

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy

Chapter 31

Jackson takes a long moment to size up Luca, I think feeling more comfortable

with direct confrontation than small talk. “No secrets, Grant,” he says quietly. “Just genuinely f**king good at it.”

Luca's smirk deepens. “At least you're good for the grunt work,” he says quietly,

and my spine straightens at the cruel edge to his words. “Even the military needs

its brutes on the front line.”

The table goes quiet at the clear implication in Luca's words. My eyes flick over

Luca again, unsettled by this aggression.

“I seem to recall,” Jackson says slowly, carefully, “that I beat you out on the intelligence exam too, Grant.”

Jesse's mouth forms into a scandalized, delighted little “O” as he looks eagerly between Jackson and Luca, and a scandalized little laugh stumbles from Ben's

mouth. Rafe and I are completely silent.

Luca just leans back in his chair and grins, flicking his eyes over Jackson like he

knows he could take him.

Even though...honestly, he might be the only person at the table who believes that.

“Thanks for breakfast,” Jackson says, smoothly breaking the awkward silence and standing up from his chair.

“Stay,” I say, leaning forward, the word popping from my lips before I realize it.

“Nah, I'm finished, and I want to warm up,” Jackson says, pushing his chair in and looking towards the tray—bussing station. But before he goes, he flicks his

blue gaze back to me and holds my eyes seriously. “But thank you for the invitation. No one...no one has asked me to eat with them yet. It means a lot.”

I stay still for a moment, captivated by his gaze, but then he just nods to me. And I nod back.

And then he's walking away.

“Ari, why the hell did you ask him to eat with us?” Rafe growls, leaning across

the

table to yell at me once Jackson's out of earshot.

"Because I felt bad for him, Rafe," I say, gesturing in Jackson's direction.

"Didn't

— no one, for two whole weeks you hear what he just said

"And did you ever imagine," Luca says, his voice dry, "that maybe there's a reason why no one asked him to eat with them? Because he's a dangerous jerk?"

I snap my head to glare at Luca, suddenly angry. "Don't talk to me like I'm an idiot, Luca," I say, my voice low. He blinks at me in surprise. "Don't try to pretend

I'm silly enough to not have bothered imagining why people might not like Jackson. But I also don't imagine that most people have your particular reason

for disliking him, okay? Just because you don't like him doesn't mean that everyone else needs to feel the same way."

I hold Luca's gaze while he just stares at me, I think a little shocked to see the funny little Shrimp he's gotten to know push back like this.

"What on earth are you two talking about?" Jesse asks, leaning forward, fascinated.

"Nothing," Rafe snaps, standing up with his own tray and nodding up towards the

clock. "No one's talking about anything anymore. It's time to go."

I take a deep breath, because I know Rafe is right, and push to my feet, my hands shaking a little as I grab my tray. Rafe waits patiently for Luca, Jesse, and

Ben to move ahead, falling in next to me as we walk to bus our trays.

"You're explaining this," he says quietly, glaring down at me, "the moment we get

into the Academy. All right?"

I sigh and look up at him, words on my lips ready to explain —

But then I grin instead, my eyes crinkling as I look up at my brother. "Does that

mean you think I'm going to get in?"

Rafe nods, assured, and then stalks forward to deposit his empty tray, taking my

full one from my hands and putting it on the rack below his. "It does," he says, his

voice sure. "I believe in you, Ari. Even if I'm going to kick your ass for that stunt

the moment we get inside,” he sighs, slinging an arm around my shoulders as we

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head for the gym, “I do think you're going to pull it out. You're a Sinclair, after all.

We don't fail at shit like this.”

Happiness wells in me at my brother's confidence, and honestly?

I think it's precisely what I needed to hear as I head into the gym, ready to meet

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my fate.

We enter the obstacles course in groups of ten according to our ranking, which

means that Luca, Jesse and Rafe are invited in way before Ben and I. I give Jesse and Rafe both hugs and wish them good luck, knowing that I won't see them again until the ceremony in which the final rankings are announced.

We'll

be allowed back in the barracks after the obstacle course, but just to grab our things. We've got to get outside as fast as possible.

Since I'm currently ranked in the middle of the pack a status which will surely change after this obstacle run — I don't have too long to wait.

As they call my name as part of the next group of 10, I wave to Ben, who gives

me a wink and a salute of good luck. I grin as I turn away from him, hoping to hell

he makes it too — Ben, he's become a good friend. It would be heartbreaking to

have to say goodbye to him now.

little As I walk with the group of ten through the entrance to the course, I'm a chagrined to see that Graham Wright is part of my pack. But I sigh and just do my

best to stand far away from him. As we pass through the door, I'm surprised to see a small group of Academy professors in black waiting there, making us all stand in a straight line. I'm studying them, my eyes catching again on the handsome brown-haired professor who I noticed at the intelligence examination.

Today, he holds a shiny black orb in his hands.

But before I can study him further, I do a bit of a double-take, because
Because Jackson is there, at the start line of the obstacle course, kneeling
down

and messing with the tie of his boot of all the things. What the hell...

“Clark!” Someone barks, and my attention is pulled away from my mate. I
shake

my head to clear it and step into place at the back of the line. Once I'm there,
the

professors begin to move slowly down the line, the handsome professor at the
center handing the orb to each of us in turn and observing us carefully for a
few

seconds before taking it back.

Each of the candidates looks as confused as I do after the experience, but...
mean, nobody looks any worse for the wear. So I attempt to pat down my
anxiety

as my

turn comes.

“Candidate Ari Clark,” a Lieutenant says, making notes on a clip board as the
professor comes to stand in front of me. When the Lieutenant nods that he's
ready, the professor looks me seriously in the eye.

“Please take the sphere in your hands, Clark. Nothing else is required of you.”

“What is it?” I murmur, looking down at the glass ball. But no one answers me.

As

I stare at the orb, I realize that it's not a solid ball of obsidian glass, but
instead...

clear glass, in which shadows swirl and pulse. I go still with surprise as I
watch

the black clouds, and as I stare I even see.. little pulses of purple lightning
flash

through them, as thin as thread and so fast you'd swear your eyes were
playing

tricks on

you.

“Thank you,” the professor says, and I jump a little before handing the sphere
back to him.

“You're welcome,” I reply, and then I blush, because I feel a little ridiculous. I
mean, I didn't actually do him any favors. He smirks at me, looking me up and
down before he moves with his colleagues to the back of the room.

I'm still staring after him when someone barks my name again.


I twist and then curse as I realize that all of the other candidates are lined up

at
the start of the course waiting for me.

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I run over, falling in line, putting my hands on my left knee in a runners stance, ready to make a break for it when the whistle sounds.

To my shock, a tall form takes the spot next to me in line.



Найди свою вторую половинку. Раз и навсегда!

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But, of course, I know immediately who it is even though I don't look up. I can tell

by sense of smell.

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Why are you still here?" I whisper, feeling like it is..not chance, that Jackson is running this route with me and not with my brother. But why would he do that? Does he...does he mean me harm again? The content is on ! Read the latest chapter there!

"Problems with my shoe," Jackson says, his voice light as he too bends over, ready

to run.

I exhale, trying to put my anxiety out of my mind — because whatever Jackson's

going to do in the course, I have no control over it now. Better to concentrate on

what I can handle.

“Did you read the handbook?” Jackson asks suddenly, and this time I look up at

Chapter al

him, completely baffled. Why why on earth is he asking me this seconds before

we enter the course?

“What handbook?” I ask.

He turns a little to look down at me, frustrated. “The one your f**king uncles wrote, Clark.”

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I scowl, realizing that I never even knew there was a handbook because

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Rafe and Jesse — they've probably had it memorized since they were

: “ »

kids. “No, I never read the handbook,

I murmur, turning my eyes back to the gauntlet ahead of us. The content is on ! Read the latest

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« . . »

Interesting phrasing,” Jackson murmurs, glancing over at the Lieutenant at the sidelines, who starts to raise his whistle to his lips.

« :

When they describe the rules for . Pn)

going through the course, it's very clear that candidates will be disqualified for actively helping each

LO

other. But, there isn't any language

that prevents you from using other
: 0 : ”

candidates' bodies as leverage.” The
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“What?” I breathe, staring at him in utter confusion.

But Jackson he just turns his face away.

And suddenly the bell whistles, and I swear he's gone in a flash-

And I'm just left standing here alone on the start line, wondering what the hell

“Go, Clark!” the Lieutenant barks. “The trial has begun!”

Cursing at my idiocy for letting him throw me off the game, I launch into a
sprint,

heading into the course already behind on my time.

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I'm gasping for breath by the time I get to the sand pit through which I
have to

army crawl under a heavy cargo net. This obstacle marks the final third
of the

course, which means that I'm almost done but it's also the part that
always slows

me down the most.

I dive in without hesitation, trying to push myself as hard as I can, not
giving

myself any time to hesitate or take a break even though my heart is
pounding

with the exertion.

Rafe is right. I'm a Sinclair. We don't fail at shit like this.

And the chain climb, which is next?

Well, I'm just going to have to handle that when I get there, aren't I?

In the meantime, I use my legs to propel me forward, my thighs burning
as I use

my stomach muscles to hold my body in the air as much as I can, my

forearms

moving fast to take my weight as I move towards the edge.

By the time I get to the end of the sand pit I'm red and panting, my tongue sticky

with sand kicked up into the air by the sixty—some cadets who are already ahead

of

like me in line, including Jackson, who has already overlapped me. As usual, he

Rafe, Jesse, and Luca — goes through the course twice in the time it takes the

rest of us to do it once, earning a completion bonus.

But, considering that he didn't even look my way when he passed me...I'm

counting my blessings.

I roll out from under the cargo rope, giving myself ten seconds to lay on the

ground and catch my breath, as Rafe advised I do, before I try to magically

levitate myself up this chain or something —

But as I lay stay still, carefully counting my breaths, suddenly a heap of sand hits

me in the face —

And I gasp, sputtering and roiling over onto my stomach as I frantically wipe at

my face, hacking sand from my throat. I finally shake the majority of the sand

away and get a glimpse of f**king Graham Wright smirking over his shoulder at

me as he starts to pull himself up the chain

God, what an asshole-

He puts a further thirty second dent in my time as I work to spit the sand out of

my mouth and ensure that it doesn't get in my lungs. Then I pull myself to my feet

and start to jog towards the chains, cursing the Wright family and passively

plotting their deaths when suddenly I stumble in surprise, because

Because f**king Jackson is right there, kneeling at the corner of the chain obstacle, again tying his damn shor
I slow my pace but keep moving, trying to figure out what the hell is going on with him —
I mean, honestly, if his boots are messing with him that much, why doesn't he just take them off and go? This is going to put a severe dent in his time he'll still get the completion bonus, but this will be the worst time he's ever recorded, and he'll certainly have given the title for this course to Rafe, who...
But as I jog towards the chains, my mind working fast, Jackson raises his head.
And looks directly into my eyes.
I slow further and he scowls at me, glancing down at my feet, clearly telling me to get a move on.
I hesitate for a second but then start to run, faster now. He lifts his eyes again to mine and nods, one, solidly. And then, shocking me, he returns his gaze to his shoe, his body curled over, his shoulders flat above him almost like...
Like...a table.
Or a platform.
I gasp as I suddenly realize what the hell is happening.
And that...that I have one shot to take advantage of this gift Jackson has laid at my feet —
And I don't know why he did it — maybe as an apology for trying to choke me?
Maybe as a thanks for the simple act of inviting him to breakfast?
But for whatever reason he did it — Jackson has opened a door for me to f**king make it into the academy.
His words at the start of the obstacle come back to me as I pick up speed
“There isn't any language that prevents you from using other candidates“
bodies

as leverage.”

