitcoms,” he says, again stroking my hair as he smiles at me and tells me his story like it’s a great secret he’s been dying to share. “I liked that they showed women talking to each other in their everyday lives, and being friends, and that they talked

about what they wanted from life. It felt like... like I was finally getting answers to things I'd been wondering my whole life. It allowed me to see women as just...people. Not forbidden, mysterious things."

My heart swells in me with every word my mate says. "Did you have any favorites?" I ask, my question a whisper, not wanting to break the spell.

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His brow furrows as he tries to remember. "There was one, um...about the six friends? Who all lived in apartments across a hall from each other? Three guys and three girls?"

"Besties," I say, immediately supplying the name of the old sitcom we've all watched a thousand times, smiling softly because I absolutely love that he loved this show.

"Yeah, that one was the best one," he says, nodding like it's a fact. "The girls were...really nice to each other, and so supportive, and so funny. And I learned about...boyfriends and girlfriends and dating. And what mates were. And with movies, I liked...um, what do you call them? Romedies...?"

"Romantic comedies?" I offer. "Romcoms?"

"Yes," he says, giving me a decided nod that makes me grin. "I loved romcoms, and what the guys called 'chick flicks' – any movies and shows about women's lives, I wanted to watch. And then when I found out that the library existed? And that you could borrow movies and whole seasons of shows?"

He puffs out his cheeks again, like it completely blew up his world, and I laugh with him.

"I put that library card to work," he murmurs, staring off into the distance, "never had a late fee and watched...probably every movie in their collection that had a woman on the cover. And I got books, which answered...so many questions."

"What like, romance novels?" I ask, curious.

"What's a romance novel?" he asks, snapping his attention to me, immediately intrigued.

I grin at him and shake my head. "I'll tell you about those later," I say with a little laugh, knowing that it will open a whole new world for him. "But tell me what you mean – what books did you get?"

“Books on science, on the world,” he says, staring down into my eyes. “I...well, that’s how I figured out that I’d been told a lot of lies at the Community. I read everything I could on history, and biology, and nature. I...I mean, I didn’t even know the earth was round,” he murmurs, closing his eyes on a deep sigh, like he’s embarrassed. “Or that there were...other planets.”

“That is so insane, Jacks,” I whisper, wondering what else he still doesn’t know he doesn’t know about.

“Yeah,” he murmurs, sighing. “Some of the science fiction shows I watched made absolutely no sense until I got my hands on a children’s picture book about the solar system. That was...that was a big day for me.”

I sigh, and reach up, and stroke his cheek. There must be so many gaps in his knowledge, so many things about the world which he just doesn’t know. And, I mean, it’s not like I know everything...

But I have had the benefit of a world-class education. And Jacks is so clever, and so hungry for knowledge that it breaks my heart. Suddenly, if I could give it to him – everything I have had, even if it means I had to give it up - I’d do it. In a heartbeat.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Jacks murmurs, gentle, looking down at me with a little sadness in his eyes.

“Like what?” I whisper, confused.

“Like you pity me,” he murmurs, shaking his head.

I sigh, realizing that he’s right – that I am pitying him, and it’s written all over my face. I reach up, running my fingers through his hair, tucking it back behind his ear. “You’re just so lovely, Jacks,” I whisper, meaning every word of it. “I want you to have had...more than what you were given. I know that the people who raised you...that you didn’t know any different, and that some of the must have

done their best. But I wish they’d done better by you – given you more. I want you to have everything, Jackson. You deserve it. You deserve the world.”

“Well, I’ve got that now, don’t I?” he whispers, tightening his arms around me and giving me a shy smile, clearly meaning what he says and believing it – like now that he has me, he can’t possibly be lacking, at all, ever. He leans forward, nudging my nose with his, opening his feelings to me, letting me understand just how happy and content and whole he feels when we’re like this, curled up with each other, our own little world. Complete.

And I can’t help it. I’m just completely overwhelmed, absolutely consumed by how much he loves me already, and how much my feelings match his, inch for inch. I lift my chin,

closing the short distance between us and wrapping my arms around my mate's neck as I kiss him, desperate for him to know that he's mine – mine forever – and that I'm going to do everything in my power to give him the life he deserves.

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A tiny groan escapes Jackson's lips as he pulls me tighter, moving his mouth slowly over mine, cupping my face in his wide palm as he kisses me breathless. Things move fast, as they always do with us, and it feels like hardly a moment has passed before my hand wraps in the fabric of his t- shirt, pulling him closer so that his body is leveraged over mine.

Jackson complies, bending me backwards in his arms as he's done before, kissing me deeply and taking control, dominating me in a way that feels natural, instinctual to us. Immediately I cede him power, wanting him to be in charge. Jackson moves his hand away from my face, sliding it over my shoulders and down my back until he takes a firm grip on my ass, using his leverage there to press me closer against him.

When I feel the hard length of him pressing, ready, into my hip, I lose control a bit – lose my mind, if I'm being frank. A moan slips from me as I kiss Jackson harder, more fervently, tightening my arms around his neck and using my weight to pull him further on top of me.

Because right now, I want to be laid out on my back, and I want Jackson's weight on me, and I want to slip my hand down between us and feel him in my palm – I want –

"Ooooookay," my mom's voice says, tired but not without humor, from the direction of the door. I freeze, my eyes flying open to see Jackson staring down at me, shocked.

Slowly, we both turn towards her voice.

"I mean," mom says, leaning against the open door frame and grinning at both of us like the sneaky cat she is, "I'm very pleased to see that my daughter has in fact inherited some of my passionate tendencies and is doing me proud here –"

"Mommmmm," I groan, covering my blushing face with my hands, completely mortified and letting my entire weight rest in Jackson's hands. Jackson just laughs, sitting up as best he can and pulling

me up with him.

“But!” mom continues, and I slip my hands down from my face to see that she’s grinning even more now. “It’s time for bed, chickens. Clean all this up, and then let’s go. We have a busy day tomorrow.”

I sigh, still embarrassed, but I just shake my head in disappointment because...well, because it was just getting good, isn’t it? But Jackson and I pull ourselves together, and quickly clean up the blankets and the pillows. I’m about to dump our mostly undrunk wine down the sink when mom protests, hurrying over to tuck it into the fridge for later, scolding me for being wasteful.

I just smile at her, reaching out and wrapping her in a hug as Jackson tucks the last of the blankets away in the shed, I think going deliberately slow so that he has a moment to...pull himself together, as it were.

“Are you mad at me?” I whisper, holding her tight.

“No, baby,” mom replies, laughing a little. “You’re a young woman who just found her mate – I’d worry something was wrong with your relationship, honestly, if you weren’t sneaking off to steal a few hours with him. But,” she pulls back a little to look me in the eye. “Tomorrow we’re going to have a serious chat about birth control, okay?”

I blush bright pink at this, looking down and biting my lip, but mom just laughs cheerfully and I glance back up at her. And then I smile back, because I know she understands, and that she isn’t trying to make me feel shameful about it. It’s just practical, yes?

Because I have a very, very difficult time controlling myself around Jackson, and had mom not shown up at the door tonight...well, some things might have happened. Things with some very natural consequences for which I am very sure I am not ready.

So, it’s a chat that I think I need and very much want to have.

My mom gives me a wink as Jackson comes to stand with us. “I’m sorry, your Highness,” he says, his face very serious. “I don’t want you to think I was...rude, or disobedient, or breaking your rules.”

