

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy

Chapter 41

When I next open my eyes, I'm half unsurprised to see that it's the golden—
leafed

birch forest.

I groan a little, covering my face with my hands even as excitement runs
through

me. Because — I mean — I'm only here because I want to be, right? The
dream

state only appears if you call for it, call for your mate to meet you here.

Right! My wolf shouts. He's coming too!

“Oh no oh no,” I murmur, dragging my hands down my face and looking
around

for him. I mean, it's all getting very real now-

Luca is clearly figuring out that something is up with these dreams

And the way he put his hand on my calf tonight? And subtly mentioned
dreams,

watching me as he did?

God damn it, but we are getting into some tricky territory.

“Hello?” his voice rings through the forest. “Shrimp, are you here?”

My wolf gives several happy yips of excitement as I put my hands on my hips,
looking down at my nightgown, my hair falling over my shoulders.

You can end it if you want toooo, my wolf says, her voice sing—song. But you
don't

want too00.

“God damn it,” I growl to myself, but when I lift my head I'm laughing a little
too.

Because I really, really do not want to end this dream.

And so instead I will my clothes to change, my nightgown shifting into the
black

pants and top of an Academy cadet, my hair tucking itself away under the
standard black cap — which is optional for cadets, but which I will never be
without.

And then I step out from behind my tree and into the clearing. “Over here,
Grant,”

I shout, my voice a little tired.

I see him immediately as he spins around, his eyes catching on me at once in

the clearing. He smirks as he starts to walk over to me. "What is this place," he says, and I can tell he's a little bit thrilled to be here too, which makes me smile. My I mean, at least he's happy to see me. "I never, ever have a dream about the same person in the same location."

"Really?" I ask, crossing my arms and cocking my head to the side, watching him look all around at the beautiful trees, the strange ambient lighting that seems to have no source, the fog that floats around at the edges and by our feet.

"Where do you usually dream about me?"

"Usually like, on Mars or in the Roman Empire —" he stops suddenly and turns his face back to mine. "Nicely done, Shrimp. Maybe you'll make a good little spy after all."

I laugh and wrinkle my nose at him, unable to help it.

"So," he murmurs, taking a step closer to me. "Is there anything to do here? Or do we just...hang out?"

"There is no here," I say with a sigh, looking up into his gorgeous face, "so, we can't brown really expect there to be anything to do." I letting myself stare into his warm eyes, tightening my arms around each other so that I resist each and every urge to touch him.

"Well, I can think of something," Luca murmurs, taking another step closer and reaching out a hand towards my arm —

"Luca!" I gasp, flinching away.

"What!?" he says, laughing and closing the distance. "Seriously, Shrimp — you're a figment of my imagination — why on earth are you playing hard to get!?"

I grit my teeth at him, glaring a little. "I'm not playing, Luca — I just genuinely think

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it's a bad idea!"

"How could it be a bad idea!?" he laughs at me again and reaches out both

hands. this time, placing them on my upper arms, his fingers wrapping around the back and slowly sliding down towards my elbows. “Honestly, it’s just an experiment — I have got to figure out what this bizarre attraction to you is
“Well,” I say quietly, my stomach filled suddenly with butterflies as those sparkles

suddenly appear in the air — the embodiment of the...whatever it is between us

that happens when we touch. “What if it’s not an experiment?”

“How could it not be?” he murmurs, pulling me a little closer — and, damn it, but I

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let him. I can’t not — god, it’s just too hard to resist. I can smell him, and the closeness of him, the warmth of him

It’s just too damn much, and I’m weak with wanting him, being the only one putting up any barriers here.

“Luca,” I sigh, letting myself lean into him just a little bit, looking up at him with wide eyes as one of his arms slips around my back. “What if it’s not a dream? What if it’s real?”

“You know I kept thinking all night?” he murmurs, ignoring my words and tightening his arms around me until I’m pressed warmly to his chest, my head bending back on my neck so that I can look up at him.

Despite myself, my hands unclench, one pressing flat against the soft cotton of

his hoodie, the other finding its way to a spot on his waist, my fingers curling into

the fabric there. And I can’t help it, I give in. “What were you thinking about all night, Luca?” I breathe, my voice lower than it usually is.

“About how to get you away from your god damn cousins,” he murmurs, smirking

down at me, his hand brushing again over my cap like it did this afternoon after

I’d entered the doors to the academy, though this time his palm drifts down the back of my neck, making me shiver. “How to like, get you to come see my room

you alone for ten fucking seconds

“Luca,” I say, laughing a little and shaking my head, “and what the hell were going to do if you did?”

get

you

“I don’t know,” he says, grinning and laughing at the ridiculousness of it

himself. "I
have no idea, Ari — I just can't stop thinking about you — wanting to touch
you, it's
absolutely insane —"
I exhale, guilt roiling through me
Because, I mean, I'm tortured by the impossibility of our connection too least I
know what's going on.
but at
"Luca," I murmur, shaking my head and dropping my eyes, pulling away a
little.
"This is —"
"No!" he protests, his hands tightening, pulling me back. "God, Ari, if I only get
you in this weird dream, at least let me try to figure this out —"
68%
Chapter 41
And then he dips his head, bringing his face so close to mine I can feel his
breath
against my skin clearly intent on —
"No!" I shriek, shoving him hard and ducking out of his arms, stumbling away.
"Ari!" he shouts, frustrated and stepping towards me. "What the hell is going
on?"
"You stay right there!" I shout back, pointing a finger at him and continuing to
step
backwards as he advances.
"Not"

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"Do it!" I snap, but then I bang into a tree and curse, lifting a hand to the back
of
my head where it smacked into the trunk. "God damn it, that hurt ="
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« ” .
See!?" Luca protests, closing the
distance and coming close enough
)

that there's barely any space
between us again, pressing a hand
against the tree and leaning over me.

" 5 a 5 :

This place — it's weird. Like, why can
I feel this tree — why did it hurt you!?
And if you really are a figment of my

' ,
subconscious, why the hell won't you
"

do what I want you to do!?" The

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"Because I'm real, Luca!" I shout, my head aching a little bit adding to my
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frustration and making me blurt out

apa 5 Ge

the truth. "This is all real! This is

Il = Aril I t part of

actually me — Ari! I'm not part of your

: ' : :

subconscious — I'm in this dream

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too!" The content is on

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chapter there!

Luca freezes for a second and then he laughs at me, taking a step back and
crossing his arms. "Yeah, right."

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I'm serious," I growl, still rubbing at
my head and glaring back at the tree,

: f) :

which I'd swear wasn't there earlier.

am :

It's a subconscious state for both of

' ,

us. So, I don't think you should...do

f "

what you were going to do..." The

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the latest chapter there!

I blush furiously, unable to even say the word kiss.

He smirks at me, shaking his head.

“Because!” I continue, glaring up at him. “It would be exactly the same as if you did

it in real life!”

“All shit my subconscious would say,” Luca says with a smug shrug, “if it was trying to convince me not to kiss a boy because I’m straight.”

And then he leans in, and I press myself back against the tree with a deep inhale

of .

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“What, is your subconscious homophobic?” I ask, continuing to be frustrated and

a little annoyed at him for not believing me even though I’m telling him the truth

and spilling a serious secret for his own good.

Because honestly! I could make out with him here! And I would be the only one

who knew that it was real!

I’m doing this for him, to be fair, and yet he persists in not believing me! It’s very rude.

“It might be,” Luca says with a shrug, still looking down at me. “I wouldn’t think that it was, but here you are, still not kissing me, even though I keep trying.

Honestly, Ari, being shut down by the figment of my own imagination is very annoying —”

“I’m real!” I insist again, this time through my teeth.

“Prove it,” he says, shrugging.

“Ask me anything!”

“That won’t work,” he says, turning his head to the side. “Anything you say is something I already know or think I know. No way to verify that it’s true.

“Fine,” I say, crossing my arms and lifting my chin. “Ask me something tomorrow,

in real life — something impossible, that you’d never predict. I’ll give you the same

answer here as I do then.”

Luca turns his head a little, considering. “That could work,” he murmurs, but

then

he turns back to me with a sly smile. "But in the meantime, you and I could, you

know, fool around a little..."

In the distance, my wolf howls with delight.

"Whoa," Luca says, turning to look for her. "What was that?"

"It was my wolf," I sigh.

"Really?" he asks, and then he turns back to me, smirking. "Your wolf does...not

sound adverse to the idea." He leans more fully against the tree now, bringing his

body closer to mine and kind of pinning me back against the trunk in a way that...

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That I do not mind at all.

"Luca," I sigh, and honestly I have to close my eyes as I turn my face away from

him, because if I spend even a moment longer looking up at the shadows his long lashes cast against his cheeks...I am definitely going to do something I regret.

"What?" he asks softly, cupping my cheek in his palm and turning my face back

to his, his hand and his voice both impossibly gentle. "What do you want, Ari?" And his question...I know instinctually that there are layers to it. That he's asking

me what I want, but also what I like —

How I want to be kissed.

Where, precisely I want him to put his hands.

Whether or not I want him to pull me tight against him as he presses his mouth

hard to mine — which I decidedly do —

"Luca," I sigh, as he rests his weight deliciously against me, pinning me back against the tree in a way that feels....god, it feels fucking amazing, his body pressed flush against mine. "I want you to ask me a question."

He laughs darkly and my eyes fly open, already glaring. "Not that kind of question," I growl, and he laughs again.

"Fine," he whispers, playing my game even as he strokes his thumb along the skin of my cheek. "Real-Ari had my nan's coffee cake tonight, which is my favorite desert. What's yours?"

"Strawberry ice cream," I answer immediately, "with whipped cream."

Relief running through me — because I stand by what I decided last time. It is not fair to be in this dream state with him and be the only one knowing what's going on. If we're going to do this? As we both very clearly want to? Then we're both going to know that it's real. “No sprinkles on top?” Luca asks, teasing — because, I mean, it is a very girly desert. “Of course sprinkles,” I murmur, sighing as I take one last look of him, “too many. Like, way more than seems practical.” I take a deep breath, savoring his scent and the press of his muscled torso against me for one last second. I hesitate, but

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then I lift my hands, and let my palms press against his sides, feeling the lines of his obliques as I slowly slide my hands down towards his hips. And as I do, just for a moment, I let myself imagine what his bare skin would feel like under my fingertips. A hard shudder passes through Luca's body. “God damn it, Ari,” he growls, leaning in. But I turn my head, and press my eyes shut, and will the dream to end. My eyes fly open in my bed and I clench my teeth with a groan, turning and burying my face into a pillow to stifle the sound of it. I spend too long with my face buried in my pillow, feeling sorry for myself, cursing myself vehemently for having a sense of ethics and the willpower to stop Luca from doing something he'd probably regret. Because god damn it, god damn it I wanted to kiss him. And now, who the hell knows when I'll have the chance — because Luca, he just wanted to kiss the figment of his imagination that looks like me so he can figure out how he's feeling. As soon as he realizes that that figment is the real Ari Clark?