And as my focus lands on the flat expanse of his wide shoulders?
see exactly how he’s positioned them for me.

As leverage.

With a final burst of speed, I launch myself into the air over Jackson's
head, my

right foot landing on flat of his back between his shoulders, and I shout
as I

straighten my knee and push

Jackson lets out a yell and stands, acting for anyone who is watching like
I did

this without his consent – shouting after me and cursing like a damn
sailor at the

little Shrimp who used him like a damn step stool.

But the leverage, and the fact that Jackson shouted and stood just as my
foot hit

his back – it only pushed me up higher.

And the boost is everything I need.

I grab the chain about eight feet off the ground, and I grit my teeth,
putting every

ounce of effort and will into my biceps as I haul myself the final two feet
onto the

platform at the top.

But two feet? Two feet I can do.

I ignore Graham's shouts behind me as he calls me a cheater, and

Jackson's

pretend curses, grinning like an idiot as I sprint forward on to the next
obstacle.

But the rest is cake -And as I cross the finish line ten minutes later, my
coming in

short pants, and glance up at the time?

1 grin, because it's absolutely the best time I've ever made minutes faster
than

I've ever made it before.

Which means...

breath

a whole fifteen

it's not a good time, the
I start to laugh a little hysterically now. Because I mean obstacle course
is still by
far my weakest test, and it counts for so much in the final
ranking
But I think...I think it just might be good enough
And as Jackson crosses the finish line a second after me, I swear there's a
little
smile on his lips as he glances my way.
I fall in at Jackson's side as the Lieutenants nod to us, letting us know
they've got
our times, my breath coming pathetically short in comparison to
Jackson's even.
controlled breathing.
But neither of us acknowledge it or even say a word as we pass through
to the
barracks.
Because whatever is done is done.
And only the rankings truly matter now.
Inside the barracks, Jackson still doesn't speak to me as he moves to his
bunk
and I go to mine. I glance around, looking for Jesse and Luca and Rafe —
Ben
won't have come out yet — but none of them are here. Lieutenants move
around
the room, barking at us to hurry, and as much as I'd like a second to run
to the
bathroom and clean up, there's just no time.
So, I gather my pack, which really just has my spare blanket and my
toothbrush
kit in it I didn't come with any personal belongings, like everyone else
did — and
head anxiously for the front door and out into the sunlight.
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Like everyone else, I head
immediately for the line of
candidates who already stand in
formation, organized according to

our ranking yesterday. Everyone stands looking forward, their hands clasped behind their backs like the soldiers they hope to become, their feet shoulder-width apart.

A Lieutenant directs me to my spot, a little black dot with a small number 70 painted on it. I exhale, tucking my hands behind my back and lacing my fingers together, assuming the position. As soon as I do, though, I start to peer around, looking for my family and my friends, hoping to hell that everything went okay for them.

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We're all pretty spread out on the wide lawn at the base of the cliff on which the Academy castle is built, the entrance just a black door built into the wall of rock directly ahead of us. I curse my short stature again as I try to see between shoulders and torsos,

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but luckily we're far enough apart that

:)

I get a glimpse of Rafe's dark head rising high above pretty much

75

everyone else's. Near him at the The content is on ! Read the latest chapter there!

front is Jesse, and down the line to their right is Jackson
spare a glance for 1 ucx, and consider looking behind me to see if Ben has
emerged yet, but then my eyes return to Jackson and I consider, again,
why he
helped me today
But then my stomach sinks as I wonder god, did he help me today?
I go over the events again in my mind.
Jackson waiting for me at the starting line.
Jackson telling me about a vague rule in the handbook – a handbook I've
never
heard of before.
Jackson kneeling at the base of the chains, which he must know is my
worst
obstacle –
And then the way he looked at me before setting his shoulders flat,
basically
inviting me to use him as leverage.
But...was it even real?
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If it was – Jackson just gave me the
boost I needed to get into the
opie ' 5
academy. But if it wasn't... go white
as I realize that Jackson – who
basically tried to kill me twice – he
may have just gotten me disqualified
from candidacy. If it is actually illegal
f)
to use another candidate's body as
leverage, which seems like it should
be... The content is on
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Then Jackson just fooled me into breaking the rules during the last test.
My face goes white as I realize the risk I just took, and I curse myself
heartily as
a fool as I realize that I trusted him because he's my mate-

But Jackson — he has no idea that I'm his mate. As far as he knows, I'm just the shrimp who is somehow keeping his mate from him- precisely the person he'd want to eliminate, precisely the person who he'd want to lure into complacency with an awkward apology and by accepting an invitation to eat at breakfast.

I press my eyes shut, stifling a moan, realizing just how stupid I've been today.

God, I shouldn't have trusted him I should have just tried to do it on my own,

taken the penalty for being so slow...

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Unless...

I mean, isn't it just as possible that Jackson, like Luca, does sense a connection

between us? That he might want to help?

“Candidates,” the Captain's voice booms out, artificially amplified this time so that

we're all sure to hear him. “Congratulations on your completion of these two

rigorous weeks. It is now time to announce the names of the 96 newest cadets at

Alpha Academy. In order, those who have been accepted are as follows...”

And as the Captain pauses, reaching behind him for the official list of final

rankings, I gulp dry air down around the lump in my throat.

Because in just a few minutes I'll learn the truth: whether my mate truly saved

me, or if he intentionally ruined my dream of becoming a cadet at the Alpha

Academy,

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I'm shaking as the Captain places the list on the podium in front of him, all thoughts leaving my mind as he studies the names. Because as much as I'm desperate to figure out what happened, all I can do is listen and wait.

“The cadet in the number 1 position,” the Captain says, his voice completely without emotion, “is Rafe Sinclair.”

A shout goes up from the gathered candidates as their champion walks forward

to shake the Captain's hand and pass through the doors into the Academy.

And

even as anxiety still rolls within me, I can't help the smile that bursts onto my face.

No one is surprised at his taking first — Rafe has stayed at the top of the list this

entire time, and as Dominic Sinclair's son and near—identical replica, he was sort

of a shoe—in for the spot. But I'm prouder than all of them, because he's my big

brother and as much as Rafe made it look easy, he worked his ass off for this his

whole life.

Rafe deserves it, and I couldn't be happier or prouder of him. My eyes well with

tears even as I cheer for my brother, because I wish mom and dad were here to

see it. That's not allowed, of course, but still.

I know they'd be so proud they could burst.

Jesse is called third, and I cheer just as hard for my cousin alongside everyone

else as I catch sight of his cheerful face as he shakes the Captain's hand.

Jesse

lets out a good-spirited whoop that makes me laugh as he dashes for the doors,

clearly so eager to get inside he can't help but run.

My eyes return to the Captain then, and I lose track of time as I listen to the names go by, watch hands shake as cadet after cadet is admitted. Jackson's

name is announced next, coming in at S — I expected him to be higher, but he

must have lost time on the obstacle course either helping me or screwing me over.

I scowl as Alan Wright is called, but the distaste is wiped away when Luca's name is announced soon after, a big cheer going out for our resident celebrity.

Luca showboat that he is riffs a little bit, waving out to the crowd of candidates as

he walks to the Captain's podium to shake his hand.

The Captain rolls his eyes a little at Luca's vanity as he shakes his hand, but he can't help but smile either. Luca — he's a little bit irresistible, isn't it? I bite my lip a little

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as I watch him pass through the doors, because I am well aware that I'm the one

who is the least able to resist his charms.

The numbers pass in a haze now through the twenties, the thirties, the forties and fifties — I don't even pay attention, because I know I didn't get that high. Pretty much everyone ahead of me on the field has been cleared out by now, which makes sense.

As the numbers hit the late sixties, though, my stomach starts to turn.

Because

some of the young men behind me have been called, having risen in the final ranking, which means that some of us who were safe before the final ranking are

going to be cut.

The Captain reaches the seventieth name. And it's not me.

A boy behind me moves forward, rushing across the lawn to shake the Captain's hand.

My heart sinks. Because, I mean, I knew I was going to take a hit in the ranking,

but seventy was my spot.

I hold my breath as the guys to my right are called, as the numbers make their way through the seventies.

As number eighty is announced, and it's not me, my heart sinks.

The numbers continue to crawl upwards.

As each passes, I become increasingly convinced that Jackson tricked me. I mean — he's clever, I always knew he was smart. But how could I have been so

stupid?

The Captain announces the 86(th) candidate. Still not me, and still not Ben. I turn

now, risking it, knowing that there can't be any consequences worse than being

cut from the Academy. My eyes immediately meet Ben's, and I know that his expression matches mine.

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Dread fills every inch of me and Ben feels precisely the same. Thirty-four people

are still left standing on this field, and only ten of us will become cadets.

What are the chances that both of us will make it?

Hell, what's the chance that even one will?

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About 30 percent chance for one, my wolf unhelpfully supplies, and inwardly I scowl at our propensity for fast math. But just about 6 percent for both of your Shit. Shit. I mean, I know it's more than just a random selection — that our previous rankings come into play...

But as the Captain continues to announce names? Our odds continue to go down.

The Captain announces number 90 and I hang my head, wondering what the hell

I'll do next. I mean, I guess I'll go home, but how the hell will I get there? Rafe and I we never even discussed the possibility —

I mean, there's a train, right?

“Number 91,” the Captain says, his voice bland and a little bored.

And someone will let me use a phone I guess I'll just...call my mom

“Ari Clark.”

My head whips up and I gasp.

Because-

That's-

That's my name —

I mean, it's not my name, but —

A hysterical little laugh bursts from me as I stumble forward. I can feel eyes on me as a small, half-hearted cheer goes up — nothing like the cheering at the beginning, but most of the cadets are inside now, and most of the people behind

me are feeling just as horribly as I was a moment ago —

The Captain locks eyes with me and I hurry my pace, eager to get across the lawn and shake his hand before he does something ridiculous, like realizes he made a mistake —

Or figures out that I'm a girl —

My feet move almost without me realizing it, and suddenly I'm right in front of him, reaching out my hand.

“Well done, Clark,” the Captain says, a little smirk playing at his lips. I stare at him in surprise even as he clasps my hand because he didn’t say anything to most of the other new cadets. “Bit of a surprise, weren’t you? I’ll be seeing more of you inside.”

