Chapter 0004

The next two hours are...an education in boy world. I sit perched up on my bunk, staring around in awe. This room has more than a hundred boys in it right now, and we'll all be sleeping in here together through candidacy. When that's done, if we make it, we'll move up to the castle to more private dorms.

But seriously? Until then? I'm kind of...thrilled.

The atmosphere here – it's totally different than anything I've ever experienced. There's a great deal of shouting and laughter, and two fist fights have already broken out, along with quite a few arm-wrestling matches.

Girls? We'd all be simpering and sizing each other up. Guys? They just clasp hands and smack each other on the back, instant friends.

But then a boy walks by in his underwear – which I'm not complaining about in itself – but

my eyes go wide with shock when he just blatantly, casually dips a hand into his boxers and scratches his balls —

"So, what do you think, cousin," Jesse says, making me jump as he pops up at my side,

standing on Rafe's bunk and using the leverage to hook his arms over the edge of mine, grinning at me. "Regretting your choices yet?"

"Boys are..." I whisper, still looking around with awe, "a completely different species."

"I think our prim little Princess likes it," Jesse says with a laugh, observing my fascination.

I laugh too and lift a finger to my lips. "Don't tell Rafe," I whisper, knowing my brother –

"Your secret is safe with me," Jesse whispers back, giving me a wink. "Just...try to look more boyish, all right? You're sitting up there like a pretty little barn owl, staring around

so that I'm not so prim. "Is this better?" I murmur, pitching my voice lower and laughing because I feel ridiculous.

"Just scratch your ass a little more around people," Jesse suggests with a grin, "let people see

I gasp a little, realizing that he's probably right. I hunch my back a little, unfolding my legs

you burp."

Horrified, I glare at him. "Absolutely not."

like my dad - is crazy over-protective.

with those big eyes."

fist.

Jesse laughs and then holds out his arm to me, wrist up. "Here," he says.

"No," Jesse says, laughing, and then he beckons me closer. I lean towards him and, lightening quick. Jesse wipes his wrist across both sides of my neck and then across my own

"What?" I ask, tapping at his closed fingers, thinking he has some little present hidden in his

lightening quick, Jesse wipes his wrist across both sides of my neck and then across my own wrists.

"What's that for?" I ask, frowning, confused.

"Scent marking," he replies in a whisper. "Sometimes you smell like a girl. This will

disguise it a little, make it not so obvious."

"Won't I just smell like you?" I ask, confused.

He shrugs. "We're cousins," he replies. "No one will notice or care."

"Oh," I say, and then I lean back in my bunk as Jesse jumps down and goes to talk to a light-

haired boy who has just come to introduce himself to Rafe. I didn't even think about smelling like a girl - what else is going to give me away?

I try to think it through, to strategize, but soon the room is so filled with young men that I

can't really think about anything else besides watching them, studying how they move so I

can move like that and start to blend in. I can't even really keep track of which one is which as they all move around the room, unpacking their personal items and introducing themselves to their neighbors.

Which is why it is so incredibly disconcerting when I find my head snapping to the left, my eyes frantically searching because...

Because I swear, I just smelled...the most amazing scent that has ever crossed my nose –

My wolf leaps inside me, which is itself shocking – she's usually so calm that I sometimes forget she's there –

Get it, she commands, instantly starting to prowl, go find it – you have to – it's ours – "What?!" I say aloud as I sit up stark straight, suddenly a little freaked out. But then I lift my

sharp bite of citrus, bergamot and wet pavement baking under the summer sun, apricots and almonds
Something snaps within me, an almost physical twist that redirects everything in me – all of

nose and almost moan aloud when I smell it again – that incredible, amazing scent – the

Mate!, my wolf howls, lifting her nose to the sky and singing the word, her feet dancing. Go! Get up! Go and find him – Mate! Mate! Mate!

my goals, all of my dreams – just wipes them away in the singular pursuit of it, of him –

And I gasp, pressing myself back against my pillows because I know it now – know it for certain in my heart and my bones – that my mate is here –

But as I look around, frantic, something...something else crosses my path.

And I do moan aloud this time, my lower lip starting to shake as I go limp, falling back

against my pillows. I have to press my eyes shut against the leather and whiskey scent of him – red hot cinders and the sharp bite of pine on a night so cold even the air freezes - And, to my horror, something else snaps within me, shaking me to the core, so much so that

my shoulders start to tremble with it.

Because...because the other one is still there – and this one too -

to point both north and south at the same time, my internal compass spinning –

They're both still there, both bonds now calling to me, urging me to run in two different directions at once -

I raise my hands to my temples and give another soft moan.

"Ari," Rafe says, coming to the side of the bed and peering over at me, concerned. "Are you

I'm suddenly nauseous, my head spinning as gravity reorients itself in two directions, trying

all right?"
But I don't reply, my eyes pressed tightly shut as I concentrate on my wolf, on the ridiculous

thing that she's saying –

Inside of me she prowls back and forth, giving little hops of excitement, turning in eager circles, her tongue lolling from the side of her mouth.

Go!, she commands, and I find myself sitting up straight, my eyes flying open despite myself. Go and find them! We need to meet our mates!

What?! I say to her, frantic. But that's ridiculous – we can't – we're in disguise!

Get up! She urges me, snapping her teeth with glee, go and find them! Now!

But as I look around the room – it's too much of a mess. I know that they're here – but I have absolutely no idea which ones they are.

him I see Jesse turn, confused, looking at me with curious worry.

I open my mouth to stumble something out – anything – to beg them to help –

I spin my head to look at my brother with frantic eyes, my breath coming fast now. Behind

"Seriously, Ari," Rafe says, peering at me closely. "You're...all pale. Are you okay?"

He's a gigantic man with a rough, craggy face that doesn't look like it's seen a smile for twenty years.

But I can't think about that now - my head still spins, and I do my very best to keep my eyes

forward and concentrate on walking as my body begins to adjust, not allowing myself to be distracted by my surroundings or by my stupid wolf, who is howling at me – begging me to go find them, to hunt them down, to strip off my uniform right now and –

The Captain scowls around at us, clearly displeased with our disorder.

But before I can, a loud clap sounds at the head of the room and we all spin towards it.

Everyone goes silent, staring at the Academy Captain standing there with four Sergeants.

"Fall in," he snaps. "It's time for your first examination."

Comments (1)