Mom just laughs, a little delighted, and steps forward to pat Jackson’s cheek. “It’s fine, Jackson, you’re young and sleep seems very unimportant when you’re young. But please – I’ll only be mad if you keep calling me Highness. It’s Ella.”

“Ella,” he says, smiling at both of us as he tries out the name. He nods once, I think deciding that he likes it.

“All right, now go,” mom says, giving me a little shove and gesturing towards the door. “Because I need to sleep, even if you don’t, and I’m not going to get any if I keep having to herd my children back to their beds.”

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“Children!?” I gasp, “who else is out?” I peer back over my shoulder at my mom as I head down the stairs.

“None of your business,” mom says, very lofty, giving me a secretive smirk. “I’m not going to rat on my own children, after all.”

“Is it Rafe!?” I ask, eager and a little scandalized, glancing back at Jackson too, who listens with interest.

“Not my meatball!” mom says, laughing and continuing to escort us down. “My perfect little meatball, who’s never done anything wrong in his entire life!?”

“It was Rafe,” Jackson murmurs to me with a wink, pressing a hand to the small of my back as we get to the bottom of the stairs and mom walks ahead. “Your mom put me in his room, like she put Daphne in yours, but he snuck out even before I did.”

“Rafe,” I sigh, shaking my head. “God, I wonder where he went...”

I look up at Jackson curiously, wondering if he knows.

But, dead serious, Jackson just shakes his head at me. “Even if I knew,” he says, his voice low with the gravity of his charge, “I wouldn’t tell. I have been sworn to secrecy, and I take my charge quite seriously.”

I scowl at him, mumbling discontentedly about how mates aren’t supposed to have secrets from each other, but he just laughs like that’s quite rich coming from me.

And I laugh too, realizing that he’s right.

But when I get back into my room, and cast my eyes over Daphne, I see that she’s wearing a little pair of pink slippers that she certainly wasn’t wearing when I left the room.

And that her eyes are pressed shut...a little tighter than I think they need to be for a girl deep in sleep.

But I don’t say anything, letting my friend keep her secrets. I just climb into bed, pulling my blankets up with a contented sigh, and let sleep find me.

All of my determination to let Daphne keep her secrets ends, however, the moment she wakes up. “Sooo,” she says, still groggy, waking up and rubbing her eye as she grins at me. “Someone was a bad little princess last night, sneaking out!”

My mouth falls open for a second at her gall, but I snap it shut with a grin.

“Oh really, Daph,” I say, flipping around on my bed so that I’m laying flat on my stomach as I grin at her. I perch my chin on my hand. “Do you really want to have a chat about who was bad, and who snuck out, with a certain someone’s brother?”

Her jaw drops but then she bursts into laughter and flops back on her pillow, covering her face. “Wait, how did you know!? I got back before you!”

“I know everything,” I say, exaggerating obviously but enjoying the way that she shakes her head in complete disbelief. “Sooo, Jackson and I took the roof. Where did Rafe take you?”

“The kitchens,” she sighs, dropping her hands and smiling at me. “We sat on the counter and had cake. It was...very cute.”

“Did you kiss?” I ask, eager, my eyebrows going up.

She laughs and shakes her head. “No, Ari, it wasn’t like that. It was just...” she sighs and covers her face with her hands again. “It was very sweet.”

“Is that all the detail I’m going to get?” I ask, twisting my mouth in disappointment.

“It’s your brother, Ari!” she says, laughing and turning her face back to me.

“I know, I need dirt to blackmail him with,” I say, grinning and throwing a pillow at her before jumping out of bed. I move to my wardrobe, picking some clothes out for the day and letting Daphne keep her secrets if she wants to. It’s her love life, after all – she doesn’t have to share.

But even as I sort through the dresses and clothes that hang before me – mom has clearly been updating my wardrobe, even in my absence – I let my mind wander. Rafe and Daphne, wow...I mean, are they becoming a thing?

Or is it just...flirting?

Are they just friends? Do they want to be more?

“Ohhh, wear this green one,” Daphne says, appearing at my side and reaching into the wardrobe, pulling out a stunning but simple dress. “You’re going to Luca’s, right? This has very ‘meeting the mom’ vibes.”

I laugh but nod, taking it from her hands, grateful for my friend's impeccable taste. "It's perfect," I say, wrapping her in a quick hug before hurrying off to the bathroom to take a shower and get dressed.

Because Daphne's right – questions of my brother's love life aside, I've got a lot on my plate today, and it's time to get started.

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Daphne and I chat amiably on the way to breakfast, her telling me all the things she wants to see in the city, me giving my own recommendations. But when we turn into the breakfast room, I go a little still to see that it's just my dad sitting at the head of the table, having a quiet cup of coffee while he scrolls through some document on his tablet.

He looks up when we come in. Daphne freezes awkwardly beside me as dad stands up, giving us both a wide smile.

"Daphne," he says, giving her a little bow that makes her blush. "As much as I'd love to have breakfast with you as well, Ella's set up a little something for you and the boys down the hall." He gestures to the hallway behind her. "I think my daughter and I need a little moment alone to have a chat."

My eyes go a little wide because...well, I mean, I don't think I've done anything to be in trouble...

But did mom tell dad I snuck out with Jackson last night!?

Does it even count as sneaking out if you don't leave your house!?

"Okay!" Daphne says, her voice a little squeaky as she scurries out into the hall. She looks back at me anxiously, though, not knowing where to go.

"Three doors down on the left," I whisper, grinning at her and nodding, knowing that's the only other room mom would use to serve breakfast. Daphne grins at me and mouths "good luck" before heading down the hall.

"The door, Ariel," dad says, his voice stern, and I take a deep breath as I press it shut and move to the seat at his side, which is already set for breakfast, a cup of coffee waiting for me. "A bit late," he

says, glancing at the clock as I seat myself. I glance at it too, and nod, realizing that this is more of a brunch or a lunch than a proper breakfast.

“We were all tired,” I say, giving my dad my best innocent-Princess smile, “after our long journey home.”

Dad just laughs a little, shaking his head, and seeing him smile allows my shoulders to unwind. “Don’t be so anxious, Ariel,” he murmurs as one of the cooks comes into the room with a plate of food for me. “You’re not in trouble.”

The chef sets a plate of scrambled eggs and toast in front of me, my favorite breakfast since I was a little girl. I smile my thanks at the chef, who murmurs that she’s glad to see me safe home before discreetly disappearing from the room. As I begin to eat, I turn my attention back to my dad.

“If I’m not in trouble,” I say, scooping some of the eggs onto my toast and making a little sandwich for myself by folding the slice of toast in half, “then...why the one-on-one?”

“Because,” he says, settling back in his chair with his coffee in his hand, studying me. “I thought we should talk. About this two-mate stuff.”

I grin at dad, anxious again because – well, because dad and I don’t really talk about romantic stuff. But when I see him clear his throat and flick his gaze away, I realize that he feels just as awkward as I do. And my anxiety subsides, replaced by love for him.

“I could kill Roger,” dad sighs, a growl rumbling in his chest as he looks down into his coffee. “For not telling me about this sooner.”

“Aunt Cora says you would have locked me up,” I say, taking a bite of my eggs and toast.

“Still might,” he says, flicking his eyes up to me. I squawk a little, horrified at the idea, and then cough a bit as toast crumbs get stuck in my throat. Dad laughs, leaning forward to pat me on the

back. “Or I’ll just let your mates watch you eat,” he murmurs, “that should be enough to make them run for the hills.”

“They’ve already seen it,” I mutter, mouth still full, as I reach for my glass of water and take a sip, swallowing. Then I turn my eyes back to my dad. “They were able to get over it.”