I stumble away, still shocked, as the Captain releases my hand and continues on with the names.

He’ll be seeing more of me inside? What — what does that mean?

But I don’t have time to think about it, because suddenly the black doors of the Academy are in front of me, and my heart is absolutely pounding as I walk up to them.

Because...I mean...

I did it.

I feel tears slipping down my cheeks as I walk slowly towards the doors, staring

up at them, really realizing for the first time that...that I’m a cadet at the Alpha Academy. That I earned my spot, proved myself alongside everyone else.

That I belong here.

A huge rush of pride blooms in me as I cross the threshold and accept my spot

as number 91, Ari Clark. Cadet of Alpha Academy.

A huge shout goes up as soon as I step through the door, and I gasp as someone grabs me off my feet, spinning me in the air.

But I know instantly, by touch and feel, by scent, that it’s my brother —

And I give a little shriek of happiness and wrap my arms around his neck, tucking

face against his neck as I cry and shout for the joy of it.

my

“You did it, Ari!” Rafe shouts, his voice breaking in his excitement and his pride. “I

f**king knew you could do it! God damn it, I’m so proud of you!”

He spins me twice more before putting me back on my feet, and I stumble back a

step, dizzy, but grinning up at him —

It doesn’t last long, because Jesse grabs me next. “Shrimp!” he shouts, “I always



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ad

thrilled believed in you, my Shrimpy little cousin!” And I burst out laughing now, and loving him loving all of them Jesse puts me down, pressing a big kiss to my cheek, and then I'm in a third set of arms.

And let's just say that I'm glad that the entrance hall is filled with joyful shouts, because when Luca presses me close and that summer—sun, citrus—and—apricots scent hits me...

Well, the little moan that escapes my mouth is...deeply embarrassing, to say the least.

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Good job, Shrimp.” Luca says, his voice soft, and I tilt my head up to smile at him. His eyes sparkle as he looks down at me, running a hand 5 , 5 ;

over my head like he'd be stroking it over my hair if he could see it. The intimacy of the gesture, it sends a . . . “

shiver right down my spine. "I knew
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you could do it." The content is on
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"No, you didn't," I say on impulse, wrinkling my nose up at him. "I bet you had
all

sorts of bets against me —

"I did not!" he protests, laughing.

"Admit it," I say, pointing a finger up at him. "You had at least five bucks on me
getting my ass kicked out of here —"

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Luca laughs harder at this, shaking
his head, but his arms slacken when
another roar goes up at the door. And

I spin, moving away from him, my
mouth spreading into a wide smile
because the next candidate who

comes through the door? The

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I know that face, that wide smile.

"Number 95!" Ben shouts, throwing his hands above his head as he leaps
through the door.

0 too as

And suddenly I'm we all move forward to hug our friend, welcoming him to the
crew.

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Ben — he's the last of us to make it

,
through, but he's one of us now. We
all are — cadets, equals. I wrap Ben in

a warm hug, telling him how glad I
am that he made it, him whispering
the same to me. And then we both

pull away, laughing and shaking our
heads at each other, wondering how
the hell we made it through. The

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But we don't do that for long, both of us turning towards the long hall through the cliff, to where our future waits.

"Come on, baby sister," Rafe whispers just so I can hear, slinging an arm around my shoulder, Jesse coming to my other side. "Welcome to Alpha Academy. Let's get the adventure started."

And the three of us march forward together, eager to see what the future holds.

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Chapter 34

I gape a little as we walk down the long, dark tunnel towards...

I mean, I don't even know what we're walking towards.

"Where are we going?" I ask Rafe, a little breathless with intrigue and excitement.

"Into the Academy," he hisses back, like it's a secret, but I know he's kidding even before I glare up at him.

"Uniforms," Jesse says smoothly, running a hand through his hair like he's very

suave. "We've got to get fitted, because Academy cadets always look good."

"What?" I say, a little confused. "Honestly, that can't be first —"

"His dad," Rafe says, "the vainest man in the world —"

"Um, justifiably," Jesse counters, grinning.

"Yeah, whatever," Rafe says, grinning, "anyway, Uncle Roger really did decide that all of the cadets enrolled here need to look their best at all times. So, yeah,"

he shrugs, "first thing is fittings for uniforms."

"Whoa," I say, and my awe is not simply for Uncle Roger's semi—predictable flare

for looking good, but also for the cavernous room we walk into next. Because,

I mean, the tunnel was literally just that a tunnel, with rough walls and low lighting.

But this?

"Damn," Luca says, a smirk on his face as he comes up next to Jesse. "Looks like this city boy has finally made it, haven't I?*

I nod as I stare around the room, with its three-story arching stone ceilings

and polished floors. And I mean, this is the bottom of the castle, where I assumed the

dungeons were. If this is here, what the hell is upstairs?

"This way," Rafe says, tugging me along towards a line of professors waiting at a

set of tables ahead of us, a set of boxes in front of them.

"Ah, Cadet Sinclair," one of the professors says, smiling at Rafe as he steps forward. "Naturally we thought you'd be one of the first to appear, but now I see

that you

Chapter 34

were waiting for..." he peers beyond Rafe and blinks a little at Ben and I, clearly

having no idea who we are.

"Some friends." Rafe says blandly, smiling at the professor and putting on his best Prince and Heir persona. "Is there something here we need to collect?"

"Your temporary uniform," the professor says, smiling and lifting a box into Rafe's

arms, "sized according to your candidate apparel. Also within the box is your dorm information and key, the Cadet Handbook, and a map of the parts of the castle which you'll need to find your classes. Class information will be along this

evening shortly after your meal."

I peer around Rafe, listening interestedly, and I jump a little when I hear my own

name.

"Cadet Clark," the professor repeats, and as I turn I realize with surprise that it's

the dark-haired professor again — the one who made us hold that strange orb this afternoon. I move eagerly towards him, seeing he has what I assume is my

box in his hands. "Congratulations, Cadet." he says, his voice dry and amused in

a way that makes me look up into his eyes as I take the box from his hands.

"Thank you," I say, and then I hesitate because...I mean, he's just staring at me

in this knowing way.

"You're welcome," he says softly. "I'll look forward to seeing much, much more of

you, Cadet...Clark."

My lips twist up into a practiced smile, a knee—jerk reaction after years of Princess training that taught me to be sweet to anyone who says they look forward to seeing me again, but my reaction just makes his own smile deepen.

And suddenly, as he holds my gaze, I get the sneaking suspicion that he knows....absolutely everything about me.

As I back away from him I realize that I am on much shakier ground here, and

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under a great deal more scrutiny, as a cadet in the Academy than as a candidate

in the barracks.

I clear my throat, straightening my shoulders, doing my best to be, I don't know,

masculine. "Thank you, sir," I say seriously. "I'll look forward to you seeing you,

100."

But he just chuckles a little, clearly pleased and entertained, and nods to me.

Chapter 34

And I scowl, turning away as Luca, Ben, and Jesse accept their own boxes, my

mind racing as I follow Rafe to the next step in our process.

Rafe's already rifling through his box as we step into the next room, which is smaller and has walls covered in mirrors. I look around passively, my mind still reeling from my interaction to the professor, who was the second person to tell me today that they're going to see more of me...

What the hell do the Captain and this brown-haired professor teach? They're so

different — I can't imagine, at all, that they'd teach something together. So.....

But suddenly my eyes lock on a figure across the room and I go very still in shock before I suddenly burst out laughing, realizing that I'm looking at myself in

the mirror on the far wall.

"What?" Jesse asks, coming to my side.

"Seriously?" I say, grinning at myself as I turn a little, observing my plain face with

no makeup, my hair tucked expertly up below my cap, my baggy fatigues.

“That's
what I look like?”

Jesse frowns at me for a second and then looks across the room like I'm
doing,

his face bursting into a grin as he sees my reflection there too. He laughs.

“Yup!

You look good, Shrimpy!”

“No wonder no one takes me seriously,” I murmur. Because honestly, I do
look

like a boy, but I'm sure that I'm the smallest, wimpiest, most pink—cheeked
little

guy that's ever walked through these doors.

“Don't worry,” a girl's voice says, and I go still when I hear it, turning towards it
in

shock as she laughs a little too and waves me forward. I mean, it's not like I
recognize the voice or anything — it's just....a girl. “A lot of guys have that
reaction when they see themselves for the first time in candidate grey after
two

weeks,” she says, smiling at me.

She nods to the round platform in front of which she kneels on a little ottoman.

“Come forward,” she says. “I'll take your measurements, and we'll have you
looking dashing in a custom uniform before you know it.”

I hesitate, realizing suddenly that this young woman

she wants to touch my

body, to figure out the precise dimensions of my form. And while my baggy
candidate uniform conceals everything about my slight figure...

SUN, LU Mar

Chapter 21

She is going to have access to some details I don't want anyone to have.

The girl shrugs. “No worries, if you're shy, I can take someone else first

I glance quickly where Rafe and Jesse are already standing on platforms, but
when I see that their tailors are older men...

“Til go,” Luca says, starting to walk past me and flashing his charming smile at
the girl tailor, who is probably just about my age. “Hi, my name is Luca, it's
lovely

to meet you —”

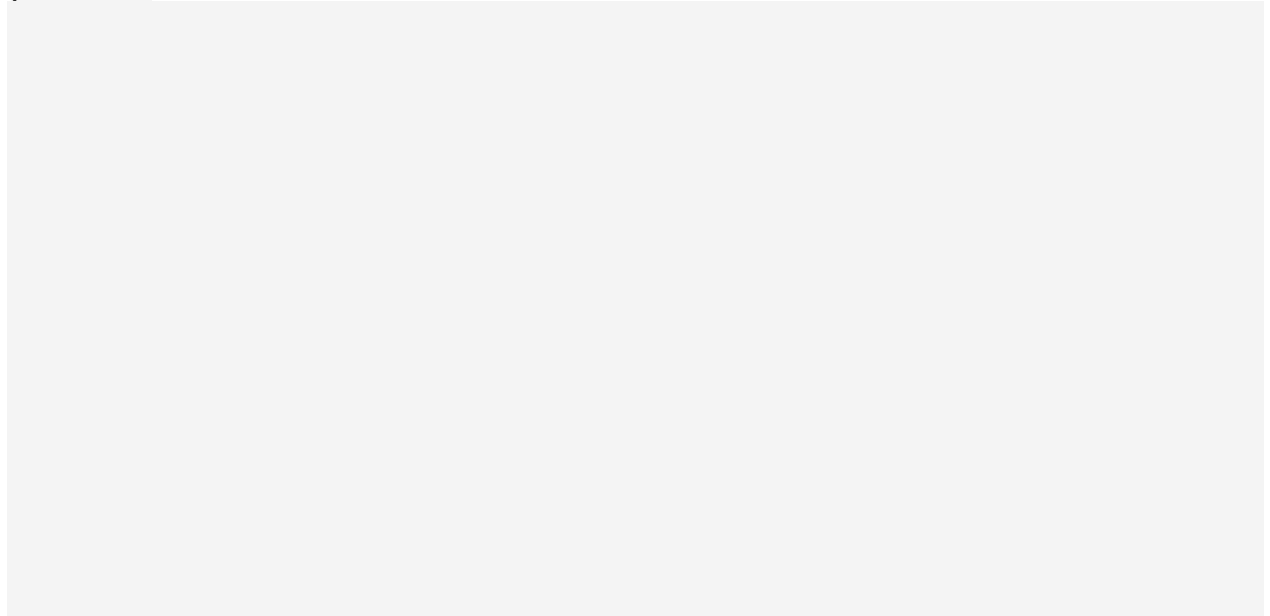
“Hey, no cutting.” Ben says as I squeak a little, realizing I'm losing my chance
to

be measured by the only girl here. Luca falls back a step as Ben grabs him by
the sleeve. “Let Ari go first, cheater.”