He's going to run screaming from the room.

I mean, at least I think he will. I sigh, curling up in my pillows and wrapping myself up in my soft white duvet, considering it. Because Luca — he still thinks I'm

a boy, and as much as he's willing to subconsciously consider experimenting with

kissing a guy...

I think that he is straight, and that I'm just unfairly confusing him because I'm his

mate underneath this boy facade.

I sigh, worrying about all of the complications of this, because Ben revealed today how tenuous my secret already is. And as much as I'm fine with Ben knowing... Luca? My mate? It's a different story — an unpredictable level of exposure that I'm just not ready for yet.

I'm still hiding my gender at this school, because failing to do so means getting

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kicked out. And I've just, just gotten hold of the thing I never knew I always wanted: a chance at the Espionage Track at Alpha Academy.

And I am not at all ready to give that up with Luca Grant.

not even for the chance to make out

So I sigh, turning over again in my blankets, and I close my eyes and force myself to try and go back to sleep — a state which feels very, very far away right

now.

Jesse and Rafe wake up early, some kind of Alpha alarm clock that I was not born with making them rise before sun.

“Up and at ‘em, little cousin!” Jesse shouts, throwing a pillow into the open curtain of my nook. I jump and shriek when it hits me right in the head.

“We spies get an extra hour of sleep,” I growl, pulling the blankets over myself and nestling back down.

“Not if they want breakfast, they don't,” Rafe says, laughing and yanking my away, making me shriek again.

duvet

“Doesn't it just come up in the dumbwaiter?” I ask, sitting up finally when I realize

they're not going to leave me in any peace.

“Nope,” Jesse says around his toothbrush as he walks out of the bathroom, brushing as he strides around the room in his underwear, getting ready for the day. “Breakfast all together with cadets.”

“Oh,” I say, yawning and looking around for my boots. Rafe tosses one in my

direction as he takes Jesse's place in the bathroom. I sigh and grab it, yawning so wide my jaw cracks. As I pull my boot on I hope that there's coffee with breakfast — because while dream states do happen while you're dreaming, I'm not sure that I'd say they let you wake up relaxed and rested. At least, not the way I'm doing them. Visit to read full content. Awe hits me again as we walk into the dining hall. My head swivels around, taking in the gorgeous sight of round tables set up in what looks like a damn cathedral. The four—story ceilings arch high above us, shadows



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hiding the light from the chandeliers and three-story windows that line the western wall can't reach the The

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corners.

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I Sa ”

Wow, this is the breakfast room?” I murmur, kind of shocked as Rafe walks us to an empty table with eight seats and sits us down. I smile when I see dozens and dozens of young men dressed in cadet black at their own tables, chatting with friends or reading through books. These are more advanced students apparently we all have breakfast together. The

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“This used to be the castle's great hall, like the one at home,” Rafe says, sitting

down before an empty place setting and gesturing for me and Jesse to do the same.

I hesitate, looking around for the line. “Where....do we get the food...”

But my eyes go wide when a man dressed in stark white comes to the table and

gives us a sharp bow. “Coffee or tea?”

Rafe calmly orders coffee for all of us as I gape at the man, who smiles around at

us before walking away. “Do we have...waiters? At breakfast?”

“Why is this so weird for you, Ari?” Jesse asks, already seated on Rafe’s right.

“All of this is available at your house — it's why I like to sleep over so much.

Your

personal chefs are way better cooks than both of my parents.”

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Yeah, but it's school,” I say, taking my seat and watching in awe as another group of people bring us a selection of toasted bread, butter, and jam alongside our pot of coffee. One leans forward and asks softly

lie ?

what hot food we'd like and I blink at
,

her, shocked that there's more — The
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Rafe orders bacon and eggs, telling her that we're expecting two more, and
starts to pour from the coffee pot, laughing at me. “Seriously, Ari, why is this
such
a surprise?”

“It's just so fancy,” I breathe, blinking. “I don't know, I guess I just got...used to
the barracks.”

“Well, dad and Uncle Roger like cadets to understand themselves as
deserving
of the best,” Rafe says with a shrug, and I tilt my head, considering that that's
not
a terrible way to think of it.

“The Academy asks a lot of its cadets, as does the life after school,” Jesse
says,

smiling at me, clearly repeating words his dad said to him verbatim. “It likes to
return the favor while it can.”

“Fine by me,” I say, reaching for a blueberry muffin — still warm, my god —
while

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Rafe fills my cup with hot brown liquid. I smile when he pushes the sugar and
creamer my way — he and Jesse take theirs black, but he knows what I like.

“Morning!” Ben says, sitting down next to me and giving me a warm nudge
with

his shoulder. “Where's Luca?” he asks, looking around.

“I'm right here,” Luca's voice sounds, dry and exhausted, from right behind
me.

I spin, my muffin halfway to my mouth, to see him already glaring down at
me.

Ut-oh, my wolf says, skittering back inside of me. Looks like he's mad...

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Chapter 43

“Hi!” I say, forcing my face into my best cheerful-Princess grin. “There's
coffee!

Come sit down!”

Luca just narrows his eyes at me a little more, suspicious, and goes to the other side of the table, sitting with Jesse.

My stomach twists at this — Luca almost always sits by me. And while Ben took his spot today...I don't know. Something about the way Luca keeps his eyes on me even as he rounds the table...

God, I feel like a little rabbit being watched by a hungry wolf.

We're wolves too! My wolf reminds me, snapping her jaws eagerly in response to Luca's predatory prowl. Let's not let him see us sweat.

I nod, inwardly, and proceed as if absolutely nothing is wrong, determined not to let Luca think that I know at all why he might be in a mood.

Even though that I am well aware that I am very much the cause of it.

I did more thinking last night, and I decided in the end that I've been very foolish with the dream state. Even though my wolf is disappointed in my decision, I've decided not to use it anymore — it's just too risky.

Instead, I'm going to put my feelings for my mate aside and concentrate on succeeding here at school. After all, that's why dad didn't let girls in in the first place — there's enough to do here without romantic distractions.

I'm not going to be the first girl in, just to fail out because I couldn't stop mooning over a boy.

Rafe, Jesse, and Ben chat excitedly about their mornings, those on Warrior track eating faster than Ben and I because they have a workout this morning while Ben and I have an extra hour before class.

"Why do you think that is?" he asks me frowning.

"Who knows," I say, giving a little shrug. "Maybe we'll have like...extra homework to do in the mornings or something."

"Nerd track," Jesse murmurs, and I shoot him a dirty little glare.

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"Don't be jealous, dumb jock track." I throw back at him, and he just grins.

"All tracks are equally good," Rafe cuts in smoothly, always diplomatic.

Luca, to my chagrin, doesn't say a word. I sigh a little, looking down at my plate

as I push around my eggs, because I'd much rather he was his old self. This quiet, moody Luca — it makes me anxious.

"What's up with you today?" Jesse asks, nudging Luca with his elbow. "Didn't sleep?"

"Nope," Luca says, terse, flicking his eyes up to me. "Weird dreams again." Jesse's mouth bursts into a scandalized smile as he slowly shifts his gaze to me,

but I quickly dart my eyes back to my plate, inwardly stringing together a fluid and vehement line of curses.

"Really," Jesse says, digging in. "And what was so troubling about it?" he asks,

and I can tell that he's almost vibrating with eagerness now, just dying for more material to tease me with later.

I lit my eyes to glare at my cousin, wishing I could shoot death rays from my pupils to knock him dead in his chair.

"What was so troubling," Luca says, his voice low and dangerous, "was that I knew so little about my friends. For instance, I shared with you all what my favorite desert was last night —"

I go rigid despite my earlier determination to keep cool.

"Your nan's coffee cake was delicious," Jesse chimes in, turning his head to Luca, fascinated as to where this is going.

"But," Luca says, his eyes still trained on me, "I have no idea what any of your

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favorite deserts are."

"What?" Rafe asks, turning to Luca, confused: "Why does that bother you?"

"Just humor me," Luca says, his voice oddly angry for someone who is pretending to so casually talk about desert. "Let's just...all go around. Say our favorite deserts. Ben?" he says, and I jump a little when he snaps his gaze to Ben next to me.

Ben glances at me, picking up on the weird vibe. "Um, I like...chocolate cake?"

"Amazing," Luca says, dry. And then he turns to Jesse, clearly keeping me for last.

As Jesse reports that his favorite is bread pudding, and Rafe that he just likes chocolate chip cookies, I renew my determination to stick to the plan I made

last

night. When Luca gets to me? I have to lie.

Let him think that the dream state was a figment of his imagination — I'm never

going to meet him there again. The plan I came up with last night to convince him

that it was real? That was foolish — it is so, so much simpler to just.....never go

there again.

“And you, Ari?” Luca asks, and Jesse turns to him a bit with a frown, because in

public Luca never calls me by what he thinks is my name — he always calls me

Shrimp.

“What is going on here?” Rafe asks, quietly looking between us.

I sigh. “I like chocolate cake too, Luca,” I say casually, taking Ben's desert when I

can't think of my own.

I watch him carefully and, after a long moment, see his shoulders slump.

Though

the expression on his face is it relief? Or disappointment? Or...

I peer at him, trying to figure it out, but suddenly

“Don't lie, Ari,” Jesse says, laughing and shaking his head and reaching for another piece of toast from the bread basket. “Everyone knows that you don't actually like chocolate cake.”

Luca's head whips to Jesse, his eyes going wide.

“Jes-” I start to say, but he's still going.

“No, your favorite,” he says, taking a bite of his toast and talking with his mouth

full, “is strawberry ice cream, with whipped cream, and so many sprinkles on top

that it's kind of disgusting.”

He laughs, shaking his head at the memory of twenty—some birthdays when I wouldn't even touch the cake — only wanting scoop after scoop of strawberry ice

cream

My face goes pale as I turn my eyes back to Luca.

