

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy

Chapter 61

“McClintock?” Alvez says, smiling at Jackson. “Anything to report? I am particularly interested in the results of this pairing.”

“Why?” Rafe says, the word abrupt. All of our faces turn to brother, Tony leaning

around Jackson to get a good look.

Alvez just raises his eyebrows.

“Why?” Rafe asks again, slinging an arm over the back of his chair. “What’s so special about the pairing between Clark and McClintock?”

“Because,” Alvez replies, even. “I have the sense that their magical affinities complement each other.”

Jackson goes rigid in his seat next to me, but I just turn my head, curious.

What

is this man up to.

“I know it seemed, perhaps, by chance how I paired you up in the last class and

for your homework sessions, but the orb gives more than sense that you can do

magic. It also gives a sense of what that magic might be.”

“What the hell,” Jesse says, frowning at our professor. “Why didn’t you tell us this

last time? Wouldn’t it have been useful to know that whoever we were paired up

with for homework was our best match? And, also, that you already know what

we can do?”

“I don’t know what you can do,” Alvez corrects, his voice still calm and even though the rest of us are a little ruffled by the news. “I simply have a sense,”

he

says, gesturing back to the diagrams on the board, “of where your affinities might

lay.”

“No, I’m with Sinclair,” Tony says, shaking his head at Alvez. “You should have

told us this, if you already know. You expected a lot of honesty from us last class

while withholding information.”

“I understand your point, and your objection,” Alvez says smoothly, nodding and

looking around at each of us in turn. “But I do find that the results are better when students go into the first pairing with less information and more freedom to experiment. Everything here is deliberate, planned. I would ask you to please trust me both as a person, and as your professor.”

I narrow my eyes a little at this man, though, my wolf's hackles raising. Because honestly, I'm not sure I do trust him. Tony is right he asks for a lot while holding his own cards quite close to his chest.

And considering the leverage he's holding over me...

“So?” Alvez says, turning his attention back to me, raising an eyebrow and perhaps reminding me of that leverage with the little smirk on his handsome mouth. I sigh, torn suddenly between my obligation to this man and my promise to my mate.

But, I think I can find a line to walk between the two.

“We had a result, yes,” I say, trying to channel Jackson's energy and keep my voice as stony and expressionless as possible. “melted the marble into a puddle of glass.”

Tony gasps in excitement, but Jesse and Rafe — for whom this no longer a novelty — simply turn to listen.

“You melted the marble?” Alvez says, emphasizing the first word with interest. “Yes,” I say, not looking at Jackson as I nod solemnly. “I could feel the magic coming from me. Jackson and I tried to do things to the marble together, but when it didn't work, we both tried individual experiments. I didn't tell him that I was trying to melt it, I just did it by myself. And it worked.”

Jackson stays silent and stoic at my side.

“Very interesting,” Alvez says, smiling and looking between us. “And, it confirms

the placement of your affinity along the lines reported by the orb, Clark. There is

indeed an aspect of heat to your magical gift.”

He stands then as Jesse and Rafe stare at me, baffled but also a little delighted

to see this information come forward. Alvez stands then and moves towards the

chalkboard, beginning to explain the complicated diagram which he has drawn

out. He informs us that there are six main categories of magic light, dark, earth, sun, body, and spirit — and they blend and combine in unique ways. The next hour passes in a blur, so fascinated am I by the lesson. Apparently, my magic is primarily sun magic, if it has something to do with heat. But what I can truly do with it has great deal to do with how much of the other magical categories my magic engages.

“Wait so,” Jesse interrupts, his voice dazed with his own interest as Alvez lays out the details for us. “Why, then, were you excited to see Clark lined up with McClintock? What are his powers?”

Jackson goes slumps in his chair beside me and I sit up straight. “There was nothing —”

But Alvez interrupts. “McClintock is Body and Sun,” he murmurs, still studying the diagram. “I figured the Sun connection between the two of them would produce

an interesting result. The whole system is a great metaphor though, it isn’t as precisely scientific and factual as I’d like it to be.”

I look over at Jackson as Alvez’s back is turned and he looks back at me, his face

expressionless. But he gives me a steady nod, letting me know that we’re okay —

that I haven’t done anything that he feels has betrayed him. I nod back, letting him know that I won’t.

“Wait, so, what am I?” Jesse asks, all eagerness.

“You, Jesse Sinclair,” Alvez says, pointing to two spots on the diagram, “are heavy on darkness with a touch of spirit.”

“Awesome,” Jesse murmurs, leaning back into his chair. “I don’t know what that means, but it’s definitely more badass than the rest of you.”

I laugh, leaning over to glare at him, but he just grins at me.

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And you, Rafe,” Alvez says, pointing ey

to new spots on the board. “Display a strong affinity for light and body, which is an unusual combination.

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Cadet Davis, perhaps unsurprisingly,
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says, turning to Tony, "is most promising in the categories of earth and
darkness,

which explains why he has a connection with water — cool and deep."
he

"Wait," I say, frowning as Tony nods, unsurprised. "Why does everyone else
get

two? You only said sun for me."

"Because," Alvez says, leaning forward on his desk and studying me
further. "The

orb only

reported that affinity for you, Clark. Which is rare. A strong connection to
one

category — we'll have to see what the result of this is."

I scowl, slumping back in my seat, a little disappointed. Jesse is right —
just being

sun does not compare, at all, to darkness and spirit.

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The rest of the class goes quicky,

with four of us peppering Alvez with

questions while he explains as best

as he can. By the end of class I think

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we're all as confused as we are

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excited, though I don't miss at all that

Jackson simply sits quietly. He

i d isel

doesn't seem..mad, precisely. He just

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sits still, like he's passing the time.

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Like he's here because he's obliged

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to be, but that doesn't mean he has

to participate. The content is on

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For homework," Alvez says, startling me out of my contemplation of my mate for a moment as our time runs wp yp; short. "I'd like you each to return to your pairings and try again. mounted with this new knowledge. Clark and . " « : : .

McClintock," he says, "see if this time you can experiment with making 5 J 5

McClintock's power manifest. And BATE < . 3

Clark, I'd like to see you in my office early next week for some...private consultation regarding your singular affinity. See if we can make heads or § Se 5

tails of it." The content is on

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Rafe goes rigid next to me at the idea. I admit, I do too. Inwardly, my wolf leaps to her feet, baring her teeth. But I just nod to Alvez because... I mean, what other choice do I have?

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Chapter 62

Alvez smirks at me and lets me know that he'll send word about time and place, and then we're released.

Jackson nods to me, grabbing his bag. "I'll send word too," he says, standing up from his desk and looking towards the door.

"Wait," I say, reaching towards him, wanting him to stop and talk for a minute.

Not

because I have anything to really say, I realize. Just because... I want to talk to

him. "Won't you just come to dinner, like you did before?"

"You're already a packed house for dinner," Jackson says, smirking at me.