“I was called before Ari,” Luca protests, but I scurry forward and Luca just

laughs,
letting me.

Almost shaking with anxiety, because this could go very wrong, I step onto the platform.



Найди свою вторую половинку. Раз и навсегда!

ad

“Congratulations,” the girl says, smiling up at me. “Can you tell me your name for the list?”

I do so, and she makes a note on the pad next to her before reaching for her measuring tape.

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“ ” . .

Um,” I say, looking anxiously at my brother and cousin for help, but

, -

they're talking to each other and have apparently forgotten all about me.

us)

Listen, you don't really have to take measurements for me, you can just..give me a uniform the same

; .) .

size as this one that I'm laughing.

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Unfortunately, the girl just laughs as she reaches forward, starting to measure the length of my leg from

: “

my hip to the floor. “Cadet Clark, you

: : . v * ,

are swimming in this uniform. Don't

, <

worry — we'll get you suited up very

. : ”

nicely — sharp and trim!” The content

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« » .

No, really,” I protest, taking a step forward as she stands and moves behind me, tugging the pack from my back even as I try to cling to it.

« - ”

Honestly, I prefer to be...unfitted...

She scolds me good naturedly for being so shy before measuring the width of my shoulders and then the length from the name of my neck to my lower back. The content is on

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chapter there!

I jump a little as her hand grazes the top of my butt, but she just laughs at me

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Chapter 34

again, going on with her work, and suddenly her hands appear in front of me as

she passes the tape from one hand to the other, starting to loop it around my chest.

“No, please.” I whisper, begging and doing my best to spin around.

But the girl, she just keeps going. “What, are you ticklish?” she laughs, her

words. kind and teasing as her hands move lightning-fast in a practiced manner, tightening the tape first around my chest, and then my waist, and then my hips.

I hold my breath as her hands go still and she raises her head, her eyes slowly

meeting mine as she considers the particular ratio of my dimensions.

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Chapter 35

My breathe freezes in my lungs as the young tailor and I stare at each other, neither of us blinking.

I mean, I am not someone who can claim anything close to the dangerous curves

of a temptress, but I am decidedly a girl. Like my mom, I have smaller breasts, but my waist is small and my hips are far from narrow.

The seamstress stares at me for another second before she blinks rapidly, clarity

suddenly coming to her face, studying me as she puts the pieces together.

“Please,” I say, lifting my hands up and shaking my head vehemently, “please, I

am begging you...”

And then a grin bursts onto her mouth.

My stomach absolutely sinks to the floor in relief.

The girl's smile widens and she nods once, glancing over at the other tailors, who

have not looked our way. “I'll fudge the measurements,” she whispers, nodding to

me again, more eagerly this time. “Give you a little extra room for.....mystery. And

I'll send along some stretchy fabric for...”

She quickly gestures towards her own breasts, just subtly, and relief floods through

1. me.

“Thank you,” I whisper as she beams and finishes up measuring my arms, around my neck, and finally my inseam. “Thank you, I owe you everything.”

“You're welcome,” she says, looking up at me as if she genuinely means it.

“I'm...

I'm really excited for you, Cadet Clark. I think it's great.”

And as we grin at each other, I quite suddenly wish we had more time-

Because she seems like the kind of girl that I could really talk to. And, all in a rush, I suddenly miss girl time with a vehemence that surprises me. I mean, I love my brother and my cousin and all my new friends here. But if I could just have ten minutes to sit and talk to a girl who is my friend and confidant, who I can laugh with and spill my heart to...

"Go ahead," she says, nodding her head to the side and giving me a wink. "You're all finished. Uniforms will be delivered tomorrow. Good luck!"

I grin my thanks to her again and, while I probably should be worried that she's lying and is going to tell her superiors the moment I get out of the room, somehow as I watch her finish up her notes, I am not nervous at all. But I admit, I am a little jealous when I notice that Luca is the next one to step on her pedestal as I sling on my pack and pick up my boxed temporary uniform. And as she greets him, he's already smiling that too—charming smile. When the nice tailor looks up at him, her eyes widen with surprise and pleasure, and I can see that his charm and his dimples are already doing their work. "Come on, jealous," Jesse whispers to me. He's already out in the hall, and he laughs as he pulls me away from the doorway. "Time to go to the dorms. She's not going to steal your man in the next two minutes."

I scowl at the thought because I mean, she is pretty and clearly very nice. But Jesse is right — I have other things to wonder about right now. "The dorms?" I ask, sufficiently distracted by the thought of it. And suddenly I laugh at myself, because how can this not be the first thing I checked? I balance

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my box on one arm, lifting open the top and reaching my hand in, searching for the little piece of paper that I know has my dorm assignment written on it. I mean, where will I be living? Will it even be close to Rafe and Jesse? What will the bathrooms be like —

"Don't worry about that," Rafe says, grinning at me and putting a hand on my

arm

as I search. "We made sure you're in with us."

"With...with you?" I ask, looking between them. "I'm rooming with you?"

"It's a big suite," Jesse says, slipping an arm around my shoulders. "We had them add a little matchbox bed in the corner for our pet shrimp. Wasn't a problem."

"How do you — how did you already pull strings and make changes?" I breathe,

shocked and suddenly very excited. "Did you already know your room before today?"

"Mom and dad....might have pulled some strings before we enrolled as candidates," Rafe says, "just in case we got admitted as cadets." He shrugs like

it's no big deal, which just makes me burst out laughing.

"Nepotism!?" I chide, shaking my head at him. "You used nepotism to get the best suite in the place!?"

"Hey, we rarely use our royal privilege for anything." Rafe says, slinging an arm

around my

as he starts walking down the hall, taking me with him. "Just this once-

"Just this once," I scoff, laughing at him, "how about the fact that we grew up in a

palace, and had world—class educations by the time we were sixteen —"

"Or these looks," Jesse says, gesturing to his admittedly gorgeous face, "completely inherited. I did nothing to earn this."

"And our titles," I continue, making Rafe laugh even more at his understatement.

"Really, Rafe," Jessie considers, nodding, "being a duke has gotten me a serious

amount of tail, and your Prince status "

I gasp, spinning to Jesse, fascinated and dying to know more.

"Enough!" Rafe booms, interrupting and dropping his arm from my shoulder so he can give Jesse a shove. "Fine, you both got me, we're spoiled rotten, and mommy and daddy got us the nice room. I admit it! But...you're not going to guilt

me into giving it up!" He grins at me. "It's a really nice room."

"Who cares about that anymore," I breathe, rapt, "tell me about the tail!"

But Rafe just groans, shaking his head and striding ahead. "Drop it, Ari!" he calls

back. "We're not having this conversation! Ever!"

I step closer to Jesse as we hurry along.

“Tell me tell me tell me,” I whisper, looking up at him, my face all eagerness.

“It all starts five years ago,” he says, his voice very wise voice as he slides his arm Rafe’s place around my shoulder, “when Rafe met this very nice foreign exchange student named Theresa

in

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“ ” . . . :

Jesse!” Rafe barks out, spinning in

c . “

the hall, his expression appalled. “If



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ad

you say one more word I will tell her
f)

everything about you — and there's
way more of that The content is on

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chapter there!

Jesse and I burst out laughing as we catch up with Rafe. “I love this,” I say as
we

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reach the doors of a gorgeous brass

elevator that will take us...honestly, I

. ' . " "

have no idea where it will take me. "I love Alpha Academy — who knew there was so much gossip involved

" 5

—" The content is on !

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"There is no gossip." Rafe growls, glaring at me. But then he smirks and raises

an eyebrow. "Unless..." he says, his voice slow, "you want there to be. Ari."

And I gasp, remembering that he does know parts of my mate drama that Jesse

doesn't and vice versa — and I glare back at him.

"Wait what?" Jesse says, grinning and looking between us. "Rafe has gossip about you?"

"Why don't we all just declare a stalemate!" I say all in a rush, grinning up at my

family. "Full stop on all dramatic news for the time being. Yes?"

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And as the elevator doors open with a pleasant little ding, we all step inside and agree to the terms, even though Jesse gives me a wink, letting

' A 5

me know that he'll spill at the first opportunity. I grin and lean in to nudge him with my shoulder, letting

= J

him know I'm ready when he is. The

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the latest chapter there!

if that's

The elevator whooshes us up into the air, faster than I thought would be possible

for an ancient castle like this. And as it does, I feel my spirits rise too even possible.

Because I've certainly got secrets to keep, but right now? For the time being, at

least for the next twelve hours, through my first evening and night at Alpha Academy?

It seems like those secrets are going to hold.
And right now, that's all I can ask for.
When the elevator dings and the doors open again, a little fascinated noise spills
from my mouth. Because this — this really looks like a castle.
“Come on,” Rafe says, grinning at me and striding forward, pulling a little iron key
from his box.
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Chapter 36

I hurry along with my brother and my cousin, staring around at the stone hallway
that meets in gothic arches above our heads, at the windows scattered along the
right-hand wall that look out over the landscape.
I grin, because I thought I'd gotten used to the view from the barracks — but this
high? I feel like I can see everything, and the wide grey landscape around the castle is desolate and gorgeous in its own way. My steps slow despite me as I
wander over to one of the windows, which looks north towards the palace, towards home, where mom and dad are —
And Mark and Junic too — god, how long as it been since I thought about them
I'm a bad big sister-
“Ari!” I jump a little at Rafe's frustrated bark and then laugh and hurry along to catch up.
We wind our way up the staircase at the far end of the hall, two stories which I'm
pleased to see takes my breath away less than I thought it would. I guess two weeks of workouts really has helped me out in regards to my fitness, at least a little bit.
But when we get to the top of the staircase — which must be the highest level of
the
Rafe strides eagerly down the hall, leading us to a broad wooden door at the center. I glance around, but don't see many other doors on this level.
castle
“Are we, like, alone up here?” I ask, curious.
“It's a more private floor,” Rafe answers, inserting the key in the lock and

deftly

twisting it. "But, the suites are meant to accommodate more than one Cadet, so

they're a little larger."

The lock clicks and Rafe grins at me before opening the door.