“Brave men,” he murmurs, smirking at me, and I smirk back, and then everything feels...quite suddenly right again. Dad and I – we’ve always had a very special bond. And even if it is strange to talk about boys, I know that he’s got my best interests in his heart. And as we smile at each other, I know he’s realizing the same thing.

“It’s not that I don’t want you to have these relationships, Ariel,” dad sighs, leaning forward and talking to me more naturally now. “I just...it’s going to be hard on you, isn’t it? And I’ve got that dad thing where I just want things to be easy for my kids – want it to be all right.”

“Well, was it hard on you?” I ask, reaching for my coffee and taking a sip. “Aunt Cora told me that you have a little...experience here with the two-mate thing.”

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“It wasn’t...hard,” dad says, leaning back in his chair and thinking about it. “But it was different. It wasn’t like yours – I met your mother long after I met Lydia, and we had enough trouble figuring out that your mom was a wolf before we ever figured out that she was my mate. I think that had I met them at the same time...” he hesitates and then grimaces at me. “I think it would have been... insane. Mostly because they would have torn each other to pieces.”

“Yeah,” I say, grimacing too as I lean back in my chair. “We had...a bit of that.”

“No!” dad says, grinning at me and leaning forward, clearly wanting to hear more. I smile at my dad, because as much as he pretends he’s so serious, he loves gossip as much as the rest of us. And so I launch into the story, telling him about the night that Jacks and Luca found out about each other, and how they shifted, and how Jesse and Rafe had to intercede, and how Ben knocked me out of the way and probably saved me from some serious harm.

“Wow,” dad says when it’s all done, looking a little pale as he runs a hand through his hair. “You were...lucky, Ariel. That could have been way worse. And I like this Ben character even more than I did before.”

“Yes, Ben’s a gem,” I say, smiling. “But Jesse and Rafe have been amazing,” I continue, keeping my voice soft. “They really helped me to negotiate the whole thing, and calm Luca and Jackson down, and helped me advocate for myself when emotions were running high. I’m very lucky to have them.”

Dad nods, thinking it through, and then we proceed to have a very long breakfast in which he asks for more details about my bonds with Luca and Jackson – nothing intimate, just the basics of how they feel, any abilities that come along with it, the politics of having to manage them.

And then, to my surprise, he tells me the long story of his first mate. Of how she had been engaged to Uncle Roger, and the torture of discovering that she was his mate

when he reached his majority, and how she made it worse for years by insisting that he keep it a secret until Grandpa Henry finally

decided to declare dad his heir, not Roger. And then Lydia had shocked everyone by revealing her mating bond with my dad and leaving Roger for his younger brother.

“Wow,” I say, kind of shocked. “She sounds...not nice.”

“Lydia was...complicated,” dad says on a sigh, lifting his eyes to mine. “And it wouldn’t have bothered her, at all, that people didn’t think she was nice. She cared much more about being powerful, and refined, and in control. She was a whirlwind of a woman – very easy to get caught up in, not at all concerned with the destruction she left in her wake.”

I go quiet for a little, studying my dad, wondering how someone like that could be his mate. Because mom...mom is the opposite of all of that. And dad and she match so well.

“I was a different man when I was younger, Ariel,” dad says evenly, intuiting the direction of my thoughts and telling me the truth even though I can see it pains him a little to do so. “I was...angry, and desperate for Lydia after so many years pining for her. And Grandpa Henry was...a different man too. He was still mourning the loss of mom and his political position.” Dad sighs, shaking his head. “It almost killed Roger and my relationship – we only got back on track after Cora and your mom came on the scene. They changed our entire world for the better.”

I smile a little, liking that part of the story. “So, how did you change?” I ask quietly, really wanting to know. “How did you becoming...someone who matches mom, instead of Lydia?”

“Grief,” he says, quite honestly, meeting my eyes. “It was a dark time, realizing that Lydia wasn’t the right match for me. Rejecting her – it almost killed me, Ariel. And I mean that quite literally – almost killed me in a physical way. The claim that a fated mate has on you, body and soul,” he sighs, looking down. “It is no small thing to reject them. It took me years to recover, but I think the crucible of that pain...allowed me to become the man who was worthy of your mom.”

He looks up again, studying me. I look back at him quite seriously.

“Does that make sense?” he asks, his voice quiet.

Slowly, I nod. But I don’t say anything.

“What is it, daughter?” dad asks, leaning forward and taking my hand. Because he can tell something is wrong.

And then, my voice soft in my fear, I tell him about Luca and Jackson's decision – their request that I eventually choose one of them, and not just have them both. Because now that I know, at least second-hand, what it's like to reject your mate?

God, could I even do it?

Chapter 0289

Chapter 0289

My dad sits quietly by me as I finish telling him what Jackson and Luca have asked of me, as I wipe a few stray tears from my eyes. Dad is strong and stoic as I speak – the rock in my life that I always need him to be, letting me feel my pain and sitting quietly by me as I do. And when it passes, he's still there, holding my hand.

"What do you think?" I ask, my voice a little shaky, wanting to know.

He sighs. "Well, I'm not surprised," he says, tilting his head to the side. "The possessiveness I feel towards your mother – there was a moment when we thought she had a second mate too, and I... completely flipped out –"

"What!?" I gasp, shocked. Why – why are there all these things about my parents' past that I had no idea about!?

Dad laughs a little, squeezing my hand. "I ripped the door basically off its hinges, went tearing through the Palace looking for him, fully intending to murder him, scared poor Conner nearly to death." He laughs again, like it's a fond memory, as I stare at him with wide eyes.

"But he wasn't her mate?"

"No," dad says, shaking his head. "Just...a misunderstanding. We checked with the Goddess, who confirmed things."

My eyes go wider. "How does one check with the Goddess!?"

"Cora can do it," dad says, waving a passive hand before reaching for his coffee. "Just summon her up – the rest of us can't see her, but..."

He goes still for a second, staring into space and collecting his thoughts, as I just gape at him. Aunt Cora can just summon the Goddess? God, and I thought it was impressive that she could control

the weather.

“Actually,” dad says, turning his green eyes back on me and gently taking his hand from mine while he takes a sip of his coffee, sensing that my sadness has passed fully now. “You should consider asking Cora to call the Goddess for you, or see if you can do it –“

“If I can do it!?” I gasp, appalled.

“You’re a little demigoddess too, Ariel,” dad says, grinning over his coffee at me. “I mean, we avoided saying that to you as much as we could when you were a kid because we didn’t want you getting a big head about it. But being the grandchild of a goddess – the first girl, too? It...might have some perks.”

I just stare at him, completely baffled, before I blink myself out of my shock and concentrate on his words. “Wait, so, why would we summon the Goddess? To ask what?”

“To ask if you need to choose between Jackson and Luca,” dad says, nodding slowly to me. “I mean, I’m not saying that you should break your word to your mates. But, I think it’s worth realizing that if the Goddess gave you two mates, she probably had a reason for it. After all, she gave me Lydia, I think, so that my loving her, and then rejecting her, would make me become the man who was worthy of being her daughter’s mate.”

I grin at dad now, seeing where this is going, and very warmed to think that my dad really is the best – that if anyone on earth deserves mom, who is so amazing, only he can fit the bill. So, maybe his first mate really was part of the Goddess’s plan – that she made him go through a trial by fire to create the only man who was good enough for my mom.

“So,” I say quietly, “you think I should talk to her?”