Who is staring at me in complete shock, his jaw hanging almost to the floor.

The table is silent for a long moment.

Jesse figures it out first, his head swiveling between us, delight on his face as he

realizes that he just caused some kind of drama that he's going to get to hear all about later.

Rafe is next.

"Seriously," he says, leaning forward with his coffee cup halfway to his mouth, "what the hell is going on here?"

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« . " —

Nothing!" Ben says next, realizing that the tension is between me and Luca, and proving himself an absolute gem by leaping to my aid.

" :)

Come on, Ari! Let's go check out the 3 " «

library before class!" The content is

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Immediately I accept his offer, jumping to my own feet and almost up—ending my

chair, which makes Jesse cackle with laughter.

"Wait," Rafe says, frowning at Ben and me, "it isn't safe

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You have to go to your class an hour

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early anyway," Ben says, rolling his eyes a little at Rafe as he slings an wp

arm around my shoulders. "I'll walk

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Ari to Chemistry — it will be fine -" The content is on ! Read

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Rafe hesitates but I quickly shout my goodbyes, glancing at Luca who I see is just...

Still absolutely frozen, staring after me, probably processing the shock of his life

as he realizes that I actually was in the dream state with him the night before

—

And that I just tried to lie to him about it —

And that he's confessed to this little Shrimpy boy that he's attracted to him —

That he tried to kiss that same little Shrimp boy that he insisted was a figment of

his subconscious — but that it was real

And that I know all about it

The hysterical urge to laugh wells up in me, but luckily Ben sweeps me out of the

room, speaking loudly about the history of the castle and the location of the library, covering my complete panic.

As soon as we get out the door I can't help myself, covering my face with my hands and letting out a horrible little embarrassed shriek as I press my back against the

wall.

"What the hell is going on!?" Ben laughs, glancing back towards the Hall,

"what

did you do to Grant!?"

I slip my hands down a little bit so that I peer over my fingers, shaking my head

at him. "Ben," I whisper, "you wouldn't believe me if I told you."

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He bursts into a grin. "After

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everything I've witnessed with you

: . "

this week, Ari Clark?" He puts a particular emphasis on my fake name and raises an eyebrow at me.

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There's not much I wouldn't believe.

He glances back towards the Hall.

"

But come on — we should go.

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They're getting up." The content is on
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"You mean Luca has regained his power of speech?" I ask dryly, ducking back against Ben's side and letting him lead me away.

"Yup," Ben says, still looking backwards. "And he looks mad."

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Ben sweeps me up a few staircases, away from the rest of the boys, and he really does take a minute to show me the incredible library that takes up a large

portion of the top floor — presumably on the other side of our rooms. I gape around at it in complete awe.

I mean — we have a pretty impressive library in the palace — but this? The arching

ceilings are almost entirely made of glass, like the entire space was once one giant greenhouse or something. The stacks are all tall and white, reaching so high I can't believe they don't topple over, with these gorgeous brass ladders steeped all over them.

Obviously, all I want to do for the rest of the day is wander around picking out a

stack of books and sinking onto one of the plush velvet chairs with them, but Ben

laughs, leading me away to my chemistry classroom with plenty of time to spare.

As we walk, I smile at him even as he glances at his map, trying to find the right

halls. Because as much as I know he's dying to ask me what's going on with Luca, he's also sensing that it's somehow private, and that I'm not ready to go there yet.

Unlike Jesse, who I know will tease me mercilessly and press me for details the

moment he gets a chance, Ben lets me have my space.

And so as we arrive at the door to my class, I take a minute to bump my shoulder

into his what I'm coming to learn is the manly version of a big hug. "Thanks, Ben."

"Anytime, Ari," he says, grinning at me. And by the crinkle around his eyes, I can

tell that he understands that I'm thanking for him for more than the escort.

“Good

luck in there,” he says, nodding towards the classroom.

I bump him again, and he grins at me before heading down the hall.

When I step inside, I'm surprised both by the smallness of the classroom and by

the fact that I'm...

Alone.

I stay perfectly still for a second, the two boys who are already in the class turning to look at me.

68%

Chapter 44

I mean, it's not that I've never been alone before...

But, I mean, have I?

I have spent my entire life in the company of my family, watched and guarded. Even when I'd go to sleepovers they'd send a guard or two along to stand outside of the house.

But now...

“Are you staying or going,” a deep, bored voice asks, brushing past me into the room.

I stumble a little — he didn't hit me or anything. I was just...surprised.

I watch with interest as the tall man sweeps to the front of the room, putting his

book down on the black desk at the front, raising an eyebrow at me. He has dark

hair, just going grey at the temples, and a long crooked nose.

I smile, liking him instantly — I don't know why. Nothing about him screams nice,

but...I don't know.

I like him too, my wolf says tilting her head with interest, and I stand up straight,

trusting my instincts. “Staying,” I say. “Sorry,” I apologize, coming into the room

more fully now and taking a seat at an empty table.

The professor nods and looks down at his book, flipping through the pages.

I sit a little awkwardly, not knowing what to do. I mean I recognize the two other

cadets already in the room, and the five more who filter in after. They were all candidates with me. But what Ben said last night holds true

Rafe and Jesse, they

really did do a good job of isolating me away from everyone else. I have no idea who any of these people are. “All right,” the Professor says, marching to the door and slamming it shut, twisting the lock and striding back for the front of the room, all business. “Welcome to the Espionage Track. I’m Dr. Neumann, I will be your advisor and your professor of Chemistry.”

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We all sit up a little straighter then, I think anxious and eager to impress. He smirks a little at us, not unkindly, and then launches into a speech about what we'll be expected to do here. My eyes go wider and wider as he speaks, detailing the

Chapter 44

incredible amount of information that we'll be expected to learn in a very short amount of time. I jump when he takes a textbook from below the desk and drops

it on the table in front of him, the text making a huge thwapping sound.

“This is the first of your four textbooks for this course. I will expect you to be proficient in all of the information contained within this text by the time the holiday

break rolls around.”

Holiday break? We....we have those?

“Those who do not succeed...” he says, his voice slowing now as he looks around at all of us, “will not be accepted back next term.”

I breathe in sharply. What?

“This is in addition to the school’s standard cuts at the end of the first semester,”

Neumann says, looking around slowly at all of us, and the other students all flinch and begin to murmur. I look around, confused and a little upset —

Further cuts — god, I'd forgotten all about those —

Neumann's eyes focus on me now, perceiving that I am completely lost. “In case

some of you are unaware,” he says, his voice dry, “which is... frankly

abundantly

clear from some of your expressions, Alpha Academy cuts a further 40% of its entering Cadets at the end of the Examination.”

I go pale. What? What?

40%!?

What the hell is this Examination!? Why didn't Jesse and Rafe say anything!?

“What I am attempting to explain to you,” Neumann continues, “is that

Espionage

cuts on top of that. If you pass the Examination but fail your Chemistry exam?

You're out. The rates for continuing in Espionage are the most competitive in

the

school, which I believe is fair, considering that we do not want to produce

inept

agents. With an entering group of 8, as we see here, I would expect the continuing number in January to be...”

He pauses to consider, perhaps doing the math.

“Somewhere between two and three of you.”

Chapter 44

My breath freezes in my chest. What. What?!

“Of course,” he says with a bored sigh, “there is no reason why all eight of you could not make it if you were the most spectacular incoming group of young cadets the school has ever seen. I would just...not expect it to happen.”

He takes a moment to look each of us in the eye, and I don't miss it when he lingers longest on me.

67%

“You will be trained for other affinities within Espionage with other professors, but

all of you will meet here three times a week to study with me. You will be examined in your other affinities as well and will be required to pass those examinations too. You will also need to be fit enough to pass the Examination, which will be your own responsibility. I suggest you each work very hard. That being said, if any of you do not believe yourself up to the task, you may apply to

switch to the...Ambassador Track.”

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But the distaste with which he says the word suggests to us that to do such a thing would be a great step down in the world. My heart twists for Ben, who is already there. All of the young men around me straighten

their shoulders, and I see that each is determined to try. The content is on ! Read the latest chapter there!

Neumann takes another moment to look us all over, not inviting questions but leaving the space open in case any of us have anything burning we need to ask.

And even though questions race through my mind, I press my lips together in a

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firm, determined line.

I can ask Rafe and Jesse for answers to those later. Now? Now I need to listen.

“Good,” Neumann says, nodding, and then he reaches below the desk again, pulling out a stack of notebooks and pens. “Hand these around,” he says, offering them to the young man closest to him, “lessons begin now.”

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As Neumann speaks I scribble furiously in my notebook, taking down everything he says because I

) . > .

don't yet know his teaching style — is he the kind of professor whose lessons you pour over again and again in an attempt to memorize his wisdom? Or is he more of a guide through the field, supporting you as

)

you your own pace? I've had both kinds of teachers — but until I know

) Bn

his style? I'm writing down everything. The content is on

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chapter there!

learn at

The pages are soon filled with a wealth of information, and even though I'm intimidated, by the end of the class I'm also incredibly excited about what to come.

Chapter 44

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The lesson plan that Neumann has sketched out for us by the end of the

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semester we're not going to refresh our understanding of the basics of

0 ' 5

Chemistry, but we're also going to understand the chemical compositions and the mechanics. of how to create twelve subtle poisons that he understands as the basic toolkit of any self-sufficient shadow agent. The content is on

! Read the latest

chapter there!

Those poisons, he promises, will be the basis of our examination at the end of term.

My hands are almost shaking with nerves and excitement when we close our notebooks at the end of the three-hour class. I slip my pen into the notebook, clutching it to my chest as I get in line with the other students picking up my textbook at the front of the room.

When Neumann places it in my waiting hand, he smirks when I almost drop it, my

eyes going wide at the surprising weight. "Going to have to work on that, Cadet,"

he murmurs. "If you can't carry the book, how can you expect to carry the knowledge?"

"Well, it will weigh a lot less when it's all in my head," I murmur, lifting the book more firmly into my arms as I turn away.

To my surprise, Neumann laughs, and he nods to me as I glance over my shoulder on the way to the door. When I trip over a desk because I'm not looking

where I'm going, he just laughs again good-heartedly, hanging his head a little with a sigh and

a smile.

I dart into the hall, embarrassed but smiling.

I probably shouldn't be as surprised as I am when I walk immediately into my brother, basically bouncing off his chest.