"Jesse, Ari," he says, proud and eager, "welcome home."

And then he pushes the door open, and my jaw feels like it hits the floor.

"Oh my god," I breathe as I step into what has to be the most gorgeous room I've

ever seen.

I drop my box immediately on the floor along with my pack as I step in,

spinning

around to take it all in.

Chapter 96

"Whoaaa," Jesse says, laughing with his own joy. "This is amazing!"

Rafe just grins with pride, striding in like he planned it all. Which, I mean, he probably did.

I cover my mouth with my hands as I stare around the gorgeous room, which has

high steepled ceilings like the arches outside. At the center of the room is a lovely

little living area set before a huge hearth where the logs are already laid out for a

fire, ready to keep us warm. A set of worn furniture couches and chairs before the

fireplace, mismatched but looking well-loved and comfortable.

sits

Beyond that, in the two far corners of the room, are two huge beds to accommodate the two huge Alphas for which this room was designed. I grin

as

Jesse folds back the ornate wooden screen that sets his little bedroom area apart

and then leaps onto the plush bed that lays behind it.

"Oh yeah, this one's mine!" he shouts, already snuggling into the wealth of blankets and pillows waiting there.

"Fine by me." Rafe says, grinning and tossing his box down on the bed in the other corner, which has rich velvet drapes all around it that he can draw

together

for his own privacy. Between the beds are two bureaus, and then two desks, presumably for homework —

I mean, if there even is homework. I have no idea what the coursework will be

like here or will everything we do be physical? I honestly don't know
But as I consider it, I turn, frowning a little.
Because where do I...

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I mean, Jesse joked about a match box, but...I turn to the corner looking for it.
“Over here, little sister,” Rafe says, grinning at me as he strides across the
room.

I go a little still to hear him refer to me as his sister, but he just shakes his
head
and smiles at me.

“It's just us in here,” he says, passing me and moving towards the hearth. “We
can
be a bit freer with our words.”

“And our gendered identities,” Jesse adds helpfully from his place snuggled in
his
blankets.

Before I can add any comment, though, Rafe moves to a little alcove next to
the
fireplace and pulls back a red velvet curtain, looping it behind an ornate brass
hook to hold it back. “You're in here, Ariel,” he says, stepping back with a
smile.

I walk forward, fascinated, and I gasp softly as I peer into what is just....the
sweetest little nook I've ever seen.

There's a bed squeezed in — smaller than the boys, as is necessary to fit in
the

space, but just as plush with pillows and blankets. And at the foot of the bed
there's a small chest of drawers and the world's tiniest, prettiest iron—and-
wood

desk situated neatly in the corner with an oil lamp attached to the wall above it
for

light. It's simple, but it's so cute, and so plush, and so cozy —

I am instantly at home, and instantly in love.

“I mean, I know it's small,” Rafe says, running a hand anxiously through his
hair,

“but we thought you'd want to room with us, and we wanted to give you a little
more privacy —”

“I love it!” I shout, hurling myself at my brother and wrapping my arms around

his

waist. He stumbles back in surprise, but laughs and puts his arms around me too. "I love it, Rafe, it's perfect."

head

My big brother hugs me back, rocking me a little in his arms, and I rest my on his

broad chest as we both study my nook. "Only takes two weeks in the barracks to

be impressed with a little alcove, after a lifetime in the palace," he murmurs.

"Nah, this is way better than the palace," I whisper, meaning it. "It's mine."

I mean, we're not kids anymore, but it's not like Rafe or Jesse or I ever really left

home and got our own apartments or anything. For all of us? This is our first taste

of independence, and I know we all feel excited about it, even if it doesn't match

the luxury we grew up with.

Or, well, some of it. The amount of pillows and linens heaped on each of our beds that just screams mom's motherly touch, wanting us to be cozy and comfortable in our own little nests.

nook "Very swanky spot, little Shrimp cousin," Jesse says, coming over to see my

and looping an arm around Rafe's shoulder. I wiggle my way between them — my

habitual spot — and wrap an arm around Jesse's waist too. "Perfect little matchbox

bed, just like I said."

"We tried to get you a bigger one," Rafe murmurs, looking down at me with a little

guilt in his eyes, "but they said this is the only one that would fit "It's great!" I say, laughing and wrinkling my nose up at him, not wanting him to

feel bad about it for even a moment. "I'm not a gigantic Alpha like you no chance

of my feet hanging off the edge of a standard-sized bed."

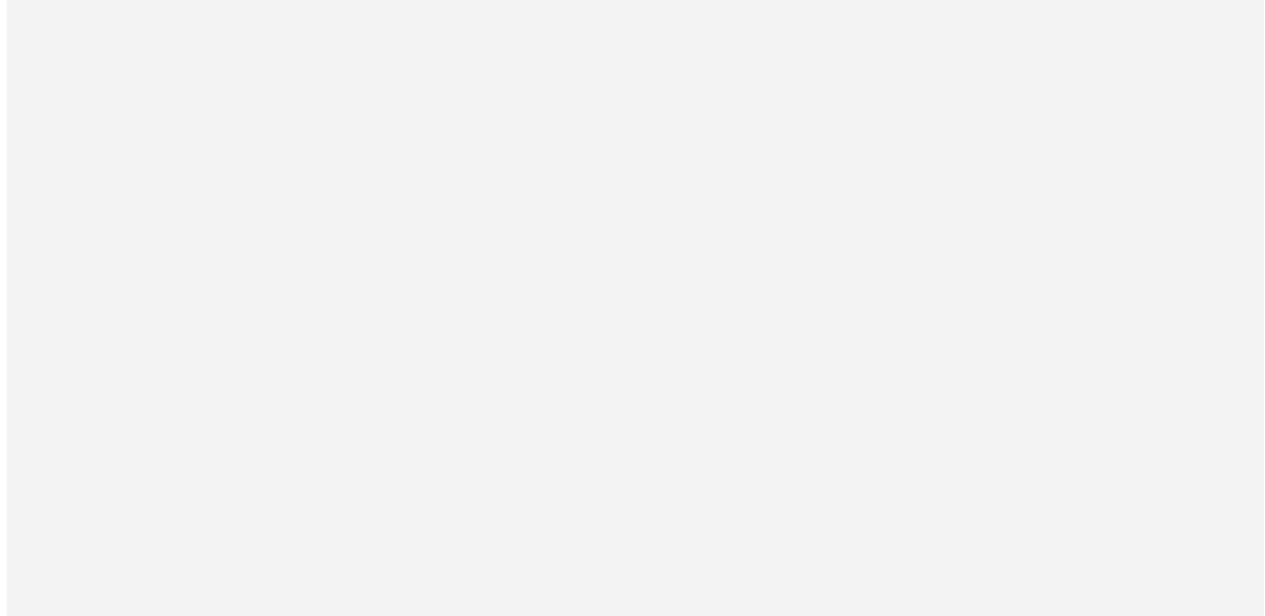
"I think I need to commandeer some of these pillows, though," Jesse says, moving forward into my nook and reaching for my bed, "far too fluffy, there won't

even be room for you —"

"Hands off!" I snap, jumping forward and swatting at his arm. He laughs, backing

away, and I turn around again, looking for another door.

“So, do we share a bathroom with everyone else, like in the barracks, or something?” I ask, curious. My heart drops a little at the idea it would be so great to be able to have some privacy, not to mention control over how filthy the shower gets.



Найди свою вторую половинку. Раз и навсегда!

ad

“Nah.” Rafe says, smiling again and walking over to a bookcase in the corner.

“Are you ready for the best part?”

I frown at him, not getting it yet, but then my jaw drops again — god, I'm going to

wake up with sore cheeks tomorrow, after all of these surprises — when he pulls

on a book and the case itself swings open — revealing a huge bathroom beyond.

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“ ” . .

Oh my god,” I gasp, darting in and spinning as I stare around in the (BY)

room. Honestly I mean, it's a bathroom that rivals even mom and

, : e

dad's at home. A wide tiled shower with a rainfall shower head at the top and multiple jets along the wall — and two wide sinks, even a little vanity in the corner next to an ornate full-length mirror. God — why would boys need a vanity — why would they need a The content is on !

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mirror —

But the true triumph is the huge soaking tub sunk into the floor, probably about

five feet deep by the looks of it, to accommodate Rafe and Jesse's huge Alpha bodies.

“Wow,” Jesse says, looking at the tub with wide eyes. “God, you could do laps in that thing.”

“Dad had it put in for us,” Rafe says, a little smug. “You can turn it into an ice bath

too, for when your muscles get sore-”

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« » .

Out!” I say suddenly, knowing

5 - ' : «

immediately that I'm getting first dips on this. The boys stare over at me in

: « ” : ore

surprise. “Out!” I say again, striding back across the room and shoving them both on the chests to back

wp 5

them out of the room. “I'm taking thirty minutes in here, and I do not

5 » 2

want to be disturbed.” The content is on ! Read the latest chapter there!

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My brother and my cousin start to

laugh, pretending to put up a fight, but eventually they allow themselves to be shoved from the room. They call their farewells after them as they

), q i go, but I don't even listen, pulling the door shut and immediately moving to the soaking tub, flicking on the industrial faucet and starting to strip off my clothes. The content is on

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The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy

Chapter 37

The next thirty minutes are...the most indulgent of my life.

I think I groan in pleasure at least sixty times as I soak my body in the steaming

hot water, as I soap every inch of my skin, as I finally finally wash my hair with

real shampoo and conditioner instead of that horrible stuff we were supplied with

in the barracks, which stripped my hair of all its oils and left it dry.

I find a little basket next to the tub that, like all the pillows outside, just shouts

mom. There are lots of bath salts and scent bombs and oils.

I mean, is this standard issue for new cadets, a gift from the Queen?

Or...did

mom somehow arrange for this to be waiting here for Rafe and Jesse, who

honestly might not even notice it?

Either way, I spend a good long time adding bubbles to my bath, pouring in some

nice salts to soften the new callouses on my skin, and finally sniffing all

of the
bath oils and adding my own particular cocktail of scents so that my bath becomes a blissful, delicious haven.
I rest peacefully for a long time in the bath, only interrupted when Rafe cracks the
door open and shoves my uniform box in so that I'll have something to change
into when I come out. I call my thanks to him before I seat myself in the tub
there's actually a seat at the far end, like a jacuzzi — and breathe deeply, closing
my eyes and letting myself relax.
The past two weeks wash over me, and I shake my head, wondering if it was all
a dream. So much has changed in that time. I went so abruptly from the engaged
Princess who was eager to be a bride so that she could help her nation to, the
next day, the Academy's shrimp — lowest-ranked candidate and least likely to get
through the doors.
And, I went from being engaged to a horrible man who completely fooled me to...
To what?
Having two mates, who think I'm a boy?
I sigh, resting my head against the edge of the tub and taking a second to try and
piece my identity together.
I mean, I was the Princess, and then I was the Shrimp.
Sun,
Chapter 37
And now...who am I?
Who is Ariel?
My eyes slowly open as I start to realize that maybe...I don't really have any idea
anymore. I mean, I know Ari Clark is a cadet at the Alpha Academy, and I'm
thrilled to be here. But...I'm not really Ari Clark either, am I?