Dad nods slowly. “And I think Jackson and Luca should be there. Just to...get things on the same page. I think she has her reasons,” dad continues contemplatively, “and she gave you two mates at once for one of those reasons. If you ask, she may tell you why, or give you advice on how to proceed.”

I exhale a deep breath and look down at my plate of food, suddenly not hungry anymore as I contemplate the fact that I’m adding “summon a goddess” to my list of things to do.

My dad laughs a little, gently, turning my attention back to him. “Don’t let it scare you, Ariel,” he says, his voice a little growly as he leans forward and smiles at me, fond and loving and warm. “If anyone can handle this, it’s my brave girl.”

Chapter 0290

Chapter 0290

I burst into a grin and then I'm out of my chair, reaching for my dad, who pulls me into a warm bear hug as he laughs. I hug him back, likewise laughing, so grateful that he always knows the right thing to say. "Thanks, dad," I murmur, tucking my face down against his neck.

"I love you, baby trouble," he murmurs, holding me tight. "Don't let those stupid boys walk all over you. You're a Princess and a Sinclair, after all. You're in charge."

"I won't," I promise, sighing happily. And as my dad releases me and gives me a little shove towards the door, telling me to get a move on with my day because I've got in-laws to meet, I'm grateful again that I've got absolutely the best dad in the world.

As I move towards the door and smile at him, he smiles right back.

And I know that he feels just the same about me.

"Love you, dad!" I call, grinning as I push the door open.

"Love you more, baby," he says, heaving a happy sigh.

I'm not at all surprised when I find Captain Conner waiting outside the door to the breakfast room. He pushes himself up off the wall when he sees me, his eyes crinkling with his smile. "Ready to go, Princess?"

"Yup!" I say, grinning up at my old friend. Conner – he feels like so much more than a bodyguard. I've known him my whole life, and I know that mom and dad basically consider him family at this point. "Dad was just telling me about how he scared the hell out of you one night when he thought mom had another mate and he hunted him down with the intent to kill."

"Oh, that old story?" Conner says easily, raising an eyebrow at me that makes me burst into laughter.

"How can you talk about it like it's so simple!?"

"It was a long time ago, Princess," Conner says with a grin, gesturing down the hall and then walking at my side as we get started.

"What other stories about my parents do you know," I ask as we walk, narrowing my eyes at him.

“Oh, what I know about your parents could fill a book. A couple of them, actually,” he says, giving me a wink. “Did they ever tell you about the time they lived in a bunker for a few months because they were being assailed by Priests of the Dark God?”

“What!?” I nearly shriek, laughing in my shock.

“Oh yeah,” Conner says, nodding and grinning as we make our way down to the garages beneath the palace, where a town car is waiting to take us to Luca’s gym. “Buckle up, Princess,” he says, gesturing towards the car. “I’ll tell you on the way. This one’s a good one.”

By the time we get to the gym, I’m absolutely gaping at Conner, who is clearly enjoying himself with the telling. “Wait,” I say, shaking my head in disbelief, “mom’s estranged uncle was trying to kidnap Rafe and take the throne for himself!? But that’s...that’s insane!”

“It was a wild time, kiddo,” Conner says, unbuckling his belt as he puts the car in park. I nod like that’s one hell of an understatement, and he smiles at me. “You ready for this?” he says, raising his chin towards the gym.

“Um,” I say, looking over towards it, a little anxious now. Because for the first time, I’m walking into Luca’s turf, which I’m very aware is a world filled with big tough Alphas who are all trained to beat each other up. And while I guess that’s not very different from the Academy...I’m walking into it as a girl now, aren’t I? And a princess. And Luca’s mate.

I bite my lip, looking back at Conner. “Will you come in with me?” I whisper, wanting our family’s old friend by my side.

“Of course I will,” he says, bursting into a grin. “Besides, I’ve been wanting to get a look into the Grant Gym for a long time now! This will be fun.”

Captain Conner gives me a wink, and together we get out of the car and head inside.

Chapter 0291

Chapter 0291

Luca’s gym is...loud.

My eyes go wide as Conner and I step inside, as I take in the dozens of people all working out. There three boxing rings spread out across the long room, and then at least fifteen large punching bags hang from the ceiling in the area to my left. Weaving in

between them are a group of teenage boys, each concentrating hard as they punch the bag in front of them, being cheerfully yelled at by the man who is clearly their coach. Loud, heavy music pulses through the air, and no one turns to me as I come in.

Despite the fact that each of the rings is occupied with boxers sparring with each other or working with their coaches, my eyes go immediately to the middle one. Because I know Luca's form when I see it, and he's there, working alone with an older bald man who barks out orders as Luca punches the pads on his hands.

A smile breaks out on my face and I glance up at Conner, who's looking down at me. He gives me another wink and then raises his chin towards Luca, clearly suggesting that I move boldly forward. So I do, remembering my dad's words that I'm a Princess and a Sinclair, and that I was invited here today. Even if I do find this place intimidating as hell, there's nothing here I can't handle.

Luca concentrates hard in the ring as Conner and I walk over to it, coming to stand quietly ringside and watch him finish his exercise. Neither he nor his coach give any indication that they realize that I'm here, the coach continuing to shout commands and suggestions for Luca. At each one Luca changes something slightly, standing straighter, or hitting harder, or ducking more quickly.

I'm amazed, again, at how fast he is. I mean, I know that Luca is the national champion for a reason, but god he's impressive. Luca's hands move so fast that they're nearly a blur to my vision and I can tell by the way that his coach's hands snap back that each of his punches land with one hell of an impact.

I smile as my eyes move over my mate, taking in his tanned, sweaty skin, the lines of his torso as they disappear in to his cute boxing shorts. I raise my eyes to admire the line of his jaw, clenched in his determination, and the way the muscles shift in his powerful shoulders as he delivers punch after punch.

God, but he's hot.

And mine, the fact of which is its own personal thrill.

My smile deepens, and Luca flinches, a little bit, glancing to the side where I'm standing.

When he does, his coach reaches out and cuffs him, hard, over the head.

I gasp, but Luca just laughs as he stumbles to the side. "Okay, okay," he says, rubbing at his head and grinning at his coach. "You got me there – I was distracted."

"Better not get distracted tomorrow night," the coach mutters, gruff, clearly not happy about the fact that Luca lost his concentration. Then he flicks his eyes to me. "She'll be there, you know. I won't have her ringside."

“She’s not gonna be ringside, she’ll be in the box,” Luca mutters, waving a hand dismissively at his coach before turning fully to me, a wide grin taking over his face as he comes to lean on the ropes of the boxing ring. “Hey!” he says, his eyes crinkling in delight as he sees me. “I’m so glad you’re here! Just let me finish this workout and I’ll –“

“You’re done, you’re done,” the coach sighs, pulling the pads off his hands as he shakes his head. “You’re tired, and you’re not going to get any work done with her here anyway.”

Luca grins at the coach before passively holding out his glove, palm up. The coach comes forward, reaching for Luca’s boxing glove and helping him with the laces on his wrist. “Ariel, this is my uncle,

Bruce Grant,” he says, nodding to me and then to the burly man who I can now see has a passing resemblance to Luca, though far gruffer.

Chapter 0292

Chapter 0292

My eyebrows go up, because Luca’s told me about his uncle – the man who raised him, kept him out of trouble, turned him into the champion he is today.

“Uncle,” Luca says, grinning at the older man and slipping his hand out of the first glove, starting on the second himself now that the first is gone. “This is Ariel Sin-“

“I know who she is,” Bruce says, gruff. Then he lifts his eyes to me, giving an awkward little bow. “Your highness,” he murmurs, clearly not happy about saying my honorific but doing it anyway. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. You’re welcome here, and to our family. We’re honored to have you, and glad Luca finally met a mate so he’ll stop being such a damn ass with women.”