"Ari," he says, frowning down at me. "What the hell is going on with you?"

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"Oh, god, Rafe," I sigh, shaking my head up at him and glancing down the hall.

"Do we have to do this now? My schedule says we have ten minutes for lunch before our next mystery class —"

"Here," Rafe says, dropping a wrapped power bar and a bottle of water on top of

my books. "Academy isn't big on hot lunch — just a snack before a big dinner. Eat

while you walk, talk while you eat." He puts a firm hand between my shoulder blades and urges me forward, making me keep pace with his quick stride.

"How do you even know where we're going?" I murmur, struggling with the wrapper of my lunch with one hand. Rafe sighs, taking the food back and unwrapping it for me before slipping it into my hand.

"I looked at the map, obviously, and don't try to change the subject," he says.

"What was going on with Luca this morning? He was staring at you, completely

freaked out, and Jesse almost had a convulsion he was laughing so hard."

"How the hell should I know!?" I ask, blatantly lying and talking with my mouth full.

"Ari!" Rafe sighs, glaring at me. "I know you're lying — I've known you since you

were born

"You were just a baby," I mutter, even though he's right.

"Fine!" he snaps, moving on, "pressing subject number two! Why the hell did you

invite Jackson to have breakfast with us yesterday?"

I stare up at him for a second, forgetting to chew in my surprise, even though he

keeps me moving. "What?" I ask, swallowing hard. "Rafe, that was like, a million

years ago —"

"That was twenty—four hours ago," he says, giving me a withering stare.

"Well a lot has happened in the meantime!"

“A lot that you were hoping would make me forget!” he counters, pointing ahead

to a door that I understand from his body language is our destination.

I grin up at him, because...yup. He's got me there.

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Chapter 45

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Rafe stops, grabbing my arm, making me stop with him. “Ari, we had a deal — that guy tried to kill you, and you promised never to speak to him again, and all of

a sudden he's at our breakfast table? What the hell!?”

“Rafe,” I sigh, glancing towards the door, knowing that we've only got a few minutes to get in there and I really, really hate being late for school. “I promise I'll

tell you, all right? Jackson — he saved me in the obstacle course —”

“What?” Rafe asks, leaning closer, shock all over his face. “He what?”

“He is the only reason I made a better time- and considering that I was the 90(th)

candidate let in? If he hadn't, I wouldn't be here. We owe Jackson — and I promise that I will tell you all about it, but can we just get to class? None of this is

pressing right now, right? We have time.”

Rafe scowls, glancing between the classroom door and me.

“Fine,” he says, tugging me forward by the arm before I wrench it from his grasp,

not wanting whatever professor is in this classroom to see my big brother dragging me around. “But you and I are taking a long moment tonight to have a

chat about Jackson McClint...”

Rafe doesn't finish his word, though, because as soon as we round the corner into

the room...

We come face—to—face with the man in question.

Or, at least I do. Rafe has to look down at him. But seated at the desk in the front

row, Jesse lounging in the seat behind him? Jackson's just about eye—to—eye

with

1. me.

Rafe doesn't even bother to hide his groan as he walks into the room, shoving me in front of him and heading for the desk next to Jesse. When I hesitate,

Rafe

barks my name, pointing to the desk next to him.

I blush, glancing around and realizing that not only Jackson is witnessing Rafe boss me around like a little kid, but so is another dark-haired cadet and the professor — who is, of course, the handsome professor who handed us all the weird orb yesterday, his dark hair tied back low at the base of his neck. He grins

at me, amused, but I sigh and do as my brother says, taking the desk next to him.

“Well,” says the professor, nodding to all of us and moving to the door, pulling it

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Chapter 45

shut. “Now that we're all here, we can begin.”

I look curiously around the room now, confused.

Seriously, a class of five people?

What the hell is going on here?

“My name is Professor Alves. The five of you have been gathered here because

out of the 96 cadets admitted to the program, only the five of you showed a particular aptitude for my teaching specialty. Unlike the rest of your peers, you will be enrolled in this class for the entirety of your time at the Academy. There will be no examinations and no cuts made. Instead, the time will be spent learning your own particular affinity and cultivating your...talent.”

He go

es quiet now, smiling around at each of us in turn, I think enjoying the fact that

each of us are completely confused. Silence reigns in the room and he just lets it

hang there.

Jackson is the first to break it, frustration in his every word. “I'm sorry,” he says,

though he certainly doesn't sound it, “I don't understand. What are these affinities. you're talking about?”

“Each of you,” Alves says softly, moving to the book satchel perched on the

edge

of the desk and pulling from it the black orb, “demonstrated an affinity for magic. I

will be here, over the course of the next several months and years, to see whether or not your particular skills can be honed for the battle field or otherwise

in service of the nation.”

My eyebrows go up almost to my hairline.

I mean, our moms told the three of us when we turned sixteen that the Goddess

has given each of us a particular magical gift. But that is a BIG family secret, and

none of us have spilled a word of it to anyone.

hint of it, I'm also pretty damn sure that none of the three of us have shown any

either. Which mom and Aunt Cora said not to worry about — they didn't find out

about their own gifts until later in their lives either.

So...how the hell did the Academy find out? My eyes dart immediately to the black ball.

“Yes,” the professor says, perhaps seeing the direction of my gaze and probably

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everyone else's as well. “The sphere measures magical aptitude — one of my own inventions, very useful. And while it does allow us to identify candidates who

have an affinity for magic, it does not at all tell us what kind of magic that person

wields.

So!”

He deftly tucks the ball back into his satchel, smiling around at the five of us.

“Does anyone know what they can do?”

The five of us sit in absolute silence, staring at him.

I mean.

He just very, very casually told us that we're all magic, and that he's going to train

us in battle magic —

And even if that is maybe the coolest thing I've ever heard...

It is definitely a surprise.

“Oh come on,” Alvez says, coming around the desk and shocking me by casually sitting on it, tucking his leg in beneath him. “Surely one of you is aware of what you can do? Sinclair?” he says, his eyes moving immediately to Rafe. Rafe just stares back at him, unreadable.

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“pr) »

I’m aware of your mother’s talents, Alvez says with a casual shrug, which) makes Rafe’s eyes narrow. I feel mine doing the same. Mom — her . 00 healing magic isn’t precisely a secret,) but she’s been very careful to never “pe ? Sh specifically confirm it. “She and your

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mother,” he shifts his eyes to Jesse

“ J :

now, “were instrumental in the formation of this department! They 5 9D 5 designed it!” The content is on ! Read the latest chapter there!

My lips part in shock now. What!?

Rafe sits back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest, glaring at the professor a little bit. And I realize that the professor is trying to get us to casually confess our mothers magical affinities, which we have long sworn to never do.

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Oh come on," the professor says, looking around at all of us and

: «) :

laughing casually. "We're going to have to learn how to trust each other

.) a

a little more. After all, we're going to be spending a great deal of time together. In the spirit of trust and full disclosure...how about a little

5) s

demonstration." The content is on

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chapter there!

I look over at Rafe and Jesse, who look between each other and at me.

Together,

we

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nod.

67%

"All right," Rafe says, speaking for us and no bothering to consult with Jackson or

the other boy, who I see scowling at the other side of our line of desks, displeased to be left out. "You demonstrate first, then we'll...have a conversation."

The Professor smiles at him and then pulls a large piece of candy out of his pocket — a jawbreaker, I think. "Me first," he says, his voice low with pleasure, and then he tosses the candy into the air towards the center of the room.

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We all turn to stare at it and I gasp when, suddenly — almost from the bottom up- the jawbreaker stops falling and instead just...disintegrates in the air. The very miniscule pieces of it float through the air to the ground in a fine pile of pink dust. The

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the latest chapter there!

“Whoa,” I breathe, shocked and impressed.
“Disintegration,” the professor says with a casual shrug. “My affinity also allows me to rust things, though it's a longer process that mostly yields the same results.”
“How do we know it's not a trick?” Jackson asks, clearly more suspicious than me. “That the candy wasn't going to fall apart as soon as you threw it?”
“Give me something else,” the professor says, looking around at us. “I'm an open book in this classroom we all have to be. I promise, I'm not lying to you about my skills or what the class is for, though it might sound unbelievable now.”
“Here,” I say, ripping a blank page from the back of my chemistry notebook and balling it up in my hand. “Can I just... toss it?”
He nods to me and so I do, lobbing it high into the air.
Like the jawbreaker, the paper likewise just falls apart into microscopic pieces that drift down through the air.
“Holy shit,” Jesse whispers, watching it. “That is...incredibly cool.”
“So,” Alvez says, smiling around at us, his voice a little self-pleased. “Does anyone know what they can do?”
But we all just look around at each other, completely silent. Until the dark-haired boy on the far side of the room heaves a sigh and raises his hand.
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The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy

Chapter 46

Professor Alvez smiles like a cat who has just caught a canary. “Oh, excellent, Cadet Davis. Please, do share.”
The dark haired boy sighs again, crossing his arms over his chest as he looks around at us, clearly uncomfortable. “Are we sworn to secrecy in here?” he asks, anxious. “I'm not eager to share if this secret I've been keeping for

twenty-two

years is suddenly going to be public knowledge.”

“We are bound by our own rules in this classroom,” Alvez says, looking around at

all of us. “If the six of us decide to swear each other to secrecy, then we will be.

Thoughts?”

“I think that's fair,” Rafe says, nodding solidly. “What happens between the six of

us should be held in strict confidence.”

“And consequences?” Jackson asks, turning to look at Rafe. “If someone breaks

the secrecy?”

We all turn, a little instinctually, to the professor. “Well,” Alvez says, his voice

quiet, a little smile playing on his lips. “I am forbidden to offer corporeal punishment...” he murmurs.

I go still, staring him, and Rafe at my side does the same.

“A.. little joke,” he says, laughing with a shrug. I relax a little, but I scowl. This

professor — he’s almost too casual with his “little jokes.” He could have some

sympathy for the fact that we're all being asked to share our deepest secrets on

the first day of school.

“But,” the professor continues, “what has worked in years past has been a jury by

peer system. If someone violates the trust of the cohort, a complaint can be

raised and we can decide together what punishment is fair. For the worst cases,

expulsion could be on the table. Thoughts?”

I look between Rafe and Jesse, who both look at me. Together, we nod.

“That

works for us,” Rafe says, speaking for our little group.

“Convenient,” the dark-haired boy says, staring over at the three of us.