So...

I laugh a little at myself, at these big questions I'm not going to be able to answer

with the simple aid of a hot bath. But, it's a good start

And honestly, I'm really excited to find out.

As the water starts to cool I sigh and flick the switch for the drain, climbing out of

the tub — there's even a little set of steps! — and toweling myself dry as I hum

softly to myself. Then I take my time combing my hair out, putting on moisturizer

— also mom's favorite brand, I smirk to see, waiting by the edge of the sink

indulging in a good long moment to brush my teeth.

and

Feeling much refreshed and more at home in my skin, I finally dress in my black

uniform, smiling proudly into the mirror as I take the time to braid my hair in a

neat arch on top of my head instead of hastily just tucking it up onto my cap like I

usually do when I don't have time. The effect is much neater and more

comfortable as I pull my cap on, exhaling a satisfied breath.

I give my reflection one last nod in the mirror, and then head out the door.

“Hey Rafe,” I say as I push into the room, “did you see that mom —

“Ari!” Rafe says, interrupting me and smiling at me anxiously from his place on

the couch. “Did you see? Our friend found us!”

And my eyes immediately move to Ben, who turns and waves to me from his

spot on the couch. And I go dead pale, because...

Because I haven't been scent marked yet.

Cousin!” Jesse shouts, bounding across the room and grabbing me close, pretending to roughhouse with me a little bit, teasing me about hogging the

bathroom for an hour as he subtly wipes his scent on all the usual parts

of my
body. I pretend to protest, laughing and pushing at him, but when I
glance up into
his face he gives me a wink, letting me know he thinks I'm safe.
So I smile, and nod, and head over to the fireplace where I flop into an
armchair,
grinning over at Ben and Rafe on the couch. "Are you close by, Ben? I
Do you your room?"
like
"I'm two fights down and do like it," he says, giving me a warm smile. "I
mean, it's
nothing like this..." he gestures around at our rather expansive room.
"Really?" I ask, genuinely curious. "What's different?"
"Well, it's just me," he says, shrugging. "I think that's pretty normal
though – after
two weeks in the barracks, I think that most of us want our privacy."
"Do you have your own bathroom too?" I ask, cager.
"Yup," he says, grinning, "but by the sound of it...it pales in comparison
to yours.
The rooms are nice – I have a window, a bed, a desk, a place to put my
stuff. But
it's pretty small – no place to entertain guests like you have."
"Except your bed," Jesse comments, a wicked grin on his face as he
lowers
himself onto an armchair, one of his legs draped over the side.
Ben blushes a little. "You inviting yourself over, Sinclair?" he counters,
raising an
eyebrow Jesse's way.
Jesse grins. "I'm flattered, Ben, but my tastes don't swing that way." Ben
clicks
his tongue and shrugs like it's a great loss, making Jesse laugh.
Before I can ask any more about his room, though, a bell rings
somewhere in the
room, making me go still.
"What the hell is that?" I ask, a little freaked out, looking everywhere for
it.
"Dinner bell," Rafe says, and I look at him curiously as he stands up and
heads to

a little door at about chest-height in the far corner of the room.
“How do you know this stuff?” I ask, getting up and following him,
immediately
curious. What's this little door – how did I miss it before?
And what the hell does it have to do with dinner?
“Because I read the handbook, Ari,” Rafe mutters, swinging the little door
open
and revealing – of all things – a little wooden box waiting on the inside,
the edge
closest to us open.
“Oh my god.” I breathe, peering around Rafe, “it's it's a tiny elevator...”
“It's a dumbwaiter,” he corrects, laughing at me and pulling out the fairly
large
cardboard box that's waiting inside. “This is how food is delivered
apparently, packages.”
and,
“That's so cool!” I cry, laughing and following Rafe as he carries the
package
back to our little living room area by the fireplace.
We all lean forward and watch as Rafe pulls a pocket knife out of his new
black
pocket – where did he get that? – and quickly cuts the tape to the box,
opening it
and revealing...
“Oh my GOD!” Jesse shouts, grabbing for the packet of his favorite
cookies that
is sitting on the top. “I love these! Mine! No touching! No takebacks!”
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I gasp in excitement as I realize that
)
it's a care package from our parents.
Rafe starts to sort through
everything, beaming like the rest of

“ p : ”
us. “Wait, we can get mail here!?” I
gasp, delighted. The content is on
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chapter there!

“We can,” Rafe says, grinning at me and handing me a packet of the peach—ring

candy that we've both loved since we were kids. “Ben, help yourself — do you see

anything you like?”

“You can't have my cookies, Ben!” Jesse shouts, his words muffled around the

ones that are already in his mouth. “Don't even try!”

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, 5 5

There's a little bit of mayhem then as

we sort through all of the stuff,

pulling it out and trying to decide

which bits belong to whom,

encouraging Ben to take what he

likes and trying to ensure that he

feels welcome and included in our

haul. The content is on

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chapter there!

Jesse and Rafe go out of their way to make me feel included too, because obviously

mom and dad still think that I am, the package was intended for them

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mysteriously, somewhere else. But

Rafe immediately presses the fuzzy

green throw blanket into my arms, Please bookmark site to read latest

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saying it's for me even though I know

mom picked it just because it

matches his eyes. But I accept it,

A Gi

because it's cozy to have something mom picked out, and because Rafe is being nice. The content is on

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And Jesse — he makes sure that he gives me half of his candy and snacks, which

is

truly a great sacrifice because my cousin is a notorious bedtime snacker sometimes he'll fall asleep with his hand still in a bag of chips.

But the thing that really breaks my heart is the two thick envelopes at the bottom

of the box. Rafe and Jesse's names written in mom's and Aunt Cora's handwriting. respectively.

Rafe and Jesse look up at me when they see them, guilt all over their faces.

Because there is no envelope for me.

Chapter 38

Rafe looks at me with a little grimace, slowly taking the envelope out of the box

and moving to tuck it into his back pocket for later, not wanting to make me watch.

"No, read it!" I say, flapping my hands at him and working hard to tuck my disappointment low in my stomach. Because, I mean, I know that if mom knew I

was here she would never have left me out would probably have written me the

longest letter of all. I can't be hurt by this, and I don't want him to have to wait.

"Are you sure?" he asks, hesitating, turning the envelope over in his hands.

Jesse rips his open, digging in, giving me a little shrug. I nod eagerly at Rafe, encouraging him, as Ben gives me a soft pat on the shoulder, not saying anything but...letting me know that he's here for me.

Rafe sighs but can't help it. He settles back into the couch cushions as he opens

and unfolds his letter, a smile already on his lips as he reads through the first words.

"Did we miss anything?" Ben asks cheerfully, tipping the box towards the two of

us as we sit together on the rug, giving Rafe and Jesse their privacy.

"I don't think so," I say, peeking into the box again, willing to take up Ben's offer

of a distraction so that I don't get overwhelmed by my jealousy.

"Yes, we did," Ben says, laughing and reaching into the bottom of the box.

"What?" I say, surprised, leaning closer. "What is it?"

And my heart absolutely falls to pieces when Ben pulls from the bottom of the box a very, very pretty blue velvet hair ribbon, already tied into a bow with a silver

clip. at the back.

I give an unintentional little gasp when I see it, as my eyes rove over the soft fabric, the little silver trim that runs along the edge-

Because I know, without even having to read the little tag attached to the clip, that this is from my mom, and that she sent it for me.

But my stomach plummets as Ben picks up the tag, his eyes moving quickly over

my mom's small, swirling handwriting.

Rafe-

I know that this box is to celebrate you, but I couldn't help myself.

When you next see Ariel, will you please give this to her?

I know she would like it.

Tell my beautiful girl we miss her and that she is much loved.

-Mom

My eyes fill with tears as I read the note over Ben's shoulder.

Very quietly, almost gently, Ben turns to me with the velvet hair ribbon flat on his

palm.

"Here," he says, giving me a little smile. "You should have it."

I stare at Ben with wide eyes, all the blood draining from my face as I lean away

from him in shock, the heels of my hands hitting the ground behind me and taking all of my weight.

Because he...

Why is he giving this to me?

What does he...

A snarl suddenly rips from Rafe's throat and Ben goes very, very still, the ribbon

balanced on his hand. I whip my eyes to my brother and my cousin and sit up very straight and very still as I realize that this...

This just got quite dangerous for Ben.

"Ben," Rafe says, leaning forward on the couch, his eyes focused solemnly on Ben's face. "What are you doing with that?"

“Um,” Ben says, his eyes flicking to the blue velvet ribbon on his palm.
“Why,” Rafe continues, his voice rumbling low with menace now, “are you giving

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that to Ari?”

My eyes flick back to Ben, whose gaze I'm surprised to find already on me, wide

and frantic, looking at me for answers. I stay very still for a second and then as

he tilts his head to the side with a little bit of irony, looking at me like this is all my

fault-

I realize that he definitely, definitely already knows.

“Oh god damn it. Ben!” I shout, lashing a foot out and giving him a good solid kick

in the thigh. “How long have you known!?”

His face suddenly bursts into a grin as he finches away from me, a relieved laugh stumbling from him as he sees that I'm not going to kill him, just kick him.

“From like, the first time we did after—hours training, Ariel —”

Jesse gasps to hear my name coming from Ben's mouth.

Ben turns when he hears it. “I mean, that's it, right?” he says, looking between my brother and my cousin before coming back to me. “She's — she's Ariel Sinclair, right? The Princess?” he turns to Rafe now, who still has his teeth bared.

“Your sister, not your cousin?”

Jesse groans, covering his face with his hands and falling back in his chair, but

Rafe just leans forward, his tone still dangerous even if Jesse and I have given it

up.

“Who the f**k have you told, Ben?”

Ben is silent for a second, the picture of shock. But then he leans forward, staring

little angrily. “No one, Rafe! Obviously, I haven't told anyone, or into Rafe's face, \$

else she wouldn't be here!"

"I think he's telling the truth, Rafe," I say, turning to my brother with a grimace.

"They wouldn't have let me in if they knew who I am."

Rafe glares at me for a second before turning his eyes back to Ben. "That doesn't mean he didn't tell any of the other cadets."

"Who the hell else would I have told," Ben says, leaning forward with his open palms out, "I only hang out with you guys

Rafe sneers. "You could have told anyone for the leverage."

"Oh my god," Ben says, exhaling and shocking me because he actually has the

nerve to roll his eyes. "Whatever, Rafe — I mean, I get that you're protective, but

honestly if you trust me this little after everything then maybe I should just go-

Ben starts to push himself to his knees.

"You're not going anywhere!" Rafe shouts, leaping to his feet.

"Well, what the f**k am I supposed to do!" Ben shouts back at Rafe, genuinely pissed. "Do you want me to just sit here all day so you can glare at me and accuse me of selling your sister's secrets for leverage? Honestly, like that's something I'd even do."