"Maybe we can... go outside for once. Try to talk to those birds."

And I smile up at him, my spirit twisting a little with excitement. Because even though it was kind of a disaster the last time I met Jackson alone outside, this time? Well. I think I'd kind of like it.

But before I can express any of that, he's already gone — striding for the door with no hint of a farewell. I laugh, watching him go.

"Sullen," Rafe says, coming to my side with his books in his arms, frowning after

Jackson.

"Nah, just...not prone to formality," I sigh, nodding. Because I get it — and now I'm

suddenly desperately intrigued to know more about him. What kind of world did

Jackson grow up in where he never learned, or was encouraged to eschew, the

polite lines of society?

And why did my grandmother the Goddess match him up with me, someone who

learned social graces from the cradle as part of my role as the nation's Princess?

"Come on," Rafe sighs, wrapping an arm around my shoulder and tugging me with him. "Like I said before — mooning happens in the room, in private."

"Oh, leave me be," I mutter, smacking him on the chest, my mind still on my mate

as we walk from the room, our cousin at our side.

The rest of the week goes remarkably fast, probably because I'm either being hauled on a

Chapter 62

workout or have my nose stuck in a book for the rest of it. Even our dinners, while congenial and full of laughs, usually end with a book in each of our laps, studying. It's grueling work, but each of us know the stakes of it — and we're all

determined to pass our courses as well as the Examination.

"I don't know what the Examination is," Ben replies to me one night when I sit next to him on the floor for dinner. He passively cats a roll as he reads through some dense political theory. "No one does."

"What?" I say, looking up towards Rafe and Jesse in their usual chairs. Luca, stretched out on the couch, looks up too. "Even you two don't know what's coming up in the Examination?"

Slowly, Rafe shakes his head. “Dad and Uncle Roger were determined not to tell

us. And the cadets who have gone through it — both passed and failed are sworn

to a great deal of secrecy, even legally. It's pretty much the only secret truly kept

about the Academy. The only thing we know is that it comes just before the holidays, it's physical as well as mental, and it's very difficult.”

“So,” I say, turning my head to the side as I lean back on my palms, my plate of

food forgotten on the coffee table in front of me. “Is it like...another obstacle course?”

“Probably harder than that,” Luca replies, “and longer. What candidates have figured out and posted online is that it takes at least forty—eight hours.”

“What?” I breathe, fascinated and intimidated.

“It's not really worth the effort to speculate and worry about it,” Rafe says, returning his attention back to his book. “You're doing well, Ari, and we're prepping you. Have faith in the process.”

“Easy for you to say,” I mutter, glaring at my gigantic, powerful brother. “Some of

us actually have imaginations which speculate beyond our will.”

“Some of us,” Rafe replies, control that.”

Is eyes up to me, a little twist to his lips, “learn to

“Oh, you never had an imagination anyway,” I sigh, letting my shoulders slump.

It's true, though — I spent my childhood half in daydreams, imagining a thousand

other worlds and

Chapter 62

identities that I played with all throughout the day. Rafe just wanted sports.

“Your curse,” he murmurs. “Not mine.”

I shrug, conceding the point, and attempt to turn my attention back to my Chemistry text as silence retakes the room, the only sound the merry crackle of

the fire. Despite my interest in the material, though, my eyes drift to Luca, who lounges with his shoulders against the arm of the sofa, one leg stretched out long

while the other is bent at the knee, his text propped against his thigh.

Damn it, but he's pretty.

And stubborn.

I sigh a little, staring at him, wanting very much to crawl up onto the couch and lay myself out along his side, resting my head on his chest. I want to feel, again, his body against mine. I want to feel his breath rising in his chest, the warm scent of him in my nostrils. I want his arms around me. But still, he won't meet me in the dream state. And he seems quite a bit more content than me to just...wait for an opportunity to arise for us to talk in private when I can't just end the conversation like hanging up a phone. Luca's right that was unfair, I had too much control in the dream state. But this? This isn't fair either. No — I'm very aware that my mate and I are locked, a bit, in a stalemate, and one of us is going to crack. I am very willing for that to be me, but Luca doesn't know that there are other reasons for my secrecy. I mean, if he was my only mate? I'd drop it all right now — just demand, openly in this room, that Luca be let in on the secret and everyone simply accept the fact that he's an important part of my life. But considering that Rafe knows that Jackson is my mate? And Jesse does not? And that I kind of want to keep it that way for now, so that I can keep some semblance of control over my insane life? I sigh through my nose, shutting my eyes, wishing desperately that I could just... concentrate on school. I wish that my handsome mate wasn't lounging on my couch two feet from me, all languid and irresistible, smelling amazing and Alittle nudge prods at my soul and my wolf instantly perks up. My eyes fly open, meeting Luca's, which are already on me. He raises an eyebrow at me, clearly asking if I'm okay. I narrow my eyes at him, hoping that he gets the clear message that I would be better if he'd just talk to me. Maybe in the dream state, if he would stop being so stubborn about it. But he just smirks, and gives me a devastating wink, and drops his attention

back

to his book.

I sigh again, out loud now, making Ben look up and over at me as I snap my book

shut and stand, heading for my nook.

“You okay?” Jesse asks, real concern in his eyes as he looks at me.

“Yes,” I mutter, glaring around at all of them. “Just...tired. And sick of boys.” I snap my curtain shut behind me, flopping onto my bed as Ben's laugh echoes in

the room. And I'm well aware that what I just said could be interpreted as... dangerous, if I'm still trying to keep my secret from Luca.

But...am I anymore?

God, I just don't know.

I let myself fall into a little daze, cozy and warm and blissfully alone in my nook,

studying the night away until I fall asleep.

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I go into the dream state again, as I have done every night. But as with every other night this week, Luca does not appear. I sigh, wondering how he managed it I mean, it would make sense that he is not obliged to an :

enter, that I can't just drag him here against his will. Is it that simple, that J :

he's not here simply because he chooses not to be? The content is on

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It's okay, my wolf tells me, suddenly appearing at my side, shaking out her rose—

gold fur and pressing her warm body against mine, sweet and comfortable. He's

our mate — we will figure it all out. Don't worry.

“Do you think he didn't like it?” I whisper to her, half afraid. “That... I mean, what

if 'm bad at kissing?”

But my wolf just laughs, a rich, wolfish sound. Don't worry about that, she murmurs. He liked it, okay? Our love is rich and good and warm. He is a fool if

he

stays away much longer. He's only hurting himself.

And I nod, letting myself believe her as I wrap my arms around her neck and bury

my face in her pretty rose—gold fur. She gives my shoulder a lick and rests herself against me, and I drift back into my dreams.

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The rest of my nighttime roving are not nearly so stressful. I am my wolf this time. Instead of having her manifest next to me, I embody her, my paws swift as I run along a dark cliffside, the waves of some cold sea crashing against the rocks below.