“Considering your little cadre of three has the majority in any voting situation.”

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Rafe just shrugs, holding his gaze, clearly telling him to deal with it. Jackson, to my surprise, looks over at me. I meet his eyes evenly and nod once,

no expression on my face as I ask him, without words, to trust us. He studies me

for a long moment with those grey-blue eyes and then turns back to the professor. "I'll agree to it," he says.

Rafe turns to look at me, his face stony, because he's very aware that Jackson —

whether he knows it or not is turning towards me and seeking my opinion

because he's my mate. He exhales sharply through his nose, turning to the dark-

haired boy across the room, and raises an eyebrow.

"Fine," Davis says, hanging his head back on his neck as if exhausted.

Then he,

too, exhales a deep breath and speaks as he raises his head. "I can breathe

underwater."

Alvez's face bursts into a grin as I gasp, leaning forward eagerly, because that is

perhaps the coolest thing I've ever heard.

Jesse is just as excited as I am. "Really?" he says, grinning at Davis. "How the

hell did you figure that out? Is there a time limit on it, or could you do it forever?

Do your fingers still get all pruney if you stay under too long? How does —"

"Sinclair," the Professor says, his voice tired, and Jesse laughs a little before

snapping his mouth shut and leaning back in his chair with an apologetic shrug.

He's just excited, is all. "That's incredible, Davis," the Professor says, smiling at

him. "And likely to be useful in a variety of situations. Would you be willing to

demonstrate at the next meeting, if I can arrange it?"

Davis sighs again but then nods sharply before turning to glare at all of us.

“Thanks for telling us, man,” Jesse says, giving Davis a warm smile. “You can trust us, though,” he says, gesturing to me and Rafe as well. “We're not going to tell anyone.”

For the first time, a little smile comes to the other cadet's face. “You can call me

Tony,” he says quietly. And Jesse nods, his grin deepening, and I'm grateful again

for my charming, friendly, thoughtful cousin who always knows how to make

everyone feel comfortable. Warmth runs through me, and I'm reminded again

how grateful I am to have him in my life.

“Anyone else?” Alvez says, looking eagerly around at us.

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The other four are silent before Rafe looses a tense breath. “We're not holding

anything back,” he says, his voice solid. “We just...don't know. Our mothers have

magic and they told us that we will have magic some day,” he says, gesturing

towards himself and Jesse, “but it hasn't manifested yet.”

“Not uncommon,” Alvez says, his voice encouraging. “And, the cousin?” he says,

turning to me.

I blink a little, because of course my story is the same as theirs. But I'm not

supposed to have a magic mother, am I? I say the first thing that comes to mind,

hoping it's plausible. “This is all a surprise to me,” I say with a shrug. “I mean, I

knew they had pending magic, but I had no idea I did too. Pretty cool, I

guess,
that I get to be part of the club.”
Rafe smiles at me, nodding, letting me know I've done well. I smile back.
“My situation is the same,” Jackson chimes in, tense. “Surprised to be
here. No
magical family line to speak of. Are you sure I'm in the right place?”
“Oh, I'm sure, McClintock,” Alvez says, leaning forward to smile at him.
And, is it
just me? Or does that smile look almost...greedy? “Your reading was
particularly
vivid.”
Jackson scowls, looking at the floor.
“So, what do we do?” Tony says, his arms still crossed as he slumps in his
chair.
“Like what is this class about? I already know how to use my magic —
what am I
supposed to learn? Are there like, textbooks...”
“No texts,” Alvez quips, stretching his arms over his head. “Instead, we
will spend
our time nurturing each of your gifts where they are. For those whose
magics
have yet to manifest, we'll spend some time attempting to coax them
forward. For
you, Davis, we'll work to push your gift to explore its extremes, see if any
other
details reveal themselves. Then, in future months or years — assuming
that you
pass the Examination —” he pauses a moment, looking significantly
around at all
of us, “we will begin to consider how to use your magic on a battlefield
or in other
ways to aid the nation.”
I take a moment to smack Rafe on the arm, mouthing “Examination!?” to
him and
knitting my brows to show my displeasure that he didn't tell me about
this. Rafe
just flaps a hand at me, dismissing my concern for now.
67%

Chapter 46

“All right!” Alvez says, clapping his hands together and hopping down from the desk. “Step one for this program is getting your magics to manifest themselves, and in my previous experience directing this program I have found that magic does indeed call to magic. As such, we will now pair off in a trust exercise to see if anything...stirs. As you three,” he says, turning to us, “have been around each other for years with no results, let's try engagement with someone new.” Rafe sends an anxious glance my way but I just roll my eyes at him, willing him to stop hovering over me like a mother hen. As he turns away, though, I realize that his anxiety is not misplaced — because Jackson and I, we have been having physical reactions to each other that I now consider might be a result of our both having magic. That pulse that moves through the air whenever I touch him with my hands? Is that....something? “Let's have Rafe with Tony, please?” Alvez says, interrupting my train of thought and gesturing for Rafe to cross the room to stand with Tony, who rises from his chair. “And Jackson with Jesse?” Alvez says next. My heart sinks a little because I'm alone the odd “man” out. Do I not get to experiment today? “I'll pair with you, Clark,” Alvez says as he takes three marbles out of his pocket and places one on a desk in front of Rafe and Tony and then another before Jesse and Jackson. Anxiety twists in my stomach as Alvez slowly

approaches

me, because... something in the way that he walks, he smiles at me.

I'm again reminded of a cat, and not the sweet kittenish type.

No, an eager, hungry cat who has just found a mouse he wants to play with.

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Alvez stops in front of me, placing a marble against our desk in front of

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us. "You should each find a form of physical contact you feel comfortable with skin to skin is best.

And then, together, you should attempt to access your magics, using it together to attempt to move the marble — either floating it in the air, , .)

pushing it from the desk or...I don't know. Exploding it. Whatever feels " :

natural." The content is on

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chapter there!

"This isn't going to work for me," Tony says immediately, glaring a little.

"I can't

take the marble under water and breathe it in.

"Humor me, Davis," Alvez says, stepping close to my side. "Your goal today is to

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help Rafe Sinclair discover his magics. Be a pal. You're a team, after all."

The four others in the room hesitate for a moment, but then turn to each other,

beginning to discuss — I guess what it is they want to do.

"Hand to hand?" Alvez says, turning to me and speaking softly, almost intimately

in my ear.

"Um, sure?" I say, anxiety racing through me as he raises his hand.

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My wolf shifts from paw to paw,
wary, as I raise my own hand and
press the back of it to the back of the
' p :

professor's hand. I don't trust him,
she murmurs to me, The content is
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chapter there!
anxious.

Me neither. I murmur back.
But there's no time to think on it now.
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Oh, come on," Alvez says, smiling
wickedly at me and turning his hand
to grasp mine, interlacing our fingers.
« Pv)

After all, it's not every day a man
gets a chance to take the hand of aPlease bookmark site to read lastest
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. arn

princess, is it?" The content is on
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chapter there!
Every drop of blood drains from my face.

Chapter 47

My eyes immediately dart to Rafe and Jesse across the room, but they're
caught
up in their conversations with Jackson and Tony.
"No no," Aivez says, his voice soft and pleased. "Don't shout for your brother,
Ariel. That would be a poor choice."
I turn my eyes back to the professor as, inside me, my wolf's hackles raise.
"Don't misunderstand — I am excited that you are here, highness," Alvez

murmurs, giving my hand a little squeeze. "I'm looking forward to working with you, developing your powers. But, of course, if anyone were to discover that I knew that a young woman had infiltrated the academy...I would lose my job." I stare at him, instantly realizing the trap that he's laid for me here. If I reveal to

anyone that he knows who I am even my brothers — he'll have me expelled, even

if it means he goes too.

"Mutually assured destruction," he murmurs, seeing me process the consequences. "So, I think it's best that the two of us work together, don't you?

Trust, after all," he says, his voice low and luxurious, "is the foundation of any great relationship."

"Fine," I say, my word hardly a whisper as I nod. "Please just...don't..."

"Ariel," he murmurs, moving closer, his eyes slowly drifting over my face.

"Your

secret is safe with me."

I exhale slowly.

"But," he continues, "you could thank me for my generosity."

"Thank you," I say instantly, the words falling from my mouth, and the way that he

grins...

Instantly I realize how under his thumb I am.

How much he likes forcing my hand, making me his little puppet.

"You are welcome, my Princess," he purrs. Alvez takes another moment to stare

into my eyes before turning to look at the marble, his entire demeanor changing

in an instant. I stare at him, shocked a little to see that he is again the mind-mannered professor. "Now," he says, grinning. "I'll do my best to push my power

Chapter 47

towards you. What do you think, should we try to levitate it? Or push?"

"Um," I reply, still staring at him, a little shocked.

"Let's try push." he says, glancing at me with a friendly grin. "Concentrate now,

Clark. See what you can do."

I stare at him for a moment longer, still rattled by his revelation and the way that

he took control. But then I lose my breath and concentrate because...what else

am I going to do?

Any way this turns, if I do anything at all beyond what he says, I'm kicked out of

school. So...I comply and focus on the marble in front of me.

To my surprise, my hand where it's clasped in Alvez's begins to heat — and more

than the usual body heat produced by two people holding hands. I flinch a little,

turning towards him.

“Nooo,” he murmurs, giving my hand a squeeze. “It's totally normal — don't get

distracted. Concentrate, Clark.”

I turn my attention back to the marble, and I do willing it first to lift, and then to move, and then to...I don't know, do anything.

My whole body is sweating after about fifteen minutes of concentration, but then

Alvez sighs and drops my hand. “It was good work, Clark,” he says, smiling at me

with encouragement as he claps me on the shoulder. “It may just be that our particular magics do not speak to each other. Shall we switch it up?”

Alvez claps his hands in the air and asks for results, but when no one reports any

ability to make the marble do anything at all, he just sighs and puts us in new couples.

I'm with Tony this time, who gives me a friendly nod. “Hands okay?” he asks, offering his.

“Sure,” I say, taking it. It's completely different this time, and a coolness rushes

through me as Tony and I stand for a long, long time looking at the marble before

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me. After awhile I find myself almost in a... meditative state. I'm calm, and relaxed, and honestly I feel like I'm almost...floating. All of the heat which resulted from my experience with Alvez is wiped from me, replaced by utter calm.

I jump when Alvez again claps his hands — because, how long was that? It

felt

like

Chapter 47

about three minutes...

