

## #Chapter 3 – The Barracks

Now I’ m Ari Clark, a family cousin on Aunt Cora’ s side.

But things start to get immediately real as Rafe and Jesse sling their backpacks over their shoulders and we start to walk towards Alpha Academy, a rugged castle built on top of the cliffs that rise before us. I gulp as I stare up at the castle, a little shiver running through me. “It’ s cold here,” I murmur, even though it’ s just towards the end of summer right now.

“You’ ll warm up,” Jesse assures me with a wink. “Besides, see that hill?” he says, and I look where he points. “There are apparently some hot springs over there. If you get too cold, we’ ll just dunk you.”

I move to elbow Jesse in the stomach for this suggestion but he neatly dodges me, laughing.

Anxiety twists in my stomach we continue to walk, though. Can I really do this?

“Stop stressing about it,” Jesse murmurs, leaning close and bumping his shoulder against me, knocking me a bit sideways. I scowl, wishing I was taller.

“You’ re trying to solve problems you haven’ t even come across yet. Just chill out.”

“Classic Jesse advice,” Rafe mutters, shooting him a little glare as we start to climb the hill, “which doesn’ t make anysense right now because we actually have very realproblems to solve. Like the fact that Ari Clark doesn’ t have any ID? And is also in possession of – you know, girl part? And is tiny and about to get his ass beatby a bunch of gigantic wolves?”

“Hey!” I protest, giving Rafe a shove that...well, proves his point more than it does mine, because he doesn’ t budge at all. “I can stand up in a fight against both of you! Don’ t doubt me now!”

“Are you serious, Ariel?” he asks, stopping in his tracks, his shoulders slumping. “Seriously think about this – about everything that you’ re suggesting here. Are you just trying to get away from your asshole fiancé? Or do you actuallywant to train at Alpha Academy?”

My face falls a bit as I realize that his question is a good one – that so far, I’ ve basically been running on adrenaline.

I take a second to think about it, tilting my head back and looking up at the castle on the cliff. And as I think about it...my mind flashes to all the things I wanted to do but was discouraged from because I’ m a Princess and a girl – hockey lessons, and weapons training, and long chats with dad and Uncle Roger about war strategy. It was all boy stuff, but it means a thousand memories of doors closed in my face, a constant reminder that I had to learn a completely different set of skills.

Because I’ m a girl.

Because I’ m...a Princess.

But I can’ t be a Princess right now. I need to hide at least until this all blows over and Edward and his family leave our nation with a treaty intact. That’ s all going to take some serious time.

And quite suddenly, without the weight of my Princess title for the first time since I was eight...I realize how completelyfreeI feel. I can do...whatever I want.

And I know, instinctually, deep in my heart, precisely what I want. My wolf lifts her rose-gold snout to the sky, giving me a little howl of courage.

Tell them she urges.

So, I bring my gaze back to my brother and my cousin. “I want to do this,” I say quietly determined. “If it had ever been an option for me, this is what I’ d have chosen for myself. And now that it is?” I nod steadily. “I want it, Rafe. I want to be here.”

I look around the room while I finish rolling up the wrists and the ankles of my uniform, my hair tucked discreetly up under my cap. And I can’ t help but stare open-mouthed at all of the boyswandering around the barracks.

I mean, it’ s not that I haven’ t been around guys before – but the sight of boy after boy flooding through the door? I mean...it’ s pretty great.

I mean, I’ ve flirted a little – and Edward, he kissed me a few times before the wedding, mostly chaste stuff for press, but in general...

Well, I’ m a Princess

It sort of makes sense that I’ ve lived a pretty sheltered life, right? Any guy who wanted to date me had to get through my gigantic overprotective dad, the King and not many were very willing to do that.

I blush now as I look around at all of these guys in front of me. Because they’ re all so fit, like they’ ve been training for weeks before submitting themselves as candidates for Alpha Academy so that they can hit the ground running.

And I have to admit...it’ s kind of a buffet.

A few guys in particular catch my eye. There’ s a tall blonde one who has set up shop in the bed almost diagonal from us, with a jaw so precisely molded it looks like it was cut with a diamond. And nobody can miss Luca Grant at the center of the room – god, he’ s actually signing autographsBut he’ s just as good looking as he is on TV – maybe even hotter.

And then there’ s a sort of shy, slim boy with dark hair that falls into his eyes who looks moody and watches everyone. I mean, I never thought that was my type before, but now? I have to admit, I find my eyes drawn to him.

Rafe slings his own supplies onto the bed next to Jesse’ s and then smacks my arm as he points to the bunk above his. “Up,” he commands, interrupting my reverie.

“What?” I ask, confused.

“You’ re up here,” he says, patting the upper bunk and giving me a big fake grin that lets me know it’ s not a request. “Where I can watch you. All the time. And smackyou when you stare too openly at all of the guys who are now your comradesnot your eye candy.”

## Comments (1)