The moon above is bright and I lift my snout, yipping for joy, letting the cool air flood my lungs as I run and run for the love of it. The content is on ! Read the latest chapter there!

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The cliff is endless, of course, as is only possible in dreams, and it never ceases in its stunning beauty.

Sometimes, behind me. or maybe next to me I can feel another wolf running. I get glimpses of his huge form, his dark and heavy fur — but I

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don't pay my companion much mind. Please bookmark site [to read latest content.](#) If you want to read [please visit to read fastest content.](#)

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Instead, I get the sense that we're both happy to simply run. The content is on ! Read the latest chapter there!

When I wake the next morning — my Alpha alarm apparently starting to kick in,

because I've woken before both Jesse and the sun I'm more refreshed than I have been in days. I hop eagerly out of bed, ready to start my day.

Chapter 63

“Wait,” I say at breakfast, half a piece of bacon already on its way to my mouth,

“what do you mean we don’t have class tomorrow?”

“It’s Friday, shrimp cousin,” Jesse says, smirking at me. “Are you aware of these

things they call weekends?”

“Don’t be cute, Jesse,” I snap, glaring at him, which only deepens his smirk. “I just didn’t know the Academy acknowledged them. I mean, it didn’t when we were candidates out in the barracks.”

“Probably to prevent brawls,” Rafe says, pouring himself another cup of coffee as

Ben, between us, nods in agreement. “Can you imagine those barracks if they didn’t keep us busy every day?”

“I think we should have a party tonight,” Luca says, raising an eyebrow and looking around at us. “Get our hands on some contraband liquor? Really let loose?”

“Get ourselves kicked out, you mean?” Rafe says, immediately putting the dampener on Luca’s idea. “I will go shot for shot with you during winter break, Grant, but I am staying sober here. Too much at risk.”

“Does this mean I’m invited to the palace for the holidays?” Luca says, his brows

raising in interest.

“Of course you are,” Jesse answers, instant. “You too, Ben. Bring your families, if

you like, there are a thousand rooms in the palace.”

“Nice of you to invite them to our house,” Rafe says, glowering at our cousin, but

then he turns his attention back to Luca and Ben. “But yes, of course you’re invited. We’ll show you a good time, and our parents would love to meet you.”

“Okay, so, sake bombs at Midwinter,” Luca says, “but nothing tonight?”

Rafe solemnly shakes his head, decided.

“Boring,” Luca says with a sigh.

“I’ll drink with you,” Ben says, shrugging and looking over at Luca. “Your room, if

the Sinclairs are too straight-laced to participate?”

I burst into a grin, looking between Ben and Luca. Ben he’s always a surprise, isn’t he?

“Seriously?” Luca says, smiling at him. “Sweet, I’ll set it

1. up. See you tonight.”

“This is not a good idea,” Rafe says, sitting up to his full height and looking

between them, worried.

“Oh, they’ll be fine,” Jesse says, sighing and sitting back in his chair. “I’m jealous,

but I’m with Rafe on this one. Sitting out.”

“Shrimp?” Luca says, cocking an eyebrow at me.

I lean forward, eager, wondering really how much of a risk it would be —

“Shrimp,” Rafe says, darting an arm out even over Ben and pushing me again against my seatback, “is staying in, and not participating in contraband.”

I scowl, glancing at my brother, who glares heartily back to me. “Shrimp makes

his own decisions,” I say, mostly to be contrary. I mean, I don’t have any real intent to go drinking in Luca’s room, even if my wolf perks up at the idea.

Rafe just rolls his eyes at me.

Even as I smirk at my brother, wondering how long I can torture him with this, I’m

interrupted when a waiter comes over with a little folded note on a tray.

“For Cadet Clark,” he murmurs, holding it out to me. I murmur my thanks and take the note, peering down at my name neatly written on the front as all the boys at the table lean forward eagerly. I look up and around at them, well aware

that nothing like this has happened to any of us before.

Jealously, I clutch the note to my chest. “Away, you jackals,” I say, scowling at them all. “My note!”

“What is it?” Rafe asks, reaching for it, but I swat at his hand and Ben takes my

side, shoving Rafe playfully back as I quickly unfold the paper before Rafe can grab for it again. Luca

makes a snatch too, but I gasp and pull away, quickly scanning the contents of

the note and grinning when I see that it’s from Daphne, inviting me to come down

to her room tonight to hang out for an hour or two.

I grin, crumpling the note and shoving it into my pocket. “Sorry, boys,” I say, standing up with a happy sigh and stretching my arms languidly above my head.

“Looks like my entire evening just got booked up anyway. I won’t be available for

contraband or for hanging out in our boring room.”

Jesse grins at me, intrigued, but Rafe jumps to his feet, demanding to know what

the hell is going on and making a mad grab for my pocket. I just laugh and

grab

my book satchel, making a mad dash for the doors to the Hall, loving that for once I have a secret that he doesn't.

I mean, I'll tell him, of course, I think to myself as I streak across the room, hearing Rafe jump to his feet behind me. There's no way he's going to let me wander off into the palace tonight all by myself. But I sure as hell am going to enjoy torturing him with the information for as long as I can.

I'm still laughing as I get through the doors of the Hall, but my laughter is cut short as I slam into a big piece of granite —

My breath is all swept from my chest as my butt hits the floor, my hand going instantly to my nose. I gasp, my eyes smarting as I wonder whether or not I'm bleeding-

"Oh my god," a voice says, "what the hell are you doing!?"

My eyes instantly snap up because obviously, obviously it's not a piece of granite in the hall.

It's just my damn gigantic mate.

Jackson crouches in front of me, his eyes frantically scanning my face.

"Is it bleeding?" I ask, taking my hand away from my face. I mean, there's no blood on my hand, but I can't really feel anything but rampant pain in my face right now.

"No," Jackson murmurs, studying me closely, taking my chin between his thumb

and his. finger to turn my face back and forth, studying it. "You're an idiot for running through the halls like that, but there doesn't seem to be any real damage."

"It would have been fine if you weren't just lurking in the doorway," I sigh, putting

my hands on the ground to push myself up.

"What the "Rafe's voice booms behind me, instantly livid. "What the hell did you

do to him!?"

Jackson's eyes go wide as he stands up in a flash, putting his hands up in front

of him. "Clark did this to himself," he insists. "I am not responsible for any of this."

"He's right," I sigh, pushing to my feet and nodding to my brother. "I ran into him I

wasn't looking where I was going."

"You didn't see....Ari, how did you miss him!?" Rafe sputters, gesturing to my mate, who is as big as my brother, if not even half an inch taller.

"I don't know," I moan, being kind of a baby about it because I know Rafe will let

me off the hook. "My face hurts, be nice to me." I rub my nose, scowling.

Rafe turns to Jackson, sighing and rolling his eyes but letting him know that he's

off the hook.