But as I glance at the clock, I realize that about half an hour has passed. I gape.

"Any results?" Alvez calls out to us, and Rafe begins to murmur something about.

the marble maybe moving a little bit as I look up at Tony in surprise.

He blinks down at me, a smile on his lips, and I instantly grin as I realize that his

experience, somehow, matched my own. "I kind of forgot about the marble," I say,

smiling up at him.

Tony laughs. "Me too, but..."

"That was cool wasn't it!?"

"I feel like I've been at the spa all day," he whispers back, laughing more now with the joy of it. "I'm so cozy, warm in my soul. I'm so fucking relaxed."

"I know! I ="

"Results?" Alvez says, pitching his voice louder to interrupt us. Tony and I both

turn to him and when Alvez flicks his eyes down to our still-joined hands, I blush

a little and pull my hand away.

"The marble didn't move," I say, my voice solid. Tony looks down at me, perhaps

wondering why I'm not sharing more, but I just stand straight and don't look at him, hoping he holds his tongue.

Good, my wolf says, though she's laying languidly in my soul now, her eyes half-

lidded in her relaxation. Let's not tell the professor anything until we know more

about what he wants.

I nod, agreeing with her.

"Shame," Alvez says, quirking his head to the side. Then he looks up at the clock.

"We are out of time," he says with a little chagrin. "For homework, I'd like each of

you to get into your last pairing and try again for longer this time. At least a full hour. Come to our class in two days ready to report your results. Sinclair?

Please

come over here to arrange a time to meet with me privately.”

Alvez nods around to us before moving to his desk, starting to pack up his bag as

Rafe approaches to arrange a time.

My eyes immediately move to Jackson, who turns to me.

Because he’s the only one who’s left.

Tony leaves my side, heading for Jesse as Jackson slowly moves over. I have to

crane my head back on my neck to look up at him as he moves close.

“I’m glad to see you made it into the Academy,” Jackson says quietly, his voice

gruff as he stares down at me, his expression stony and unkind.

I can’t help it, I burst into a grin and laugh, just a little bit.

“What?” he asks, frowning now, confused.

“You just said something really nice,” I answer quietly, shrugging one shoulder,

“even though your tone and your expression still say you want to rip me to shreds.”

Jackson flinches back a little and stares at me. “Wait, really?” he asks.

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“Yeah,” I say, laughing a little more now. “Are you now aware of it? The fact that

you’ve got like, murder in your eyes pretty much all the time?”

“Oh my god,” he murmurs, dropping his head and scraping a calloused hand down the length of his face. “No, I guess I wasn’t.”

“Well, I’m glad I’m here too,” I say quietly, more serious now. “And thank you for

“Don’t mention it,” he murmurs, and as he glances around I realize that it’s as much a desire for secrecy as it is a downplaying of his generosity in the obstacle

course. “So, we have to...”

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I » .

Yeah,” I say, clearing my throat a

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little awkwardly. “Um, do you want to come up to our room for dinner? You PB ”

could eat with us and then...” I reach out and grab the little marble still qu Pp :

sitting on the desk. “Try to blow this : ”

to smithereens, or whatever.” The content is on ! Read the latest chapter there!

Jackson smirks at me and glances over his shoulder towards Jesse and Rafe. “Yeah, Jackson,” Jesse says, and I smile as he appears at Jackson's side,

holding my

Chemistry textbook out to me. “Come to dinner — you can have your food sent up with ours.”

From the other side of the room, I hear Rafe groan as he hears the invitation. “Ignore him,” I say, stepping closer to Jackson and shaking my head as I look up

into his face. “He’s being a dick. Seriously, come!”

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I'll think about it,” Jackson says, glancing over his shoulder at the 5)

crown Prince who so clearly doesn't : “ ’

want him to do that. “If not, I'll send word about my schedule. See if we) . ”

can't make a time to meet.” The content is on ! Read the latest chapter there!

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Okay,” I say with a shrug, taking my books from Jesse and smiling up at my mate, kind of unable to help it.

)

Because...honestly, I'm not scared of him at all anymore, even if I probably should be. After his apology in the bathroom, and then how he helped me? The content is on

! Read the latest chapter there!

I don't know. I'm starting to realize that there's more to Jackson than just his gruff surface.

For a second, my mind flashes to Luca —

But I push it away, not letting myself go there.

Jackson nods to me and Jesse, not bothering to say any other words of goodbye

as he grabs his satchel and heads from the door.

"He's not all bad, that one," Jesse says, considering Jackson as he disappears.

"Even if he is mildly terrifying even at the best of times."

"I agree," I say, contemplative. Jesse just grins at me and nods towards the door,

where Rafe is waiting at Alvez's side, Alvez patiently holding the key to the classroom in his hands.

"Good luck!" Alvez says to the three of us cheerfully as we move through the door. "Rafe, I'll see you tomorrow afternoon. Jesse, Ari, please don't hesitate to

get in touch if you need anything."

"We murmur our thanks to our professor, turning away —

And honestly, I thought it was all finished, until I feel fingers trace down the length

of my spine as I turn away.

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Chapter 48

1

My eyes go wide as I gasp, spinning to see Alvez walking down the hall, completely nonchalant. But that was no ghost, sneaking an intimate touch when

my brother's back was turned.

"What is it?" Rafe asks, turning towards me.

"Sorry, I uh—just saw a spider," 1 murmur. "Really big one."

“Gross,” Jesse says, a shiver running through him. I grin at him, because Jesse hates spiders.

“Yeah, let’s get out of here,” Rafe says, nodding towards the elevator at the end

of the hall. “Ari and I have to have a chat after all.”

“Really?” Jesse gasps as we step into the elevator. “What about!? Do I get to come, too?”

“No,” Rafe says, slinging an arm around my shoulders and glaring over at our cousin. “Siblings only for this one.”

Jesse hangs his head back as the elevator lifts us swiftly into the air. “That’s so

unfair,” he groans. “Come on, I’m basically a sibling — our dads our brothers, our

moms are sisters! Genetically, I’m pretty much the same

“Don’t be weird,” Rafe says, glancing over at Jesse with his brows knit as the elevator door opens and we start down the hall.

Jesse continues to complain all the way into the room but Rafe ignores him and I

laugh, because Jesse can be such a baby when he doesn’t get his way. But eventually Jesse flops, defeated and depressed to be deprived of the gossip, onto his bed as Rafe pushes me towards the bathroom.

“Rafe, you can pee alone,” I mutter, tossing my chemistry book onto my bed as I

1. go.

“This is about secrecy not bodily functions,” he murmurs, shutting the door behind him and leaning back on it. “Which I’d think would be something you appreciated, considering this is a conversation about your mate. So?” He raises

an eyebrow at me. “Spill.”

I sigh, closing the lid to the toilet and sitting down on it, taking off my cap and

15
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taking a moment to massage my sore scalp under its tight braid. Rafe listens quietly and carefully as I tell him everything about Jackson about his apology in

the bathroom that allowed me to see a different side of him, my impulsive invitation to breakfast, and then about his waiting to go into his obstacle course.

with me, and the hint and the help he gave.

By the end, Rafe looks more contemplative than angry, which is probably a

good thing. "So," he says, looking studiously down at the floor with his brows drawn, "do you think he's like...figured it out? That he's helping you because he knows you're his mate?"

"No," I say, thoughtful as I lean back against the toilet tank. "I mean, anything is possible, and I think he's being nice to me because he does sense a connection between us. But I think that if he knew I was his mate, he wouldn't just...let it pass."

Rafe's quiet for a minute before he sinks to the floor a bit. "It's all just so weird, Ari," he murmurs, shaking his head. "I don't know how to navigate any of this." "You're telling me," I say, but I smile at my brother because it feels nice to be able to talk to him about it.

"It's just, you have a right to get to know your mate," he murmurs, "that's important. But there's so much at risk. And he did seriously try to hurt you, which makes me very wary to let him into our little circle of trust..."

"I think you have to try, Rafe," I say quietly. "I don't think he's going to try to hurt me again. Honestly, if anything, it feels like his instincts are swinging in the other direction, and he might be following them."

"So like, even if he doesn't know he's your mate, he's got some impulse to protect you?" Rafe asks, looking up at me. "I mean, that makes sense...the way dad protects mom feels just like a part of who he is."

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A little anxiety stirs in me at the comparison to dad and mom — because they feel just so right together. And Jackson? I...just met him. And Luca? They're both important, my wolf says, prancing gleefully at the thought of

them.

And very good looking.

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Chapter 48

Tu Mar

Easy for you to say, I murmur, swatting her playfully in the rump. She spins in a

circle and then trots off, spirits high.

“All right,” Rafe sighs, hanging his head a little with a big sigh. “I’ll try to be nicer.

Though it will not be easy.”

I smile, starting to thank him, but a knock comes out the door.

“Go pee somewhere else, Jesse,” Rafe says, his voice exhausted.

“Thanks so much for the advice, Rafe,” Jesse replies, dry, “but actually our uniforms are here.”

“Oh!” I say, standing up and eagerly pulling on my cap. Rafe gets to his feet too,

but his eyes move immediately to the shower.

“Will you get mine?” he asks, heading for it. “I want to take a minute to myself.”

“Sure,” I say, grinning at him and heading for the door, eager to see what the seamstress did to my uniform to make it fit better. Rafe starts to strip off his shirt

as I pull the door open, but I’m a little shocked to see Jesse standing right there,

waiting for me.

He grabs me by the wrist and tugs me out of the bathroom, snicking the door shut behind me. “You have a guest, Mr. Clark,” he says, his voice half devious and half angry. “Who is asking for you in particular.”

My eyes go wide as I follow Jesse’s gesturing hand towards there door, where I

burst into a grin to see the seamstress here in the flesh, a black box in her hands.

“Oh, hi!” I shout, scurrying over, excited. “Hi!” she says, beaming at me, “I’m so happy to see you! I made some modifications, but, um...” her eyes drift over to Jesse as she bites her lip.

“Oh, don’t worry about him,” I say, flapping a hand in his direction as I take the box from her hands and head for my nook. “Come over here! Thank you so much

for bringing these up yourself! What’s your name? I’m Ariel —

“Ariel!” Jesse gasps, horrified, and both the seamstress and I stop short in our

tracks, our eyes going to him.

“Oh, sorry,” I say, grimacing at my cousin a little as I resume my steps. “I forgot to

tell you, Jesse

she kind of...figured it out yesterday.”