My eyebrows go up because...well, I wasn’t expecting such a warm welcome from this gruff man. I clench my teeth to keep from laughing, giving a solemn nod to Bruce as Luca bursts into laughter.

“I’m not an ass with women,” he sighs, shaking the sweat from his hair and handing the second boxing glove to his uncle. “I’m just –“

“A damn ass,” his uncle says, cuffing Luca over the head again, softer this time, with a tiny smile on his lips. “Now go get a shower, so you can be presentable for your mother and your grandmother. Miss Ariel,” he says, shifting his eyes back to me and giving me a nod, “I’ll look forward to seeing you again at home.”

Bruce walks to the other side of the ring as Luca climbs out from between the ropes, hopping down to the floor. My mate reaches for me as he nods his hello to Conner, wanting to give me a sweaty hug, but I squeak and swat at him. "You're all sweaty!" I protest. "And I have to meet your mom!"

Luca just laughs again and I beam at him, completely swept away by this very attractive, very sweaty Alpha as he runs a hand through his wet hair, slicking it back. "Fine, fine," he sighs, shaking his head a little and spraying me with sweat in a way that makes me shriek again but which...well,

which I don't hate. I mean, I like my mate all sweaty after a workout, I guess. Especially when he looks like that, all shirtless and muscular, smelling deliciously of boy and apricots and sunshine.

"Come on," Luca says, nodding towards the locker room and clearly inviting me to go with him. "I'll be fast. Mom and Gran are waiting, after all."

Conner nods to me, murmuring that he wants to look over the gym, and I follow Luca towards the locker room. He leads me inside and I'm surprised to see that it's tiny – just one shower, and some towels, and a little set of lockers.

"This is just mine," Luca says, shooting me a grin as he quickly pulls off his shoes and socks before stepping into the little shower stall, pulling the curtain shut. "Being the champ has its perks."

"I guess so," I say, a little impressed as I sit on the little wooden bench in front of the lockers and listen as Luca turns the water on. As steam starts to rise above the curtain bar, Luca's hand reaches out from behind the curtain, dropping his sweaty shorts on the ground outside.

He starts talking, then, telling me about his day and how his mom and uncle reacted when he revealed to them that he has a mate, and that his mate is the princess. But if I'm being honest, I barely hear him.

Because I am suddenly very aware that my super-hot mate is naked on the other side of a flimsy curtain, water running all over his sore, muscled body.

And that we are...absolutely all alone in this private locker room.

And I've got no big brother and cousin out there protecting my chastity for once.

I mean...what is a girl to do?

Read Chapter 0293

Chapter 0293

Chapter 0293

Luca, true to his word, showers quickly, continuing to tell me about his morning and how his uncle kicked the crap out of him, not impressed at all by anything that he learned at the Academy and taking the day to drill back into him all of his old techniques.

“I mean,” Luca says, turning off the shower. “He’s not wrong – I’ve got to remember the basics that I’ve had drilled into me for years, or else I’ll get sloppy. But I did learn some stuff at the Academy, and I’m a little frustrated that he won’t even let me think of incorporating it into any of my strategy.”

“Uh-huh,” I say, completely distracted, sitting prim and straight on the little bench before Luca’s small set of lockers, my hands on my knees, staring at the flimsy curtain, thinking hard about what’s behind it.

I remember, suddenly, the first time that I saw Luca naked – in the locker room, while I was waiting to take my own shower, and I had gone completely still, just...staring at him. Watching the water slip down his skin, over his muscles. Watched him tilt his head back and fill his mouth with it, and then let it spill out over his lips...

God, god.

Suddenly all I want to do is leap forward and rip the curtain back, and grab him –

But Luca beats me to it.

I jump as he rips the curtain back, and my eyes go wide because...

God damn it – crap – crap but he’s gorgeous.

Luca – he’s a celebrity heartthrob for a reason, and as I stare at him, a white towel slung low over his hips, running a hand through his hair that’s darker now that it’s all wet...I know precisely why he’s almost always included in the top 10 of any “Most Eligible” list.

He’s just...beautiful.

My eyes drift down his body, flicking over his wide, muscled shoulders, toned from years of determination and training, of hours and hours in the gym, working towards his singular goal of being the best at his art. Over his pecs and his insane abs that ripple like a damn washboard, all the way down to the sharp V of his hips, to where it disappears into his towel.

When my eyes move back up to Luca's face – his perfect, too-handsome, even pretty face – I see him smirking at me, clearly intuiting my admiration and enjoying the hell out of my shell-shocked expression, probably feeling every inch of my insane desire down our bond.

“Oh whatever,” I huff, crossing my arms as I blush, a little embarrassed to be caught out in my lust while he's apparently perfectly composed. “You're into me too!”

“Damn right I am,” he murmurs, taking a step forward towards me that makes something burn low in my stomach, makes me go loose and tense all at once. But to my shock, Luca just continues smirking at me for a moment before he shifts his attention to the lockers behind me, reaching for one and apparently completely ignoring me.

I can't help the indignant squeak that slips from my lips as Luca opens the locker and starts to rifle inside, pulling out some clothes and stacking them on the bench next to me. I just stare, open-mouthed, at my mate – who is apparently very, very willing to ignore my desire for him right now.

Suddenly very miffed, I snap my mouth shut and glare at him, tightening my arms across my chest and sending every single one of my emotions down the bond so that he knows precisely how offended, and frustrated, and – well, yes, a little hurt – I am, so that there's no chance he can ignore it anymore.

To my shock, Luca just laughs lightly, a dark and ironic sound, pressing his eyes shut as he turns away from me and pulls on his underwear beneath the towel, and then lets that drop to the ground,

and then starts on his pants. I have to admit, I'm a little distracted by the sight, but not enough to overlook the fact that my mate is very able to just ignore me now, when we're alone in our non-dream bodies for like, the first time ever.

Chapter 0294

Chapter 0294

“Ariel,” Luca sighs, shaking his head and smiling as he turns back to me, buttoning his pants. “It's not going to happen like this.”

“What's not going to happen!?” I ask, tossing out a hand.

“It's...” Luca says, his emphasis on the word, and his raised eyebrow making it very clear what he means, “not going to happen like this.”

I jump to my feet in protest, my hands fisted at my side. “Luca!” I hiss, angry. “I mean, you don’t get to decide that for both of us! There are two of us here!”

He sighs a little through his nose, frustrated, and then lightning-fast he reaches for me, grabbing me by the waist and pulling me tight against him, running his fingers through my hair and wrapping them lightly around the back of my neck before I have time to even think, to process what’s going on.

“Do you seriously want to lose your virginity in a locker room, Ariel?” he murmurs, smirking down at me, shaking his head and staring into my eyes with his pretty brown ones. “With my uncle, and your bodyguard, and a passel of teenage boys on the other side of that wall?” He nods slightly to his left, towards the door.

“Um,” I say, my eyes shifting to the side, because I didn’t think about it that way. But even as I know that’s not what I want, my hands move to his waist. And then I watch Luca shudder, and press his eyes shut as I flatten my palms against his ribs and run my hands up over his back, pulling him tighter against me even as I rest my weight against him.

And that’s how I know that Luca isn’t nearly as resistant to me as he was pretending to be just a minute ago. And I smile.

“Come on, Luca,” I whisper, soft and teasing. “Just...kiss me. Just a little kiss.”