"Actually," Jackson says, turning his attention to me again. "I was looking for you."

Rafe's shoulders go tense. I look up at Jackson with interest.

"You have an hour before class, right? And I have Friday mornings free. Do you

want to get that magic homework in now?"

"Oh," I say, my eyebrows going up. "Actually, yeah," I say, my wolf spinning in an

eager circle in

my soul. "That's a great idea."

"Ari," Rafe protests, shaking his head. "Even if he has off, I don't —"

"What does that have to do with anything?" Jackson asks, frowning.

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Well he can't" Rafe says, but then he

snaps his mouth shut, realizing

that....it will be very weird if he tells

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Jackson that I can't go anywhere

alone with him without my big cousin

to chaperone. Rafe sighs and

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crosses his arms. "It's dangerous," he

says. The content is on

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chapter there!

"What?" Jackson says, smirking at him. "You think I can't protect him?" He gestures to me like it's it'll be the easiest thing in the world.

Rafe narrows his eyes, because that is obviously not what he's worried about.

"It's an hour," Jackson says, looking Rafe up and down like he's being ridiculous.

"I'll walk him to class and everything after. It'll be fine."

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Rafe's mouth gapes open for a second as he searches for a reason to protest, but when he comes up with nothing Jackson just shifts his gaze to me and jerks his head

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towards the long hall. "Come on, let's go outside and see if you can blow

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up the sun or something." The content is on ! Read the latest chapter there!

"This is a bad idea!" Rafe calls as I hurry to Jackson's side and start to walk with him.

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It'll be fine!" I shout back to him, excited. But as I turn to smile at my brother, to let him see that I really do

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think that I'm going to be okay under) . .

my mate's protection, my smile falters a little when I see Luca and Jesse standing at the door, staring after us. The content is on

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Jesse nods and waves to me as Rafe mutters something to him about homework, but Luca?

Luca's jaw falls open in shock, and then he snaps it shut, crossing his arms and glowering at

1. me.

My wolf yips victoriously inside of me and I have to laugh a little, because quite

frankly, he deserves to be jealous. If he won't meet me in the dream state or talk

to me about this thing between us?

Well, here's my other mate, who very much is willing to make time in his

day to
spend at few minutes alone with me.
I grin, and subtly take a step closer to Jackson, turning my face up to
smile at
him. And he smiles right back.
And so I walk out of the castle into the open air at my mate's side, going
for what
I can only think of in my mind as....kind of a first date.
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Chapter 64

I'm absolutely buzzing with energy as Jackson and I emerge through the
castle
door and out into the sunshine. I keep stealing glances up at him, which he
either
doesn't notice or pretends not to, his defined features set in their usual harsh
lines. I, however, cannot keep the smile from my face.
We walk in silence for a little bit, me struggling to keep up with Jackson's long
stride. I laugh, after a moment, when he starts to outstrip me.
"What?" he asks, glancing down and a little backwards towards me. "What's
funny?"
"Would you slow down a little?" I ask, grinning up at him. "You've got longer
legs
than I do."
He does slow then, allowing me to catch up as he glances down at his legs as
if
needing to see them for proof of their length. He frowns at me as we continue
along the path. "Aren't you used to it, though? Your cousins are as big as me
they must walk as fast as I do."
I turn my head to the side, considering this. "I guess they...walk slower when
they're with me," I say, folding my hands behind my back as I contemplate it.
Because I've never, ever had to ask them to slow down, even though Jackson
is
right. A little rush of warmth runs through me as I realize that they must do it
naturally, always using a pace that I can keep up with when they're around
me.
They've probably been doing it since we were kids.
Rafe and Jesse they really are the best.
Jackson just nods, continuing to walk forward.
"So," I say, breaking our companionable silence. "Where do you want to go do

some magic
stuff?”

“Oh, I don’t care,” he says, waving a dismissive hand. “Wherever you want.”
“Really?” I ask, looking up at him again staring freely, if I'm admitting it to myself.

“Then...why did you want to come outside?”

He just shrugs. “I guess I just like it out here,” he says quietly. “Not used to being
all cooped up indoors all the time.”

Chapter 64

“Really?” I say, smiling at him. “What, were you raised in the woods, then?
Spent
your nights outdoors?”

He looks down at me, smirking. “Something like that,” he murmurs. He holds my
gaze for a long moment — so long that butterflies develop in my stomach and I
have to look away.

“Do you want to go sit under that tree over there?” I ask, pointing towards a
big
black oak tree a short distance away, going stunningly orange and yellow for
autumn.

“Sure,” he replies, shrugging like he it pleases him just as much as anything
else.

We make our quiet way over to the tree and I sit down amongst the roots,
patting
the ground next to me. Jackson hesitates for a second and then lowers
himself to
the ground, curling his legs up beneath him, a little awkward. I grin, realizing
that
this big warrior—type probably doesn't spend a great deal of time casually
sitting
beneath trees.

I mean, I don’t either not very Princess-y, is it? But still, I hide it better.
I hold my hand out to him, palm up.

“So.” I start, a smile playing at my lips. “What do you want to try to do first?”

“You pick, Ari, I don't care,” he says, laughing as he takes my hand, his broad
palm warm against my small one. A shiver passes through me as the pulse
radiates out from us, fluttering the leaves of the trees above us and stirring the
grass around. But both of us ignore it.

“You don't care?”

"No," he says, smiling and looking down at me. "Do whatever you want."

"Wait, you called me out here just so that I can practice magic?" I ask, a little baffled. "Don't you want to try anything yourself?"

"Nah," he says, shaking his head. "I'm good. I know what I can do. You can experiment. though, especially if my..." he holds up the hands between us, apparently at a bit of a loss. for how to describe the thing that happens when my

hands touch him, "helps you. Or whatever."

"Jackson," I murmur, shaking my own head now. And then I hesitate, wondering if

I should

ask.

He lifts his chin towards me, seeing the question in my eyes and telling me to ask.

"Why don't you want to tell anyone what you can do, especially if you know?"

He sighs, even more serious than he was before. "Because it's not anyone's business but mine," he replies, his brows lowered.

I cock my head to the side. "Even if it can be...useful? To the nation, or whatever? I mean, isn't that why we're all here?"

"Is that why you're here?"

I consider it for a second, really wondering if I am. But then... "Well," I say, looking off into the distance a little bit. "Yeah, I suppose that's why I am here."

Jackson sits quietly, listening.

"I mean," I continue, "you know my connection to the royal family, right? We're all

incredibly privileged, of course, but I hope that we use our privileges to help people as much as we can. I am here at the Academy for me, but I do hope that

in the end what I do and learn here really can help our nation. Especially in this

terrible war.

He nods, letting me know he understands. But otherwise, Jackson stays silent.

"Is that not the same for you?" I ask, really wanting to know.

"I don't know," he murmurs. "If I'm being honest, I care more about helping my people."