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A slow smile spreads on the seamstress’s face as she looks between my cousin

and me. “Oh, a secret within a secret, is it? I love those.”

“Ari,” Jesse groans, covering his face with his hands and turning away from me,

his— shoulders shaking a little bit. “You can’t do this shit to me and are you serious!? Someone else figured it out!?”

“Who else knows?” the seamstress asks, stepping closer to me as I put the box

on my bed and start to unpack it.

“Just my brother, obviously, and our friend Ben,” I say with a shrug, smiling at her.

“Though he had less direct evidence than you

“Ariel!” Jesse snaps, storming over to us, “stop telling her shit! We have no idea

who

this woman is!”


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Jesse!” I scold, glaring at him.

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You're being very rude to our guest,
and obviously she is trustworthy —
she would have told someone by



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now if she was going to! And she

, ·
wouldn't have taken such time to
make modifications to my outfit!

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Thank you for those, by the way," I
say, turning my smile on her again.

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"You're welcome," she replies, sketching a little bow with a half smile on her
face,

though she does glance anxiously back at my cousin.

Jesse sighs and narrows his eyes at the young woman, crossing his arms and
looking her up and down. "While my cousin has a point," he says, frustrated, "I
would like some further assurances that you can be trusted, ma'am."

"Oh?" she says, and I blink a little as the seamstress tucks her hands coyly
behind her back and raises her chin at Jesse, stepping closer. "And what kind
of

assurances would you like, sir?"

I go a bit still as I watch them.

"Well," he murmurs, his voice deepening as he looks down at her. "Your
personal

information, to start. As well as any leverage you'd like to hand over so that I
can

exact revenge if you blow my cousin's cover."

“Leverage, highness?” she says, a little smirk forming on her lips. “Why, we've just met. Don't you think you need to earn something like that?”

Jesse laughs a little, his eyes focused on hers, and my jaw drops when I see him. take a step closer, barely a hand's breadth between them now. Because they are flirting.

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Earn it, claim it,” Jesse murmurs, raising a bold hand and twisting a stray curl of her auburn hair around his finger before tucking it back

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behind her ear. “Either way, we can

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start with your number, unless we're supposed to use messenger pigeons to contact people in this dank castle

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“Oh my god,” I burst out, staring between them. “Jesse!” I step forward and smack him, hard, on the arm. “Would you stop!?”

“Ari!” he shouts, laughing and taking a step away. “I am working here to protect

you

“Oh, you so are not,” I growl, stepping in front of the seamstress. “There is one

girl in this whole castle who knows about my secret, and I'd quite like her to be my friend, so if you can please stop hitting on her

Jesse's mouth drops open at my accusation and the seamstress, behind me, bursts out laughing.

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It's all right, Ari,” she says, putting a hand on my arm and turning me

“pr

towards her. “I'm pretty much the only young woman working in this castle — I know how to handle myself

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around these boys.” I grin at her as she rolls her eyes. The content is on ! Read the latest chapter there!

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“Okay, the question of boys aside,” Jesse says, clearly rankled by the diminutive appellation as he steps forward again, “seriously, can we trust you? This is...not a small secret.”

“I swear it,” the seamstress says, her eyebrows going up and her face sincere. “Beyond the fact that I will absolutely lose this job if anyone figures out that I kept this secret, I think it's really cool that there's finally a girl in the ranks. Plus,” she grins at me and gives me a shy little shrug, “I liked you immediately. And I, too, could use a friend. Gets lonely in this castle.”

“See?” I say, linking arms with her and turning to pout at Jesse. “We're lonely, Jess. Are you going to deny us friendship?”

Jesse groans, tilting his head back and covering his face with his hands, but I just turn to smile at the girl.

“I'm Daphne,” she says, offering her hand, which I shake. “And I swear, I won't tell anyone, ever. I want to help.”

“I'm Ariel,” I say in turn, though clearly she already knows that. “And thank you, seriously.”

“Anytime!” she says as Jesse takes a deep breath and drops his hands from his face. “Let me show you what I did —”

-a

Daphne quickly walks me through the details of my uniform modifications wider

waist, more breathing room in the chest and the little sports bra that she quickly

sewed for me, which she designed to flatten my already—smallish chest as much

as possible.

“I'll make you more of these,” she says, grinning at me, “as well as send you up any women’s products that you need, whenever you need them. Just send me a little note saying you popped a seam, I'll figure it out.”

I beam at her and impulsively throw my arms around her in a hug, pleased and grateful. “You're the best, Daphne,” I murmur. “Can you stay for dinner? There will be plenty of food,” I say, pulling back. But then I roll my eyes. “But also, many more boys.”

“That's all right,” she says, shaking her head, her pretty blue eyes sparkling.

“But,

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maybe I can come up later in the week on my day off? And we could...hang out?”

“Yes!” I say instantly nodding and feeling a bit sorry when I see the hope that swells in her eyes. This poor girl she’s probably even more starved for female company than I am.

“We'll be glad to see you,” Jesse says, his calm returned now as he slips his hands into his pockets and again steps close to Daphne, smiling down at her.

“Though, try to come with it's just us Sinclairs here in the room,” he murmurs.

“We like to keep our secret close.”

“Or,” Daphne says, turning her head, again coy. “Do you just not want to share

me with the other boys?”

“Well, why would you want to see them anyway?” Jesse asks, a subtle twist to his lips. “When you could hang out with a duke?”

Laughter bursts from me at the gall of him at this moment and I just shake my head, turning away. God, a few minutes ago I'd honestly thought Jesse was doing a good job of flirting with Daphne, but with that line

“Oh, a Duke?” Daphne says, her eyes wide and innocent. “Is that supposed to be impressive?”

Jesse blinks at her, but as I watch his smile grow I realize that he likes that she’s

actually pushing back. “Isn't it?” he asks, boldly taking another step closer,

“It's

not every day you meet a duke.”

“Well,” she says, hesitating and glancing towards the bathroom, “isn't there a

Prince just behind that door?"

I burst into delighted laughter again, doubling over and putting my hands in my

knees at the way Jesse's mouth pops open in surprise.

Daphne grins too, smiling up at him, pleased as punch to have gotten the better

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of him. And Jesse, to his credit, laughs as well.

"I have to get back," Daphne says, reaching out to me for a hug — which I give

her — before she heads for the door. "Ari, I'll be in touch. And, your grace," she

puts deliberate emphasis on his royal title as she smiles pulls the door open, "it

was so nice meeting you."

"Bye, Daphne!" I call as she leaves, but then I instantly spin to grin up at Jesse.

12:53 Sun, 10 Mar

Chapter 19

"Ohhh she got you!" I say, pointing a delighted finger up into his face. "You are so

embarrassed!"

"I am not," he says, still smiling and smacking my finger away. "Come on, you have a workout to do before dinner."

"What?"

"Seriously!" he laughs, shoving me between the shoulders towards the door.

"Didn't you hear about the Examination at the end of term? We've got to keep you fit if we want to keep you around, little Princess!"

"You just want to keep me around so Daphne keeps coming around," I accuse,

glaring at him over the shoulder as I drag my feet towards the door. Honestly, I

thought my day was over and I could relax.

"Nah, I like you for you," Jesse says, smiling at me as we pass through the door

and head for the elevator. "Though I do admit, the seamstress could be an unforeseen perk."

"You stay away from my friend," I snap as we climb back into the elevator.

“Absolutely not,” he says, his voice deadpan as the doors shut and we head down, down, down to the ground floor. I’m still panting and gross with sweat an hour and a half later when Jesse and I get back to the room, me stumbling in exhausted and him casually strolling as if we did nothing more than take an evening walk. We leave the door open in case any other cadets want to come by and say hello, introduce themselves or whatever. “Hey!” Rafe shouts from the couch, where Ben and Luca are already sitting. Rafe glances up at the clock. “You’re pushing it close to dinner time,” he says, curious. “Well, Shrimpy here just needs to get faster, doesn’t he?” Jesse says, grinning at me and shoving me towards the bathroom, letting me subtly know that I can take first shower.

I rush towards it, blushing a little — as ridiculous as it is for Luca to see me all red and sweaty.

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I take my time in the shower because while I’m in it my mind returns, perhaps inevitably, to the way Luca’s face looked at breakfast this morning — his absolute shock at the realization that not only are our midnight dream meetings real, but that in the end I tried to keep that from him.

But eventually my growling stomach forces my hand, and I towel off and pull my new uniform on— chic and fitted, as promised — before braiding my hair up and tucking my cap onto my head.

When I open the bathroom door, I almost moan at the scent of foot that immediately floods my nose.

“Seriously, Ari,” Rafe says, glancing up at me. “I had to basically fight these guys to keep them away from your serving. What took you so long?”

“Just tired,” I murmur, heading to what is clearly becoming my little corner of the

couch — a place which is, fortunately or unfortunately, right next to Luca. My attention immediately goes to the food in front of me — roasted chicken all wrapped up in soft flat bread, spread with spicy sauce and topped with crispy vegetables.

1 dig in with gusto.

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As I eat, the boys continue their conversation around me, everyone filling in the details of their day. Ben is

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chattiest, and while I am interested in the details of his program (which sounds almost as rigorous as mine), I do not miss the fact that Luca is noticeably silent and still moody, like he was this morning. The content is on ! Read the latest chapter there!

But I don't look up at him, simply concentrating on my food. Visit to read full content.

« ” :

Actually, Luca,” Ben says, and I lift my head to see him turning to my

’ “

mate from his spot on the floor. “I was practicing those punch combos you showed me earlier, but my shoulder is tweaking after like ten of rap

them. Can you show me if I'm doing 5 ” >

them right?” The content is on

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"I actually hurt my arm in workout this morning, Ben," Luca says, frowning at him with true apology on his face. "Maybe Rafe could take a look? He can throw a punch almost as well as I can.

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Luca glances over at my brother, who smirks at him before nodding eagerly to Ben. The two stand up and move to the center of the room behind the

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couch, where there's more space. My stomach twists with anxiety as I hear them get

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started, Rafe directing Ben to lift his fists and show him what he's got.

"All right," Jesse says with a sigh as he pushes himself up from the chair. "Time

for

my

Oh no, my wolf says, raising her snout as my eyes dart between Luca and

Jesse's retreating form. Say anything! Get him to stay here!

"Wait, Jesse," I say, and he pauses, turning to look at me. "Um," I say, glancing

around for an excuse for him to stay but coming up with absolutely nothing.