He groans, and his hands tighten – just incrementally – before suddenly he twists and spins me, and presses me back against the lockers. I gasp when my shoulders clang against the metal, but it’s not that it hurts – not at all, Luca’s very careful with me – but the sound of it, and the surprise –

I stare up at my mate, wide-eyed.

“Is this what you want, Ariel?” he murmurs, moving the hand curved around the back of my neck up so that he cradles my head, using his half-naked body to press me back against the cold metal of the lockers.

At the same time, he slides his other hand down the length of my body until it rests against my thigh. And then he slowly starts to bunch the fabric of my dress there, so that it raises up my leg, inch by inch.

“Do you want me to take you right here, right now?” He lowers his face a little and my breath hitches as I stare up at him, my heart starting to pound. “Because if that’s what you want...god knows I don’t have enough willpower to resist if you ask me – really ask me.”

I stare up at him, my breath coming in fast little pants now, completely at a loss for what to say.

“Tell me what you want, Ariel,” Luca whispers, his face serious, before he presses a lingering kiss to my lips.

And in that moment I realize that...I have absolutely no idea what I really want.

Chapter 0295

Chapter 0295

My wolf absolutely howls inside of me, telling me to do ridiculous things as she always does. Kiss him! Jump on top of him, wrap your legs around his waist, he likes that! See if you can get his pants off – he just put them on -

But I shake my head, willfully trying to ignore her, because the sensible part of me knows that Luca is right – that this is not how I want this to happen.

“See?” he says, smirking at me, a little smug as he pulls himself away a little bit, pausing his hand’s work to get my dress up over my hip. “I didn’t think so.”

“Hey!” I snarl, offended – because, I mean, I didn’t make my decision yet!

Yes! My wolf shouts, encouraging me forward. Grab him! Make him kiss us again! Take the stupid dress off! Why did we let Daphne pick such a complicated dress – we should have worn something with snaps -

“What?” Luca says, pausing and coming just an inch closer, teasing me now. “Come on, Ariel –let’s wait until after the match – then I can actually take you to bed, a real bed –“

“Why do you always think you get to tell me what I want?” I ask, frowning up at him, starting to get a little pissed now if I’m being honest. Because I mean, he actually is right. The first time I do this I do want to be in a bed, and relaxed, and not worrying if someone is going to come through the door.

But damn it, why did he know that first?

“Because,” Luca murmurs, stepping close to me again and pressing a kiss to my cheek and then to my neck – a soft, lingering one that makes my eyelids flutter. “You’re my mate – and because I know you Ariel.”

God, the way his mouth moves over my skin – it’s torture, and he knows it. My hands tighten against the skin of his back, my nails digging just slightly into him, and his skin shivers all over.

“I know what you want,” he whispers, raising his head and looking into my eyes again before pressing a soft kiss to my mouth. “And...well, I know what you can handle.” He hesitates here, just for a second. “I’m...more experienced in this than you.”

My mouth drops open now, a little appalled. “Luca!” I gasp, whipping my hand around and smacking him in the chest – not hard, but with a satisfying smack that lets him know that I’m mad. “Are you seriously saying that I – that I can’t handle you!?”

His face breaks into a smile and a little growl rumbles in his chest. “I know you can’t handle me, Ariel,” he murmurs, his voice dipping lower in a way that – god, that makes the heat in me grow more steadily. “Not yet, at least. We need to get your body used to this a little more before we start doing adventurous things like a quickie in a locker room. You’re trying to run before you can walk.”

I huff now, genuinely angry, and shove harder against his chest, fully pissed now. “That is so rude, Luca,” I snarl, lifting my chin up to glare at him. “Just because you’re so slutty that you’ve had more experience than me –“

Luca laughs, genuinely pleased, his eyes crinkling. But he doesn’t step back – steps closer, even, bunching my dress up more, slipping his hand beneath the hem of it and sliding his palm steadily upwards until his hand cups my ass, his palm moving over the lacy edge of my panties.

I gasp again, my eyes going wide, any protests falling dead on my tongue.

“So, this is really what you want? What you can handle?” he murmurs, his eyes shining, tightening his hand a little, squeezing my ass in a way that makes my head fall back, just a little, a puff of desperate breath slipping between my lips. “You won’t let me show you the ropes slowly? Want to just...jump into the deep end?”

“You’re mixing your metaphors,” I growl, my brain fuzzing, talking nonsense because I’m having trouble concentrating with the way his fingers are moving over my underwear, trending inwards, towards...

“It’s too easy,” he murmurs, shaking his head, taunting me. “Honestly, Ariel, you should let me take it slow. You won’t be able to handle it.”

“Wha...what?” I murmur, my eyes half shut as he presses himself closer to me, as I feel his chest press hard against my breasts.

“If you let me touch you, Ariel,” he whispers, “when you’re all worked up like this? I’m going to make you come in about...thirty seconds.”

My eyes fly open, appalled at his arrogance, his gall.

He smiles, greedy, dipping his head closer and taking a sniff of me, like he can smell my anger, like he likes it. “Seriously, gorgeous,” he says with a sigh, even though he doesn’t move his body away, keeps his hand right where it is on my ass, his other still cradling my neck. “We can take our time later, make it right.”

Chapter 0296

Chapter 0296

I just narrow my eyes, still pissed. Because I mean – I’ve done stuff by myself before – and never, ever have I finished that fast.

Damn, but he thinks highly of himself in these regards.

“You’re exaggerating to get what you want,” I growl, even though it turns into a gasp when Luca tightens his hand on my neck, holding me still as he lets his other hand inch closer to the center of me. “There’s no way you could ever make me come in thirty seconds.”

Luca turns his head to the side a little, considering. “Probably right about that,” he murmurs, nodding.

I smirk, smug.

“More like...two minutes.”

My jaw drops before I snap it shut, livid. “You arrogant little –“

He laughs, low and pleased, liking me all worked up and feisty like this. “Wanna bet, Princess?” His mouth is so close that I can feel his breath on my lips.

I go still, staring at him, realizing that he’s offering...

Luca’s smile deepens. “If I win,” he says softly, “I get a weekend with you. All to myself. Before we go back to the Academy.”

Yes! My wolf howls, dancing around inside of me, her paws skittering delightedly in my soul. Sweeten the pot! Give him money! Give him your crown – that’s worth something, right? Give him the PALACE!

I loose a shaky breath as Luca’s fingers start to trace circles around edges of my panties, dipping inwards, slow and distracting and maddening and wonderful.

“And if I win?” I whisper.

“Whatever you want,” he murmurs, lowering his mouth to brush against mine. “A blank cheque. Anything.”

He pulls back for a second, looking deep into my eyes, and I consider – just incrementally – that this might be stupid. But god, the way he’s looking at me, the way he smells –

God, fuck, I don’t care – my wolf wins, I give in –

“Fine,” I say, giving a half-hearted little shrug, still trying to play it cool even though I can barely think. “Do your worst, Grant.”

“So, it’s a bet? A weekend, against a blank cheque that you’re absolutely never going to cash?”

“Why wouldn’t I cash it?” I ask, frowning, confused.

“Because you’re never going to win,” he says, laughing a little, grinning at me.

“It’s a bet,” I growl, pissed again, newly determined –

But there’s no time to think on it, because faster than I can wrap my mind around anything new Luca closes the final few inches between us and fastens his mouth to mine like he can’t wait another second.

The kiss absolutely sweeps through me and I forget any determination that I had as Luca parts my lips with his, as his tongue presses against mine, as he licks me and presses me hard back against the lockers. I’m panting already, my heartrate so high I can feel it pounding in my ears.