"Your people?" I stare at him, trying to figure him out. "Is that are they not the same as... our people?"

"Smaller group," Jackson

urmurs, his eyes going a bit distant as he thinks about his

answer. "A community within the nation, if that makes sense."

I nod, because honestly it does. “So, how does being at the Academy help?”
“Well, the salary is pretty good,” he says instantly, which makes me blush a bit because...

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Well, because, honestly, I didn't know we got paid. I make a mental note to

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ask Rafe about this, and as I've done before to be more cognizant of the

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fact that my family's personal wealth and position sometimes makes me oblivious to money matters that are ' 5

constantly on other people's minds.

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Jackson smirks at me, I think intuiting the direction of my thoughts,

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but he doesn't say anything. “And the skills we learn here are invaluable. I can take them home, help out when

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I'm there.” The content is on

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chapter there!

“Jackson.” I say quietly, squeezing his hand just a touch, because I somehow

know that this is a touchy subject. “Where's home?”

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North,” he says, lifting his chin in the general direction. I look towards it,

7 Els

because that's where my family is too — the Academy is tucked away in

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Moon Valley's southern lands. But

when Jackson says North, I know that he means something different than northwards to the capital. He means North the craggy, wild land at the edge of our nation where people tend to live in extreme poverty and clannishness. The content is on ! Read the latest chapter there!

I've met ambassadors from the North before, and I know people who have been there on aid missions, but Jackson — I think is the first person I've ever met who grew up there.

“Do you miss it?” I ask quietly, thinking that he must be worried about family up there, if things are as bad as I've heard they can be. So, when his answer comes, it shocks me a little.

“No,” he says instantly, looking down at the ground.

I stare at him, confused, but I don't press. Instead, I seem to know that that's as

much as he wants to say about it — at least for now. So I just tighten my hand

and let it end

there, hoping he knows that I heard him, even if I don't quite understand. He doesn't look at me for a long time, but he doesn't pull his hand away either.

So, I feel a little emboldened.

“Jacks,” I murmur, knowing that I'm pressing my luck. “What's your magic?”

My mate just hangs his head and heaves a long sigh.

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Chapter 65

“Don't you just want to see what else you can melt, Clark?” Jackson asks on a long inhale of breath, looking at me with sad eyes. “Come on, I bet you could melt this whole tree if you wanted to.”

“Well, one, that's not good for the environment,” I say, rolling my eyes at him which makes him laugh, just a little. “And two, no, I don't want to melt the tree

|

want to talk about you. Honestly, Jackson, I won't tell anyone you know I won't. I

won't even let anyone know that I know! I'll keep your secret."

"Why does it even matter, Ari?" he asks, looking away from me. "Why do you want to know so badly? It doesn't change anything."

A thousand answers flood my mind. That it could help me understand what I can

do how. his power compliments mine. That I want to know more about him.

That

I'm just so damn

curious.

But, in the end, I settle for the truth.

"I want you to know that you have someone here who will keep your secrets, Jackson," I say quietly, willing him to believe me.

Jackson looks up at me in surprise, his blue eyes wider than I've seen them before.

We're silent again, but as it has been before with us, there's no awkwardness to

it. But then he breaks it.

"Why are you being so nice to me?" he whispers, half baffled and half...

suspicious, I realize. Lik

I've got ulterior motives or something.

I stare at him, my heart cracking in grief for the lessons his past life must have taught him.

"Jackson," I murmur, saying his name like a promise. "Why are you so surprised

that I genuinely just...want to be nice to you?"

He turns his face away from me like he's been struck, staring at the ground beneath the tree in shock and surprise. I watch his profile as he swallows

heavily,

as he presses his lips

together in frustration or...consternation? Honestly, I don't know what. But I give

him the space to process it.

"I don't have to eat," he says suddenly, the words falling from his lips in a rush, like they've escaped from a dark place and can't wait to get away.

"What?" I ask, confused.

He looks at me then, his brows drawn, almost angry as he speaks — but I know

not at me. "I don't have to eat like...ever, if I don't want to. I mean, eventually, I'd

have to eat, but...that's what I can do.”

“Whoa,” I say, sitting up straighter. “That is....that is seriously weird, Jacks.” He nods solemnly, agreeing. “I also don’t have to sleep, if I don’t want to, for like...days. Longest I've gone is three weeks. And I can run for miles and just....not get tired.”

My eyes go wider as his confession progresses. “And like, nothing happens? You can just go?”

He looks at me then. “I get really skinny after a while,” he says, shrugging.

“Oh, and I can eat like...everything.”

I laugh then, shaking my head. “I'm not sure that's magic,” I say, looking him up

and down, “Rafe’s as big as you and he also eats like a horse

“No,” he says, smiling at my laughter, “I mean like...I can eat without stopping for

as long as I wanted. And I don’t get full I just get...” he looks down at himself, at

his seriously impressive musculature. “...bigger.”

“Really?” I ask, my laughter fading as I look him over anew. “So....could you get

as big as an elephant if you kept going?”

“Nah,” he says, smirking, “we tried that once. I think my skeleton’s reached its natural height I just get...fat.”

I laugh then, unable to imagine it. Jackson — he’s very fit, isn't he? “Wait, how fat?”

He groans, putting his hand over his eyes and then rubbing it down the length of

his face.

“So fat, Clark, you don’t even want to know. Thank god there aren’t any pictures.”

“What, did you just like, experiment? To see how long you could push it?”

He shrugs, nodding, turning his face back to me. “Wouldn't you, if you figured out

that that's what you could do?”

“I suppose,” I murmur, turning my head. “Though didn’t you get bored, when everyone else. was asleep? And like, get sick of the taste of food?”

“Yes!” he says, his eyes going wide as he laughs. “That's exactly what happened

— and nobody gets that. Like, after eighteen blackberry pies...you never want a

slice of pie ever again.”

I laugh, squeezing his hand and nodding at him. “It’s really incredible, Jackson,” I

sigh, so happy that he told me, so honored that he trusted me enough to keep his

secret. “It’s one hell of a power. I wish I could borrow it, would probably keep me

up through these long nights of studying.”

“Well,” he says, looking down at our clasped hands. “Maybe you can...”

“What?” I ask, also looking down.

“Clearly, there’s some sort of connection between our... magic,” he murmurs.

Inwardly, I correct him. Us, I think. There’s something between us. But I clench

my jaw to keep from blurting it out.

“I think... well, I think that you were able to melt the marble because of whatever

connects. our magic,” he says, and I nod, agreeing. “So...maybe I can pass mine

to you or something. Who knows.”

“How do we experiment with that?”

Jackson shrugs. “Next time you’re tired, come find me. See if I can pass some energy to you. I’ve got plenty of it — it’s annoying, honestly.”

I grin, pleased to see him talking more casually now, like one would to a real friend.

Or a MATE, my wolf corrects in my mind, trotting anxiously back and forth.