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He has a point, Rafe," Jesse says, his voice tentative. I shift my eyes to him

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now. "If Ben was going to tell..he'd probably have done it by now. And

)

he's met you, he knows that any leverage he got from spilling the secret is probably not going to outweigh the risk of you ripping out

5 » P

his throat." The content is on

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chapter there!



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“Or,” Ben says, turning his anger on Jesse now, “one of you could just consider that maybe I’m not holding Ariel’s secret because I’m scared, but because I like you guys and we’re friends.”

“Aw, Ben.” I say, genuinely touched now. “That’s sweet! I believe you.” “Thank you, Ari,” he says, sighing hard and relaxing a little bit. “Can we seriously take the murderous tension in the room down a notch? I’m not going to tell anyone. Nothing has changed. You guys just...know that I know now. Okay?” Visit to read full content.

Rafe and Jesse look at each other for a long moment, but then Rafe scowls and sits back on the couch, folding his arms over his chest, glaring at : Po)

Ben even as he gives in. “You’re ” :

sworn to secrecy, Ben,” he snaps, still « :

mad. “All right? You tell anyone, and J iy 3 @ v

you’ll pay for it. Big time. Like, your sons and heirs for generations will

sate 3

pay for it.” The content is on

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chapter there!

“I swear,” Ben says seriously, holding Rafe’s eyes and then mine, which I appreciate. And then he turns, picking my little ribbon up off the floor and handing

it over to me. “Your ribbon, Princess. It’s pretty!”

“Thanks!” I say, taking it from him cheerfully and tracing my finger over the soft

velvet. “It is, isn’t it?”

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I lean close to Ben, bumping his shoulder with mine, letting him know

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that as far as I’m concerned, he’s

good. And I grin, because honestly — I

) R s

don’t mind Ben knowing. Over the

)

past two weeks I’ve really come to

trust him without, I think, even

realizing it. He gets my experience

here more than the others, after all

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they didn’t have to worry about being cut like the two of us did. The content

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“All right.” Rafe says, cutting through our buddy-buddy atmosphere. “Tell us how

you knew, Ben, so that we can prevent others from figuring it out.”

“And also.” Jesse adds, getting in on the interrogation now, “do you think anyone

else has guessed as well?”

“I really don’t.” Ben says, smiling now, I think glad to have his knowledge of our

secret out in the open. “You guys do a really good job of sticking together as a trio, not really letting anyone else in. Though I can’t believe Luca hasn’t

figured it

out yet.”

“Yeah, me neither.” Jesse says, shooting his eyes to me with a clever little smirk that makes me want to punch him. God, he’s being so obvious — Rafe’s going to figure it out if he keeps smirking at me like that. Please bookmark site to read lastest content. If you want to read please visit to read fastest content.

Chapter 39

I continue glaring at Jesse, but Rafe moves on with his interrogation of Ben. “What makes you think Luca hasn’t figured out that Ariel’s a girl?” Rafe says as he leans forward, eager for Ben’s answer and apparently deciding to trust him. “I don’t think Luca knows because he hasn’t tried to hit on her yet,” Ben replies, laughing. “Didn’t you see him this afternoon with the seamstress? Luca loves women — he’s dying for some female attention. If he knew Ari is a girl, he’d be all over her.” “True,” Rafe murmurs, leaning back against the couch cushion and staring into space a bit as he thinks it through. Jesse’s eyes sparkle as he again catches my eye. My mouth draws to a thin line as I stare at him, shaking my head at him because he is loving this just a little too much. God, I want to smack him right now. But that would give way too much away. “Well, how did you know?” Rafe asks, blinking back to reality and turning his attention back to Ben. “Because,” Ben says, turning to smile at me. “I have four younger sisters. You guys — you protect her the same way I’d protect my sisters if they were sleeping in a communal room with a bunch of guys for two weeks. Plus,” his smile widens now as he settles onto the carpet and leans back on his hands, clearly feeling more relaxed. “You laugh like a girl, Ari.” “What!?” I shriek. And Ben bursts into laughter at my reaction, and then Rafe and Jesse do too, and I blush, because I hear it now — it was a very girly shriek.

And so I start to laugh too, and we all laugh harder as we hear it, because my laugh — it really does hit higher notes than theirs, lilting above over their low, resonant tones.

My face reddens even further, and I press my hands to my cheeks. And then, experimentally, I try a lower laugh, seeing if I can make it more boyish

Chapter 39

But the result is just ridiculous, obviously fake as I try to mimic Rafe, which sets

us all off again. I can't help it then, the peels of laughter that come from me as I

grab a pillow off the couch and hurl it at Rafe's face, because he's laughing the

hardest. But he just catches it out of the air and tucks it behind his head, sighing

as he leans back.

"Well, you're part of the family now, Ben," Rafe sighs when his laughter fades, shrugging and giving in to it. "Thanks for keeping our secret."

"I think it's cool." Ben says with a shrug, reaching for my packet of peach rings on

the table and grabbing one from the edge. "Plus, I like girls. It's nice to have one

around." He sends me a little wink as he pops the candy into his mouth.

"Don't go thinking that it's too nice," Rafe says, his voice a low growl again. "I said you're family now, which means hands off the little sister."

"Oh, don't worry," Ben says, continuing to grin at me. "I don't think I'm Princess

Ari's taste anyway."

My mouth falls open in a little appalled sputter, but before I can protest further a

knock comes at the door.

"It's open!" Jesse calls, and we all turn in time to see the door swing open, revealing Luca looking...devastatingly good in his black uniform.

"Finally found you," he says, leaning against the doorframe with a smirk, a little

pasty box balanced in his hands. "Can I come in? I brought coffee cake. My nan

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made it.”

“Sure!” Jesse calls, grinning at my mate. As Luca walks in I take the opportunity

to slip the velvet hair ribbon into my pocket.

Rafe and Ben greet Luca but I don't say anything, because...honestly, I'm still trying to catch my breath. God damn it, Luca in that high—collared black uniform,

with the dark grey belt around his trim waist...

My wolf howls inside me, rolling onto her back like she's been knocked out cold.

We're never going to make it here, I whisper to her, laughing inwardly, but she doesn't even bother to respond. This secret...might as well just spit it out now.

“Nope,” Ben whispers, pitching his voice low enough that only I can hear the words as well as the humor lacing them, “I don't think I'm the Princess's taste at all.”

Sun, Tu Mar

Chapter 39

I screw up my face and lean over, smacking Ben hard on the arm.

But we both laugh, because we know he's dead right.

Luca comes in then, tossing the pastry box onto the coffee table just as the bell

to the dumbwaiter rings again. I perk up, completely fascinated by this crazy aspect of on new life, and dash over to it. Even though Rafe beats me there.

I'm

in time to see him open the door to a covered silver tray.

I cock my head to the side, wondering what it could be, but then the smell hits my

nostrils and I groan, reaching immediately for the covered tray which I now realize holds some delicious dinner, but Rafe just laughs and swats my hand away. “That's too heavy for you,” he says, smiling at me cheerfully and lifting the

whole silver tray out with his big hands, balancing it carefully as he maneuvers around me. “You get the drinks.”

I scowl a little as the food moves away and my stomach growls — I didn't realize

that I was starving. But I cheerfully grab the pewter pitcher and the little metal cups that come along with it, surprised to see that there are five, not three, as

I'd
have expected.
Still considering the strange number, I wander over to the couch area in time
to
see Rafe lift the cover from the tray. "Five!" I say, slipping over the back of the
couch so that I'm sitting next to Luca, leaning forward with interest. "How did
they
know I mean, Luca just got here —"
"I left a note," Ben says, looking up at me and shrugging. "Asked them to
please
send mine here. I didn't think you'd mind. I guess Luca did the same —"
"Who cares," Jesse murmurs, reaching eagerly for a plate and a set of
silverware
rolled in a white napkin. "Seriously, why are we still talking? Everyone shut up
and
eat"
I just grin and start to pour the glasses of water and hand them around.
"Wish it was something a little better than water," Luca murmurs when I hand
him
his cup. "We're celebrating, after all."
I grin a little, sitting next to Luca on the couch and considering that though he
might be right, I'm a little glad that we're obliged to keep sober tonight. With a
few
drinks in me and him looking like that? I'd probably have to sit on my hands to
keep myself from reaching out and stroking his face.
"What are those?" I ask noticing some folded up pieces of paper in the corner
of
the tray as Rafe hands me my plate. I balance the dish on my knees as I dig
in to
my meal steak, roasted potatoes, green beans lathered with butter, fresh
brown
rolls. A shiver goes through me when I realize how amazing everything tastes.
God, food really is better up here than it is in the barracks. I had no idea we'd
be
living in relative luxury candidacy really lowered my expectations.
But after the bath I took this afternoon and the evening meal tonight? I think
I'm



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ad

going to like life in the Academy.

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I don't know," Ben murmurs, and he leans forward to grab them off the

, g

tray, as he's closest. He takes a bite of his meat as he sorts through them, unfolding the one with his name on it.

« ” «

Oh, schedules!" he says. "Class schedules, for tomorrow and the rest

" .

of term!" The content is on

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). .

There's a great clattering of forks, plates, and words as we all eagerly reach forward, desperate to find out because beyond our class schedule, this also going to include information on our educational track. The content

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chapter there!

And this I am particularly dying to know.

paper is

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I put my unfinished plate on the floor,
still chewing a crispy piece of roll as I
snatch my schedule from Ben and
eagerly unfold it. My eyes flick over
my false name at the top, take in the
spreadsheet of class information at
the bottom, and... The content is on

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chapter there!

There.

Right at the top of the sheet, in small letters below my name:

Espionage Track.

I let out a little squeal of delight, falling back into the couch cushions and
kicking

my feet in excitement. Luca laughs, looking over me, pleased to see me
pleased

And I go a little still, sitting up straight, trying to be just a little less girly. But
still, I

can't wipe the smile from my face.

"Get what you wanted, Shrimp?" Luca asks, leaning sideways to bump me
with

his shoulder as, beyond him, Rafe and Jesse shout with joy, snatching their
schedules from each other and comparing their schedules.

"Yup," I say, my smile growing. "Did you?"

"Sure did," he says, holding out the schedule so that I can see it. "Warrior
Track."

I grin at him, taking the schedule and looking it over. "Ohhh," I say, noting that
he's got a 7 am workout scheduled tomorrow and every other day this week,

"you

have to get up early."

"What, you don't?" he asks, reaching for my paper.

I squeak a little, appalled, and hold it to my chest. "You don't get my secrets
that

easily. Luca Grant."

"Oh, don't 1?" he asks grinning and raising one eyebrow.

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Chapter 40

"What, you're not going to show me!?" Luca presses, laughing and reaching again for my schedule.

my

"No way!" I shout, turning so that my back is to the arm of the couch and I've got

feet between us, ready to kick him away if I need to. I grew up with brothers and

cousins, after all I know how to do a couch war. "I didn't even get a look at it yet!"