As Luca lines every inch of his torso up with mine, I can feel that he wants me too – can feel it in the way that he pants into my mouth, in the intensity with which he clings to me, in the hardness of his cock, which is pressed between us, thick and ready. I slide my hand down towards it, wanting to –

“Absolutely not,” he growls, snatching my hand away and pinning it to the locker above my head with the hand that was around my neck a moment ago. “You’re not distracting me with that, Ariel – not when I’m on a time limit.”

But I just moan, and press my body closer to him, grinding my hips forward – wanting him, wanting my mate, wanting to feel his body, every piece of it –

“No,” he murmurs, shaking his head at me. “This is about you.”

And then he moves his hand from my backside, sliding it around towards my stomach. Luca shifts his body to make room, still pinning one of my hands above my head. My other hand smacks flat against the lockers behind me like they're some sort of anchor to the world as I concentrate on his touch, on the way his hand moves all the way around so that it's pressed flat against my navel, his fingers pointing down towards the floor.

And then, as I pant, my eyes half shut, my focus on his face, Luca slides his hand lower and slips it into my panties.

Chapter 0297

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I moan again, hard, as Luca touches me, his hand moving slowly lower, sliding his fingers against the slick skin he finds there. Subtly, moving without even thinking about it, I shift my feet further apart, wanting him to touch me deeper, wanting more.

“Good girl,” Luca murmurs, his voice a purr in my ear. I shift my eyes upwards towards him, my vision hazy, not understanding because – because what's good – what did I –

But Luca just shakes his head and kisses me again, passing words down our bond. Don't think, he instructs, his voice a tender purr. Just feel.

And so I do as he says – I give myself over to the sensations as Luca gently strokes me, his fingers nimble as he expertly finds just the precise spot where I want him to press. And then, slowly, he begins to stroke and tease me there, his movements a steady rhythm that builds something in me – a heat, and a need, and a desperate flame that seeks to burn – to destroy everything in its path and wipe everything out with it.

I tear my mouth to the side, unable to handle the intensity of it, his name a breath on my lips. He shifts again then, moving his hand away from that spot, and the building intensity inside of me wanes in a way that makes me gasp in protest, my eyes opening, seeking his, wanting to know why –

Luca just smiles at me, and shakes his head, and shifts his hand lower so that his fingers press at my entrance. His thumb takes their place higher up, turning in slow circles that make me shiver.

But now that I feel him there, at my entrance, his fingers teasing, just barely pressing in – it's all I want. My hips buck forward on their own, urging him onward, wanting him to feel him fill me. But Luca just pulls back, denying me what I want. I groan, and shiver, and stare up at him, not understanding, my mind absolutely blank with anything but want for him.

My entire body now is tense with wanting it, my knees shaking, because I'm close – I'm so close – and he's deliberately holding back now. I shake my head at him, not understanding, my panting moans coming with almost every breath.

Luca smiles at me, delicious and wicked, and he drops the hand that's pinning my wrist to the lockers above me. He wraps that hand in the hair that grows at the base of my neck instead, pulling gently, just enough to make me moan so loud at the intensity of it that I'm not sure the entire gym outside doesn't hear.

Not that I care. Not that I care about anything right now, except –

"Beg me," he breathes into my ear, before his tongue licks me, just once, across my earlobe and then down the length of my neck. "Beg me for it, Ariel."

I resist for just a moment, but then god – fuck – I give in.

"Please," I groan, eager to obey, eager to give him anything he wants, if he'll just...
"Please, Luca," I say again, shaking my head, hardly able to bear it.

My mate instantly obeys, turning my head back to his and capturing my mouth with his lips as his hand shifts lower, as two of his fingers press inside of me, as his thumb flicks harder against that point at the crest of me that makes me shiver and gasp. Luca's fingers pulse once, twice, and then they curl deliciously forward –

The moan that tumbles from my mouth is intense as I spill over, as whatever dam within me breaks and the sensation races through my body. Luca holds me tight, kissing me through it as his fingers continue to curl in that way that shatters me, that sends sparks through my blood, that feels like a living flame consuming me from the inside out. I groan, and shudder, shaking against him as little sobs break from my lips. I barely notice, can barely describe it, but somehow it feels like wind rushes through the room – raising the hair off my sweaty neck, carrying sparks with it.

And then it subsides, and I'm panting, and Luca's got one arm tight around my back, the other withdrawing from me and slipping around to the back of my leg as I gasp against him, my knees going weak, completely unable to hold myself up anymore.

But Luca's there, shushing softly to me, holding me tight. He quickly steps back to sit down on the bench and takes me with him, gathering me up into his lap as I go to puddle in his arms, resting my head against him as the feeling echoes through me, pounding and then fading, less and less, until I can breathe again, until I can come back to myself.

Chapter 0298

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And when I do, Luca's right there, holding me tight.

I tilt my head up, looking into his eyes, and he cups my cheek in his hand, looking seriously down into my face.

"You win," I murmur, and he bursts into laughter as I tuck my head under his chin, and press my flushed cheek against his chest, and try to catch my breath.

Luca gives me a moment, rocking me back and forth, until I think he can feel me come back to myself more completely. He kisses me softly on the side of the head. "You okay?" he murmurs, curious and a little concerned.

I raise my head to glare at him a little, and then pass all of my emotions down our bond to him so I don't have to bother putting it all into words. He grins as he feels them – figures out that it felt amazing, and overpowering, and delicious, and wonderful, and scary. All at once.

I just sigh and murmur that I'm fine, shaking my head at the understatement.

Luca tightens his arms around me and, and I can feel his own joy pulsing through him. "Wait till you see what I can do with my tongue," he murmurs.

My head whips up, my eyes a little wide, because if that wasn't the full extent of it...

Luca just laughs, and traces the shape of my bottom lip with his thumb, and shakes his head, staring at me like he could never look at me long enough. "You're so beautiful," he whispers, making me smile. "And very sexy."

This just makes me blush, and laugh, and look away from him a little bit, down at the floor, because that I find hard to believe.

"What?" he says, brushing his hand along my jaw and turning my head to look back up at him. "You don't think so?"

"Luca," I groan, tucking myself closer to him and looking away, blushing a bit. Because, I mean, I've gotten used to the idea that I'm pretty, but sexy!? No, Daphne's sexy, with her curves and her smirks. But me? I'm just cute at best.

"What?" he protests, laughing again.

But I shake my head, sighing and looking up at him. "I just went to pieces in front of you in under two minutes, and made the most ridiculous assortment of obscene sounds, and you want me to believe I was sexy!?"

“Really sexy obscene sounds,” he murmurs, nudging me playfully with his nose, and I groan and cover my face with his hands. “I’m serious, Ariel!” he says, laughing more and tightening his arms around me, making me listen to him. “I could very happily spend a few happy days laid up in bed with you, making you make those noises.”

“Oh my god,” I moan, laughing a little against his chest, but...not hating the idea. Not at all.

“I am not at all kidding,” he murmurs, but I’m immediately more at ease. Luca, he really does know me – knows what I like, knows what will make me laugh, knows what I need emotionally and, clearly, physically.

I sigh happily, dropping my hands and looking into his eyes, believing him just a little bit. Because, I mean, the emotions that are coming down the bond to me match what he’s saying – he was very turned on by it all. Luca simply nods, smiling at me, and I wind my arms around his neck. “And when do I get a chance to wring some embarrassing sounds out of you?”