She’s

pissed, I know, because she wants me to tell him my secrets, to be as open with

him as he’s been with me.

Soon. I murmur to her, stroking a hand over her fur. Not yet.

She huffs but lets me be.

“Why is it annoying to have so much energy?” I ask.

“Constantly have to monitor it,” he murmurs, looking into my face now, studying

me, I think, in the same ways that I’ve studied him. “It all comes down to what I

eat. If I eat too much, it manifests in either sleeplessness or weight gain. If I eat

too little, I lose muscle.” He sighs, shaking his head. “It’s annoying, counting calories.”

“Jackson,” I say, dry, raising an eyebrow. “I’ve seen you eat breakfast — that

mountain of pancakes?”

He laughs, seeing the direction of this.

I roll my eyes now, “you’re not counting calories.”

Jackson grins at me with a shrug. “Fine, it’s not a precise science. But I’ve had enough sleepless nights to know not to push it.”

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Well, fine,” I sigh, putting my chin in Please bookmark site to read latest content. If you want to read please visit to read fastest content.

my hand and resting my elbow on my

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knee while I gaze at him. “If you want to pass me energy when it comes time to study for exams, I am not

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going to say no.” The content is on

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chapter there!

“Good,” he murmurs, smiling a little. “At least this gift will benefit someone besides me, for once.”

of his clear desire to connect with

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I think, then, on the selflessness of

that statement someone, to be a

help. And then, interestingly, how

much it relates to what he said about

wanting to help the people of his

community... The content is on

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chapter there!

But also, how he doesn’t miss them.

Honestly, what has been his history?

I know better than to press now, though. I have a feeling that Jackson is probably

finished confessing for today.

“So,” I say, grinning up at him. “What’s the longest you’ve stayed up?”

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Jackson laughs then, tilting his head

back and pressing his eyes shut,

clearly remembering something

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either hilarious or terrible. “Ari,

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honestly, you don't want to know.” I smile as my eyes go immediately to the long length of his throat, the soft skin at the base of his neck. I have to bite my lip then, resisting the urge to bend forward and press my lips there. The content is on

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Do it, my wolf hisses.

I just sigh and mentally press a hand to her fur. Someday, I promise. “No, tell me!” I insist, tucking my emotions away and forcing myself to be, instead, the friend he so clearly needs. “I want to know.”

And, to my delight, Jackson turns to me and begins.

Chapter 66

We spend a long time under that tree as Jackson tells me the long story about how he stayed up for three weeks in a row, only giving in because he was so incredibly bored by the end of it. About how he just wandered around at night all

alone, doing chores and going for runs just to have something to do. About how

he missed dreaming, and missed rest, because while he wasn't precisely tired, in

a bodily sort of way, he was exhausted mentally.

“We need sleep, I think, to turn off our minds,” he says at the end of it, thoughtful.

“Life's hard enough as it is we need time away from it all, I guess.”

“Yes, that makes sense,” I murmur passively, all my words blurring together as I

sit with my chin still propped in my hand, just staring at him, mesmerized.

Because god, he's gorgeous. Jackson — he's so brutal at first sight, all harsh lines

and scars and darkness. But the more time you spend with him and the more he

opens up the more you see the grace in him. It's almost, somehow, like he... tucks it away, hiding it. But when he lets it out?

His face just... lights up, like a flaming beacon in the night. And god, is he breathtaking.

"I mean, it makes sense, right?"

I startle out of my reverie and curse myself for letting myself get lost in

"Hmm?" I

say, straightening up.

my mate's

gaze.

He laughs at me. "Sorry," he says, running a hand through his messy hair,

"I've

been boring."

"Jackson," I say, my voice low with the understatement, "you've been the opposite of boring. I got...completely lost in what you were saying."

He grins, desperately pleased at the compliment, and his mouth to say more

—

opens

But I gasp, suddenly looking around. "Shit, what time is it!?"

my god," he says, dropping my hand suddenly and springing to his feet. "Shit,

Clark,

"Oh

we're late

I squeak in protest, pushing myself to my own feet as Jackson grabs my book satchel off the floor, thrusting it against my chest when I finally stand up straight.

"We've got to go," he says, looking desperately back to the castle.

"Well then you carry this!" I shout, pushing the satchel back to him. "Run!"

We do run then, and Jackson beats me, obviously, even carrying both of our books. He grabs my hand and basically drags me through the halls once we're inside, towards my Chemistry classroom.

"How do you even know where this is!?" I gasp as we get close.

Jackson just glares over my shoulder at me, like I'm stupid for not knowing that of

course. he would know where the Chemistry classroom is.

Inwardly. I'm pleased by this, though there's no time to dwell on it, especially as I

consider that Jackson fulfilled his promise to Rafe that he'd see me to my next class even though it means he'll be even later for his.

But...instinctually, I know that he's not doing it for Rafe's sake.

He's doing it for me.

I'm panting by the time I get to the door. Jackson, predictably, is not.

"You good?" He asks, unstrapping my satchel from his shoulder and handing it to

me.

I nod, glancing towards the door, anxious to get inside.

"I'll see you," Jackson murmurs, turning away.

"Come over!" I call after him, knowing that it's costing me even more time but unable to stop myself. Jackson turns, staring at me. I shake my head, speaking

all in a hurry. "Come to our room," I beg, "come spend time with us. We want you there."

Jackson just raises an ironic eyebrow, which makes me laugh.

"I want you there," I say as I grin and grab the door handle. "Which is all that matters."

He smirks for a second and then nods once before turning away, heading down the hall.

And I grin, and twist the handle, pressing into the room.

Dr. Neumann looks over at me, clearly annoyed. "And what emergency has kept

you away today, Cadet Clark?"

"Apologies, sir," I say, hurrying to my seat. "No emergencies. Just...lost track of time.... studying."

"Your tardiness will make itself known by a reduced grade on your next quiz, Clark" Neumann says, turning back to the board as I sit down. "Don't let it happen again."

And I nod, agreeing to the terms, even as I realize that...

Well. If there was another chance to spend the morning with Jackson under an

oak tree, holding his hand and sharing secrets?

I'd do it again in a heartbeat, damn the price.

That evening, Jesse and Rafe come into the room late so late that I'm already bathed, changed into a fresh uniform, and sitting on the couch with my arms crossed, glaring at the door.

"Where have you been!?" I snap the moment the door opens and they come breezing in.

Both boys stop dead in their tracks.

"What?" Jesse says, staring at me, standing stock still. "What'd we do!?"

"You let me sit here all alone!" I shout as Rafe closes the door and I get to my feet, grabbing the note I got at breakfast off the coffee table and waving at them.

"And I have plans! Which you almost made me miss!"

"What plans," Rafe asks, frowning at me as he crosses the room and

snatches

the note from my hand. I don't answer, planting my hands on my hips and frowning at him, letting him figure it out for himself.