"Well, then just tell me what your track is ="

"I cannot," I say, holding my paper close so that it mysteriously covers half my face. "It's...a state secret."

Luca laughs again, leaning forward. "You spy," he hisses, and then quick as a snake he snatches the paper from my face, immediately leaning away and holding the paper far out of my reach.

"Give it back!" I demand, laughing, and throw myself after him, landing half in his

lap as I reach for it. Luca laughs hard, but holds his long arm even across Rafe's

body. Rafe, grinning and obliging, snatches the paper out of Luca's hand and gives it to Jesse.

"Not fair!" I shout, glaring at my brother and my cousin, even though I'm still laughing. "I didn't even get to look at it yet —"

"Well you're a shit spy, Ari," Jesse says, grinning at me and lining my schedule up

with his and Rafe's on his lap, "if you don't get the information and keep it to yourself for more than ten seconds."

"Well, I haven't learned anything about being a spy yet, Jesse," I say, rolling my

eyes at him even as I grin. "That's why I'm here."

"Congrats, Ari," Rafe says, grinning at me. "I know you wanted Espionage Track."

"Seriously, Shrimp, congratulations," Luca says, smiling down at me, and as I turn my face to him I realize that I'm...well, I'm kind of still sprawled over his lap,

aren't

1?

I blush beet red, mumbling something about how I'm happy too, and do my best

to gracefully crawl off of my mate and back to the corner of the couch.

Chapter 40

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Luca grins at me, his smile widening as he notices my awkwardness and my blush. "You'll be great at it at least you'll definitely be able to squeeze into all sorts of

tiny spaces."

I prove him right by pressing myself deep into the corner of the couch, and when

I glance to my side to I see Ben grinning at me in absolute wicked delight. I give

him a dirty scowl, which just makes him laugh harder.

"Looks like we're all teamed up tomorrow afternoon," Jesse says, looking up at

me and Rafe with raised eyebrows, leaning over to pass our schedules back.

"What, all of us?" I ask, taking my paper from Luca when he passes it to me, glad

to have a minute to look at it. "Are you guys Espionage too?"

"No, we're both Warrior," Jesse says, leaning back in his chair and studying his

schedule. "Ben, do you have a weird unnamed class in the afternoon with the three of us? What track are you, anyway?"

"I'm Ambassador," Ben says, studying his schedule, "and no, I've got diplomacy

every afternoon this week. Weird, though, that you guys have a cross—track class. I didn't think those existed."

I study my schedule, surprised and interested to see that Jesse is right.

Almost

every morning this week I've got Chemistry and Marksmanship, but twice this week — tomorrow included — I've got an unnamed seminar in Room 1260.

"You're not in it either, Luca?" I ask, lifting my chin to peer over at his sheet.

Seeing my interest, he hands his schedule to me and scooches closer so that we

can study the papers together. He presses his shoulder to mine to do so, and I

pretend not to notice the tingles that immediately flood my left side. I guess he

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does too.

“Nope,” Luca says quietly, his eyes moving back and forth between our schedules. “Looks like we don’t have a single thing together, Shrimp.” He sighs

and sits back, studying me with a sad twist to his mouth. “Well, it was nice knowing you.”

“I’ll remember you fondly,” I reply with mock seriousness, making him burst into a grin.

“Nah, you guys will see me all the time. With a sweet place like this?” Luca leans

forward, grabbing his unfinished dinner off the coffee table and starting to dig in

again. “I’ll be here all the time.”

12:48 Sun, 10 ar

Chapter 10

I smile a little bit at the prospect, leaning down to pick up my own unfinished plate.

“Someone light a fire.” Jesse says, leaning back in his chair and still studying his

schedule with interest. “Let’s get cozy. After all, I heard someone say there was

coffee cake.”

68%

“Best coffee cake in the world,” Luca says, nodding towards the pastry box as I

take my last bite and move eagerly to the fire, starting to re—stack the logs so that

they suit my liking a bit more. “You’ve all got to try some. Nan would die, if she knew a Prince and a Duke were eating something she baked...”

And a Princess, I think to myself, opening the flue to the chimney with a little smirk on my mouth. But, at least some secrets have to be kept tonight, right?

Ben and Luca stay late, but not too late — walking a fine line between knowing

that they’re not going to be able to sleep tonight for the sake of excitement, and

wanting very much to get a lot of sleep tonight so that they’re fresh for

tomorrow.

Plus, our little room is very cozy at night, it turns out. We spend a couple of hours

laughing and chatting around the fire, the oil lamps that Rafe lights around the room giving everything a particularly comfortable glowing ambiance. The coffee

cake really is very good, and I think we all over—do it a little bit on the sugar and

snacks after two weeks of eating the bland suppers that the barrack cafeteria provided.

As the hours pass I relax, wrapped up in the fuzzy green blanket Rafe gave me,

warm and calm, a little unable to keep my eyes from drifting back to Luca's laughing face. I let myself fall quiet, allowing the boys take over the conversation,

and instead I just...listen. As their words fade to a steady hum I drift away into my

own thoughts, thinking about how much I like my life right now, how lucky I am to

be here.

How much I want to tell my mom everything, all about it.

My hand drifts to the hair ribbon in my pocket, and I doze off a little while I

stroke the soft velvet with my thumb.

“Hey,” a soft voice says I don't know how long later, and my eyes slowly drift open. It takes a second for me to focus on Luca, leaning towards me a little, but

then I gasp with guilt as I realize that in my sleep I stretched out and my feet have drifted

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Chapter 40

into his lap. “Oh, I'm sorry.” I gasp, starting to pull them back, “I'm hogging the couch —”

68%

“No,” he says, laughing, putting a warm hand on my calf, letting me know I don't

have to jump away. Slowly, liking the feel of his hand on my leg a little too much, I

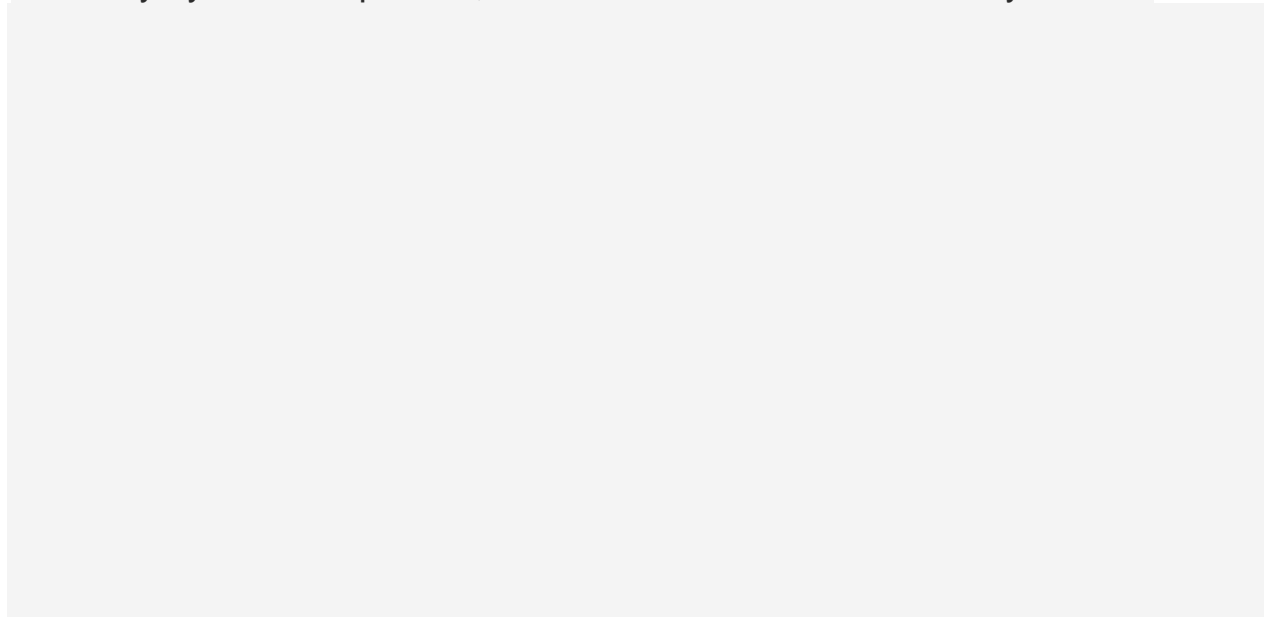
relax. “I'm just leaving now.” He murmurs. “But I wanted to say goodnight.”

Slowly

— almost like he doesn't realize it, Luca's thumb drifts across my calf, slowly

pressing the soft muscle there.

It's almost the sort of thing he wouldn't notice that he was doing. But when I move my eyes back up to his, and find his intense stare already on me?



Найди свою вторую половинку. Раз и навсегда!

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Yeah. He knows what he's doing.

"Oh..." I say. kind of at a loss for words, but when I glance up at the clock I startle. "Luca!" I gasp, leaning forward to smack him on the shoulder, "You have

to get up in seven hours!"

"Eh, I'll be all right," he says, shrugging and ignoring my weak blow. "Besides, it

was

almost meditative —" very relaxing listening to you snore just now

1 gasp, sitting up straight. "I did not ="

"You did," Jesse calls over his shoulder, heading to the bathroom.

I look around, seeing that Ben is already gone, and Rafe is carrying the tray full

of empty plates over to the dumbwaiter.

"Good night, Shrimp," Luca says, laughing softly feet from his lap

at as I move my and let him stand up. "I'll see you tomorrow."

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« » . .

Okay," I say, yawning and watching

. . i) "

him pull his boots back on. "Sleep

"ou Spm f

well." "Oh, I will," he says, glancing

"

over at me. "I just hope I have

" :

some...good dreams." The content is

on ! Read the latest

chapter there!

I go still, pink creeping over my cheeks as I look sharply up at him, trying to

figure

out...

But he just smirks at me, shaking his head a little as if I just confirmed

something.

He stands up straight, putting his hands on his waist, studying me.

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« " . :

Oh, go away," I sigh, standing up too,

"ys . a)

I'm too tired for this." I wave a

dismissive hand at him, tossing my

pretty throw blanket on the couch.

The content is on !

Read the latest chapter there!

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Chapter 40

Luca laughs, but I just give him a shove towards the door and head for my

little

nook.

my

My mate calls his goodbyes to us and closes the door behind him as I jump

into.

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little fluffy bed, snuggling down into

the pillows and pulling the warm

)

blankets over me. I'm very pleased to

find that the bed is already toasty

warm- probably due to the way the

nook is nestled in next to the fire place. The content is on ! Read the latest chapter there!

“Night, little sister!” Rafe calls to me from across the room.

“Night, Rafe!” I mumble back. “Jesse!”

But honestly? I'm basically already asleep again as soon as my head hits the pillow.

Because tomorrow is a big — big day, and I can hardly wait for it to get here.

Presuming, of course, there are no nighttime interruptions that get in the way...

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