"Don't you want to...finish...dinner?"

"I ate enough for both of us, Ari," he says, gesturing towards my unfinished plate.

"You should worry about yourself before me."

Ohhhh nooo my wolf moans as I watch my cousin disappear into the bathroom,

dread pooling in me.

"What is it, Shrimp," Luca says, his voice soft as he turns to me. I sink back into

the corner of the couch. "Don't want to sit alone with me? Don't want to have a

nice little one-on-one chat?"

“Um,” I say, my eyes going wide as his narrow.
And then I gasp as, quicker than I can see, Luca ducks below the high back of the couch and snaps his hand out, grabbing the front of my uniform and pulling me so close that there's barely a few inches between our faces.
“What the f**k is going on, Ari?” he growls, his face livid.
I stare at him, my eyes wide, but before I can bluster out some kind of excuse or apology or protest, a hesitant voice rings out from the door.
“Sorry,” it says, and I spin around in shock to see Jackson standing at the open door, his hands sunk into his pockets. “Am I...interrupting something?”
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Chapter 50

Luca freezes for a moment before scowling at me and dropping his hand from my shirt, crossing his arms over his chest before he sinks back into the couch cushions, glowering.

“No!” I say, throwing myself over the arm of the couch and stumbling my way to

the door, my face still pale from my shock. “Um, sorry it's good to see you,

Jackson! I'm glad you could come.”

I hear footsteps behind me and turn to see Ben and Rafe coming over.

Luca,

perhaps predictably, stays on the couch, though he's moved to lean against the

far arm of it so that he can watch the goings—on at the door, his arms still

crossed.

“You've got a really nice setup here,” Jackson says, his eyebrows raised as he

looks around the room.

“Thank you,” Rafe responds, reaching out a hand. I see the corner of

Jackson's

mouth twitch upwards at Rafe's relative warmth as he shakes my brother's hand.

But it's gone in a flash. "Where is your room located?" Rafe asks.

"I'm closer to this guy," he says, nodding to Ben.

"Really?" Ben asks, surprised.

"I'm four doors down," Jackson says, leaning against our doorway. Ben looks

even more surprised now, perhaps wondering if Jackson is just very perceptive?

Or if he, Ben, hasn't been perceptive enough..

"You're letting a draft in," Luca calls from his place on the couch. "Maybe it's time.

to shut the door."

Alittle shocked, I glare at him over my shoulder, because the door has been

open for hours. "Would you like to come in?" I say to Jackson, gesturing towards

the room. "We don't have any food left, but..."

"That's okay," Jackson says, nodding at me and pulling a folded piece of paper

from his pocket. "I just came to give you a copy of my schedule. Maybe you could

tell me a time, tomorrow, when we could meet for the homework?"

"Come to dinner tomorrow," Rafe offers instantly. "Ari really doesn't leave the

room much. He'll be here all night. I'm sure you can find a quiet space to work."

Chapter 50

I turn slowly to glare at my brother, but sigh when he just glares back.

He is

definitely not going to let me go galivanting around in the castle alone with my

mate.

"Yes, Jackson," I say, taking the schedule from his hands anyway.

"Please, come

for

dinner."

“All right,” he says slowly, frowning as he looks between Rafe and me, probably wondering about our weird over-protective cousin relationship. “See you tomorrow, then.”

“Bye!” Luca shouts from behind us, his word harsh and obviously making I clear that he wants Jackson gone now.

I roll my eyes, but keep my focus on Jackson. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Thanks for

this,” I hold up the now-useless schedule in my hand.

“You’re welcome,” he says, nodding to me before moving away. I smirk a little as

he goes, thinking he needs to work a bit on his pleasant good-byes.

Rafe doesn’t say anything as he moves away from the door, heading back to the

center of the room and gesturing for Ben. But Ben pauses, frowning at Luca.

“Why are you so rude to him?” he asks. “What did he ever do to you?”

“Dude’s got bad vibes,” Luca says, scowling. “I don’t trust him.”

“You’re the one with bad vibes tonight,” Ben says, frowning at Luca, whose jaw

drops open, probably surprised that Ben — who he could take out with a single

punch — is calling him out for bad behavior. But I just sigh as Ben walks away to

go work with Rafe more.

I settle in on the couch across from Luca and glare at him a little.

“Ben’s right, you know,” I say, keeping my voice soft. “You have been in a mood

all day, and you’ve been taking it out on everyone else. Get your shit together.”

“Get my “Luca sputters, leaning forward to glare at me. “Get my shit together!?”

Are you kidding me, Ari?”

My scowl deepens as I narrow my eyes. “This is weird for me too, you know!” I

hiss leaning forward, admitting for the first time in person — however tacitly that

the dream state really is real.

Chapter 30

Luca groans and presses his eyes shut, gritting his teeth, his whole body going

tense. I kick him, glancing over the edge of the couch at where Rafe slowly has

Ben go through the gestures of a cross—body punch.

“I am serious!” I whisper—hiss. “We cannot have this conversation here!

This is

not public information!”

Luca's eyes fly open, instantly glaring at me. “Fine,” he snaps. “Then we are

having this conversation tonight. And I would suggest that you have a great deal

of chamomile tea very soon, because I am not going to wait around for you in

that boring—ass fog forest for hours while you do your best to stay awake and

avoid this conversation —

I sit up a little, surprised. “Wait, so,” I hesitate now, trying to figure out the

meaning behind his words, “you can go there and like, hang around?

Even

before I get there?”

“Yes, Shrimp!” he snaps, grabbing one of the pillows and throwing at me.

I gasp a

little as it hits me right in the chest. “And it’s really boring! There is nothing to do

there except wait! It sucks!”

I scowl at him, hugging the pillow to my chest. “Fine,” I growl, glaring at him. “I’ll

go to bed.”

“Good!” he almost shouts, forgetting himself a little as he jumps off the couch and

storms for the door. “So will I!”

The door slams as Luca leaves and I gape after him for a moment before slowly turning back to Ben and Rafe, who stare at me.

“Seriously,” Rafe says, glancing over towards the door. “What the hell is going on with you two?”

“He's just tired,” I mutter, sighing and pushing myself up off the couch as well. I grab my Chemistry textbook off the coffee table and take it with me towards my nook. “And so am I. I'm going to bed. Sleep tight, guys.”

They murmur their goodnights as I swing my velvet curtain shut and flop onto my bed in despair, burying my face into my pillow.

“Whoa,” I hear Jesse's voice say out in the room as the bathroom door creaks open. “Where did everyone go?”

Predictably, it takes me forever to fall asleep, not least because Jesse, Ben, and Rafe stay up for a while, talking softly. I get changed into the pajamas that Daphne thoughtfully packed into my uniform box and re-braid my hair once it's dry, but it's the Chemistry book, in the end, which really does the trick. It's not that it's not interesting — it's just that I've had such a long day, and the workout Jesse put me through, combined with the minute details of the periodic table...

My eyes are flickering shut before I know it. And almost immediately after that...

I raise my eyelids again to blink in the soft light of the birch forest, looking around at the pretty yellow leaves flickering in the wind.

I sigh, wrapping my arms around myself, steeling myself for the hard conversation that's going to come next. Because I know I owe him an explanation, but god, it would have just been so much easier if —

“Shrimp!” Luca's voice rings out through the grove, and my eyes go wide

to hear
the anger still lacing it. "I know you're here, I can feel it!"
I curse to myself and then gasp as he appears between the trees, striding
towards me. I press my eyes shut, willing my clothes to change, my hair
to tuck
itself up under the cap —
I give little shriek when I feel hands wrap around my upper arms, giving
me a
shake. But when I open my eyes and look down, I'm relieved to see Luca's
fingers wrapped around the sleeves of my black uniform, not the white
nightdress
I always wear when I first appear here.
"Talk!" Luca demands, glaring down at me. "Now!"
"Would you stop being so rough with me!?" I snap, shaking myself free of
his grip
and taking a step back from him. "You're bigger than me, Luca! It's
bullshit to use
that to try to intimidate me
"Are you seriously going to try to talk to me about what is fair right now,
Ari?" he
spits out, stepping closer to loom over me. "After all of the shit you
pulled with
this
— this dream!?"
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Chapter 50
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"Hey!" I shout, whipping my finger up into his face, "I, too, was pulled
into this
dream without knowing what it was, and I also did not know at first that
it was
real!
So"
"But you definitely knew before I did!" Luca snaps, grabbing my arm and
hauling
me closer. And you should have told me! Immediately!"
"I did!" I insist, staring up at him.
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« .

Not until after you let me confess all
. PT

sorts of weird shit!" he shouts,
flinging his arms out to the side in

o « o :

exasperation. "God, seriously, Shrimp,
do you think I would have said half of
that shit to you if I had known that Please bookmark site to read latest
content. If you want to read please visit to read fastest content.

: PTY

you were actually hearing it!?" The
content is on ! Read
the latest chapter there!

"Which is why," I say through clenched teeth, crossing my arms. "I told
you it was

real, and then decided to never meet you here again!"

"What, like that's your choice alone!?" he gasps, staring at me. "Do you
have

control over this place?"

do you

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I spread my hands wide and, some
instinct prodding me, will flowers to
grow. Delicate little snowbells push
themselves out of the earth, unfurling
themselves from green leaves to
hang their little white heads all
around us. The content is on

! Read the latest
chapter there!

Luca gasps, his eyes going as wide as saucers as he looks around.

"Can you do that?" I ask, my voice going softer now.

Luca looks up at my face and stares at me for a long moment before he,
too,

spreads his hands wide.
Nothing happens.
“What...are you trying to do?” I ask quietly.
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I'm trying to make...daffodils..” he
murmurs, looking around. But none
appear. I sigh, shaking my head as he

DL dr 5
looks up at me again. “So this
B » I
is...your dream,” he says, picking up
on things now. The content is on
! Read the latest
chapter there!
I nod. “I think so.”
“And you pulled me into it,” he continues, studying my face as he takes a
step
closer.
I shrug, a little embarrassed, but admitting it because....well, I certainly
can't
blame him for it. Dream states come from the female wolf, we invite our
mates
into it, but we're in charge.
“So,” he continues softly, and a pulse of shock runs through me as I feel
Luca's
hands on my cheeks, turning my face up to him. “Do you...not want me to
do
this?”
And before I can stop him, he lowers his lips to mine.