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"Who....who the hell is Daphne?" Rafe murmurs.

"Daphne?" Jesse asks, perking up and coming over.

Rafe raises his eyes to mine, predictably frowning.

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She's the seamstress, Rafe," I sigh,

snatching the note from his hands.

His eyebrows lift with clarity — Jesse

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and I told him about that, of course. "I

want to go! And she asked me to

come now, and you forbid me to walk

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through the castle alone so let's go!

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"Is this invitation for one?" Jesse murmurs, grabbing the note from me and peering over it. "Or does she mention...any dukes..."

I just roll my eyes at him and continue glaring at Rafe.

"I don't think this is a good idea, Ariel," Rafe says, making me groan at how

predictable and stubborn he's being.

"Rafe, she's my friend, and I already sent her word that I would —"

"Well, why did you do that when

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When I hadn't asked you first? Rafe,

I sigh, looking down at my shoes,

trying to figure out how to phrase

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this. "We are walking a very fine line

here, my brother, between you

protecting me and you being my

jailer. Can you....can you please go a

little easier on me, here? Daphne — I

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trust her, we trust her. And she's my

: ”

friend.” The content is on

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chapter there!

There's a long moment of silence, but I look up when Rafe sighs.

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Okay,” he says, running a hand

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through his hair. “You're right, Ari —

and if you and Jesse trust this girl,

or .

then I guess it's time for me to meet

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her to.” The content is on

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chapter there!

“No need,” Jesse says, buttoning the top button on his shirt so that he can look

all sharp. “I'll take Ariel down to Daphne's room —”

“Oh fat chance of that,” I groan, shoving him away.

“What!?” he laughs, stumbling back a step. “She's a nice girl! I just want to say hi

and -”

“And hit on her relentlessly?”

“Yes,” Jesse says, grinning at me like a fox. “Yes, and hit on her relentlessly.

God, please let me go —”

“Jesse!” I snap, smacking him again. “Don't hit on my friends! It's my only rule!”

He laughs blatantly in my face and Rafe joins in.

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Chapter 67

I stand back, looking confusedly between Rafe and Jesse. “What?” I ask my brother and my cousin, “what's so funny?”

“Ari,” Rafe says, shaking his head at me as he puts a hand around my elbow and

tugs me towards the door. “Not hitting on your friends? That has never been a

rule.”

“That has always been a rule!” I gasp, staring up at my brother.

“Well,” he says, grimacing at me a little. “Then that is a rule which Jesse has never followed.”

“What!?” I snap, trying to spin and stare at Jesse but hauled along by Rafe.

“Who

— who have you hit on?!”

“Who haven't I hit on?” Jesse replies, still grinning at me, wicked.

“Jesse!” I shout, truly scandalized and betrayed. “Annie? Rebecca? Padme!?”

Jesse just grins. and I gape, looking up at Rafe for confirmation.

“He hooked up with them all too,” Rafe informs me, dry.

I let out a loud screech of protest, spinning to stare at my cousin, who just shrugs

at me like he couldn't help it.

“You bring around these nice girls, Ariel, who fall for all my lines!” Jesse exclaims,

holding out his hands and shaking his head like he couldn't help it. “Pretty ones

too it is like a buffet. And you expect me to do nothing!?”

“Stop making out with my friends, Jesse!”

“No, don't make me promise that it's my favorite hobby —

“Jesse!” I lash out, trying to smack him, but I'm too far away. Rafe sighs, hauling

me further

towards the door.

“Did you seriously make out with Annie and Rebecca?” I call over my shoulder,

desperate.

Chapter 0/

Jesse just shrugs, innocent. “Someone had to do it, Shrimp.” He clasps an honorable hand to his chest. “I was happy to fall on that sword.”

I just growl and turn away. Rafe sighs and grabs the door handle.

“Wait, what about Theresa!?” I shout, spinning to look back at Jesse.

“Oh my god, Theresa!” Jesse groans, throwing himself on the couch. My jaw drops as he covers his face with his hands, moaning like he's mourning the loss

of something beautiful he'll never have again. “Theresa is a freak

I let out a scandalized gasp, but Rafe just tugs me along.

“A freak in the best possible way, cousin!” Jesse shouts after me just before the

door snicks. shut. “The best possible way! Rafe can tell you, too!”

“Oh my goddd,” I moan, glaring at my brother, whose cheeks blush a guilty

pink.

For the next ten minutes as we wend our way through the halls I pepper him with

questions. He answers everything I want to know about Jesse, but doesn't confess any of his own sins.

"Fine," I growl when we finally get to Daphne's door, crossing my arms and glaring up into his face. "But this one is off limits, okay?"

"Okay, Ari," Rafe says, nodding to me with a smile. "I can make that promise for

myself, but Jesse? Don't hold your breath waiting for him to agree to it."

"So rude," I mutter, reaching out to knock on the door.

Rafe and I stand quietly while wait, and I hear a set of footsteps inside. Then, the

door swings open.

"Hi!" Daphne says, beaming at me. "Welcome, I -"

But her face falls when she looks up at my brother standing next to me. Her mouth makes a little "O" as she stares at him.

"Hi," Rafe says, giving her his best Prince

his hand. "It's nice to meet you, Daphne," he says, smiling and holding

out

Chapter 67

"It's...um, hi," she says, reaching out to shake his hand and smiling up at him nervously. I raise my eyebrows in surprise she handled herself beautifully with

Jesse. Honestly, I'm a little shocked by this reaction to Rafe. "I mean," she says,

blushing as she takes her hand away, "it's a pleasure to meet you....your highness."

"Please, call me Rafe," he says, smiling at her warmly, a little used to people reacting this way it's been the same since we were kids. He moves on with

the

conversation so that she has a chance to find her feet again. "Will you send word

up when you and Ari are finished with your visit? I can come back down and —"

"Oh, no need," she says, and I'm glad to see her relaxing a bit. "I can walk Ari back up to your

room."

Rafe just quirks an eyebrow like he doesn't believe either of us can protect the other for a second. Daphne, coming back to herself as the moments pass, just smirks at my brother.

"I've been walking through this castle alone for years, sire," she says, putting her hands on her hips. "And not once have I been accosted."

"Oh yeah?" Rafe asks. "What's your secret?"

"Pepper spray," she says with a shrug, making both of us laugh. "No, but really," she continues with a grin, "servants' corridors. Honestly, we'll be fine."

"All right," my brother says with a nod, surprising me. I didn't expect him to agree to that so easily I guess our little two—second chat earlier really hit its mark. He turns to me then. "How long do you think?"

I shrug, looking over at Daphne. "An hour? Maybe two?"

"Let's make it two," she says, wrinkling her nose at me. I grin and nod to Rafe, who sketches a little bow and turns away, waving over his shoulder.

Daphne gives a little squeak of excitement, pulling me into the room. "Oh my god," she says, pressing the door shut behind us and leaning back against it for support, "that was Rafe Sinclair! At my door!"