“Oh, five to six years,” he murmurs, grinning and giving me a quick kiss, “after I’ve had a chance to lick every inch of you over and over again.” He quickly dips his head then, demonstrating his meaning by giving me a long, languid lick up the length of my neck, making me shudder all over. I laugh, unable to help it, every nerve in my body still tender from what he just did to me. I swat him away, and he complies.

Luca’s face drops into more serious lines as he contemplates me. “I’m sorry,” he says, looking into my eyes. “If that was...too much, with the bet and...pressing you up against the lockers. You’re just very sexy when you’re all worked up, and I have trouble not...stoking the fire.”

“No,” I whisper, tightening my arms around him and pulling him a little closer. “I liked it too. I kind of...” I hesitate, biting my lip.

“What?” he prods, smiling his pleasure.

Chapter 0299

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“No,” I laugh, wrinkling my nose at him and smacking him playfully on the chest. “I don’t want to give you any encouragement.”

Luca growls, snatching me closer, willing me to tell what I'm thinking. And I can't help it – I just laugh and lean back against his arm. "I kind of like it when you're bossy with me," I whisper, blushing a little because I'm not sure I even knew I liked that. And I'm sure I wouldn't like it with anyone else, not at all.

But with Luca?

He just groans, his eyes fluttering half shut, tugging me closer and taking a long languid sniff of my scent. "I'll boss you around all you want, Princess," he murmurs, pressing a kiss to my shoulder. "I'll even –"

"Not in real life," I say, pointing my finger into his face and narrowing my eyes. "Just in bed. Or... locker room. As it were."

Luca grins, and nods once, and snaps his teeth just millimeters from the edge of my finger, making me jump and laugh again.

But then we both jump, and then go still, at the pounding at Luca's locker room door.

"Your grandmother is waiting for you, Luca!" his uncle's voice shouts from the other side.

And I gasp and press my hands to my mouth because – oh my god, because I completely forgot. Completely lost entire track of the world outside of this room, if I'm being honest.

"Yup," Luca says, glancing up at the clock with a grimace. "We'd better go." Hastily he stands up, setting me on my wobbly feet, and I frantically spin for the mirror, wanting to make sure I at least look like I haven't been making out with my boyfriend in his private the locker room.

"Coming!" Luca calls when his uncle knocks again. Then Luca moves to the little pile of clothes that we knocked to the floor a few minutes ago, grabbing his undershirt and pulling it over his head. He turns to me and grins as the shirt pulls over his face, ruffling his wet hair.

And everything is just so perfect in this moment I can't help but grin right back at my mate before I turn to the mirror and fix my hair. Because I'm a Princess, after all, about to meet my mate's family. And the least I can do is be presentable.

A huge cheer erupts when we walk into Luca's house, hand-in-hand, and I gasp, completely undone by it.

"Sorry," Luca says, giving me a grimace even though he can't stop smiling. "I told them that not everyone could come and meet you today – just the essentials. But I guess they...didn't listen."

I flick my eyes up at him, grinning like crazy, but there's no time to respond before Luca's family swarms forward, reaching out their hands to me, eager to make me welcome. So, I just pass all of my feelings down our bond, letting him know that I love it, and I feel so warm and loved already, and I'm thrilled to meet all of them – every single one.

Luca introduces me as his girlfriend, telling me a lot of names I unfortunately won't remember as I shake hands with his family members, saying my hellos and giving everyone my best Princess smile. But then I find myself facing a woman who holds both hands out to me, a beautiful smile on her face. I take her hands in mine, and as I look up into her warm brown eyes, and take in her own set of perfect dimples, I know instantly that it's Luca's mom. "Welcome, Ariel," she says, beaming at me. "It's so nice to meet you –"

"It's so nice to meet you too!" I say, eager, walking with her as she leads me forward – but we don't get far before a very tiny, very eager little woman steps towards us, both of her hands out, smiling so hard that her eyes are two little half moons on her face. "La Principessa!" she shouts, thrilled, and then before I know it I'm wrapped up in her arms.

I laugh, hugging her back, letting her rock me back and forth. Behind me, I hear Luca laugh goodheartedly.

"Ariel, this is my grandmother," he says, and I turn my head to smile at him before pulling away from the old woman a little bit and beaming down into her face. She shakes her head at me like she can't believe I'm real. But then she blinks and looks around behind me. She murmurs something in words I don't understand, and I turn with real surprise when Luca responds in the same language.

Chapter 0300

Chapter 0300

I stare at him, shocked, and Luca just grins at me. "Do you – do you speak Itablo?" I ask.

"I mean, just a little," he says with a shrug as his family moves eagerly around us, setting out food and drinks, turning on music.

"Of course he speaks Itablo, it's his native tongue!" his mother says, laughing and coming to press a fizzy orange drink into my hand.

"It is?" I gasp, still staring at Luca. He just laughs and looks away, maybe a little bashful.

“Where!” his Gran says suddenly, pulling my attention back to her. “Where...Rafe!”

“What?” I ask, baffled but bursting into a grin.

“Where...Rafe!” she repeats, looking around the room eagerly.

Luca’s mom laughs and slips an arm around her mother’s shoulder, grinning and speaking quietly to her in their language. I look to Luca, curious.

“Yeah,” Luca says, stepping closer and running a coy hand through his hair. “I kind of forgot to mention that Gran is...kind of obsessed with the royal family.” He lifts his chin towards the corner of the room, and I turn to see a picture of my mom on the wall, looking saintly and smiling beatifically, holding a little baby Rafe in her arms, their cheeks pressed together. A candle burns beneath the painting, and it’s clear that it’s very well cared for.

My mouth drops open in shock and delight.

“Rafe is her favorite,” Luca continues, and I burst out laughing, turning my face back up to his. “She is going to be bummed when she found out that it’s just the Princess today, and not her precious Prince.”

“Principe Rafe!” Gran says again, clapping her hands. “He so...handsome!” Luca’s mom laughs, picking up the end of our conversation.

“Don’t listen to Luca,” she says to me, rolling her eyes at her son. “Gran is, of course, thrilled to meet you, Ariel. We all are.” She opens her arms to me now, and I go to her, letting her wrap me up in her arms too. “I always prayed he had a mate,” Luca’s mom whispers to me, holding me tight, and a true warmth rushes through me at her words. “I didn’t realize he’d be lucky enough to get you.”

She pulls back a little, and cups my cheek in her palm, her eyes filled with tears.

“Mommm,” Luca groans, reaching for me. “I’ve been telling her that our family is fun –“

She laughs, pulling away and shaking her head. “You’re right, you’re right!” she says. “Call me Linda, Ariel – and please, yes, eat! Drink! Have fun! You’re partying with the Grant’s now, and Luca is right – we are a good time.”

Over the next few hours, I learn that this is absolutely true. Luca’s family instantly makes everything easy, pulling me into the cozy, well-worn living room and sweeping me up in their conversation like I’ve been there a hundred times – like I’ve always been there, honestly. I mean, they ask me about my life as Princess, of course, but his family works hard to ensure that I am instantly comfortable in Luca’s home, immediately included in all of the jokes. As time slips by I don’t all feel the revered Princess – which I

don't like, anyway, if I'm being honest – but instead like Luca's new girlfriend, accepted and loved.

Or at least, I'm feeling quite accepted and loved by everyone in the room except Luca's uncle, who stands in the corner nursing a beer and frowning, staring into space. He doesn't make it clear that I'm the source of his dissatisfaction, but he doesn't look at me.

And the way he scowls down at his drink and refuses any food – man, but anxiety twists in my gut. What possible reason have I given him to not like me?