I laugh, shaking my head at her. "Don't be so impressed — it's just Rafe," I say with a shrug. "Plus," I gesture to myself, "Nation's princess! Right here!"

"Oh, I know," she says, laughing and grabbing my arm, tugging me over to the bed and gesturing for me to sit down. "But you're not nearly as hot as he is."

I squeak in dismay, standing up straight at the offense.

Daphne just rolls her eyes at me as she crosses the little room. "You're very pretty, Ariel, but you just don't do it for me." She reaches up to a shelf and grabs a bottle of wine as well as two small glasses. "Can I persuade you?" she asks.

"I know it's technically illegal but," she shrugs and gives me a hopeful look. "As long as you promise not to tell my brother," I say, eyeing the bottle — because honestly, a glass of wine sounds fantastic right now.

"As long as you promise to dish," she counters, laughing as we both sit down on the bed. Daphne pulls her bedside table close and pours us each a glass of red wine.

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ey " :

Dish about what?" I ask, taking the glass she offers me and leaning back against the pillows. I grin, pleased Si) ;

that it's so instantly easy between us.

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Daphne — I feel like I've already known her for years. But, I guess that)

makes sense, when someone's carrying your deepest darkest The content is on ! Read the latest chapter there! secret.

"About everything," she sighs, smiling warmly at me. "I want to hear all about

your week, and about how no one else has figured out you're a girl — "Because boys are idiots —" I say, taking a sip of my drink and humming lightly

with pleasure at the velvety taste.

She laughs, and nods. "Yes, tell me all about the boys."

"Daphne," I say, sighing, "as the only acknowledged girl in this Visit to read full content.

Castle, you could have your pick of the boys. You know that. So why do you need me to tell you all about them when you could just go knock on any door you want and have him sri - »

kneel at your feet, spilling hist guts?

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"Because," she sighs, a low and devastated sound, "I'm abstaining."

"Why?" I ask, grinning.

"Because I have dreams," she groans, shaking her head like its's a great sacrifice to give up

boys for the sake of your ambitions. I smile then, recognizing the feeling, especially

considering that all I want to do is hurl myself at my mates. But I, too, am abstaining. Or, at least I'm trying to.

“What dreams?” I ask, wanting to know more wanting to know all about her, frankly.

“All of them.” she sighs, smiling at me and leaning forward. “I want a big life, you know? I want to do everything — feel everything, see everything, touch everything, taste it. I want to do it all.”

My smile deepens as I consider my friend, swept up a little in her verve for life.

“What's stopping you?” I ask quietly, sipping more of my wine.

“Money,” she says, giving a chagrined little shrug. “We...didn't grow up with much.”

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I nod, listening, my mind going back i . +

to Jackson who I'm starting to think might come from a similar world.

« :

Well, what does that have to do with ” “

boys?” I ask. “Why does that make

“ . An

you “abstain, as you say?” The

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Daphne just gives me a long, slow grin.

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Chapter 68

“Because,” Daphne says, giving a happy little sigh and taking a long sip of her wine, “you're

right the boys here would throw themselves at my feet just because I'm the only

girl here

— at least, the only admitted girl here.”

I raise my glass in toast to her, conceding the point.

“But,” she continues with a shrug, “I'm not going to throw myself at the first boy I

find myself attracted to — fall in love, get wrapped up in a marriage I haven't really

considered, find myself ten years from now tied to a life that I didn't want. I want to be more careful than that."

I nod, understanding. "So, you want to choose your boys carefully. Clever work, Daphne."

She grins at me, accepting the compliment. "Seems a waste sometimes, though.

All these boys for the pickings and I just....leave them on the vine."

"A job perk left unused," I murmur, agreeing. "Is the job worth it, besides that? You seem really isolated here."

"I am isolated," she says, shrugging before grinning at me, "which is partially why

I'm so

glad you're here now seriously, you'd better make it through to the spring semester, I'll be desolate if you leave me after only a couple months."

"I'll do my best," I say, nodding seriously, "just for you."

She laughs along with me but then I tilt my head to the side, considering her again, wondering about her past. "Daphne, how did you end up here?"

"My uncle got me the job," she says quietly. "He was the tailor here before me

he brought me in two years ago, when his health started to fail and he couldn't keep

up with the work. And then when he died, they gave me his spot, because I'm fast, and I work hard, and I know the uniforms inside and out."

"I'm sorry," I say quietly, realizing that she really is all alone here now that she's

lost her

uncle as well.

Emergency calls only 400

Chapter 68

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"Don't be," she says, her smile soft. "He had a long life, and I'm not unhappy here. I'm cozy. and warm, and busy I like all that. And the Academy pays incredible wages, so it's well worth being alone for a little for the money I can stash away and send home to my mom. I figure a few more years of this and I'm... totally free."

"What's that mean to you?" I ask, genuinely curious. "Total freedom?"

"Doing whatever I want, whenever I want to," she sighs, her eyes going a little far-off at the idea. "I don't need a big mansion or anything — just...the ability

to

travel where I want, to support myself. Maybe get a cat." She shrugs.

"That does sound nice." I say quietly, considering that...well, I never even thought of that as a possibility for myself. Total freedom, a life on my own terms...

"You can come along if you want," she says quietly. "But... would request that you bring your hot brother."

I burst into laughter at this, stretching my leg across the bed and giving her a little

kick. "Do you seriously think he's that hot?"

"Ari," she says, laughing a little low laugh. "Every girl in the nation. human and wolf- has had a crush on Rafe Sinclair since he hit puberty. That height?

Those

shoulders, those eyes?" she sighs, leaning back against her pillows.

"Ewww," I say, wrinkling my nose at her but laughing anyway, "you wouldn't think

he's so cute if you had to listen to him snore day in and day out."

Daphne smiles but shakes her head, letting me know that not even that would be

enough. I sigh because I mean, I know Rafe's reputation in the world I've seen the tabloids, and I'm aware that my brother is objectively good looking. But still, a

national heartthrob?

I guess I'm just too close to it. "Poor Jesse," I sigh, resting my head against the

wall. "You'll break his heart, you know, crushing on Rafe like that."

"Yeah well," she murmurs, smirking at me. "Something tells me your Jesse needs

to have his heart broken a bit, doesn't he?"

"Probably," I say, nodding and meaning it. Jesse — I love him so much, and I know his heart. is in the right place, but all of my friends? He would certainly deserve it.

Chapter no

But still, he's my cousin and I love him. He deserves some loyalty, after all.

"Jesse's not a bad guy, Daphne, I don't want you to think that. Just a flirt."

"I don't think he's bad," she says, nodding with a smile. "I just think he's maybe a

little bit... dangerous. A little too easy to fall in love with, that one you've got to watch your step around him before you find yourself swept off your feet."

"But not Rafe?" I ask, curious,

"Rafe's impossible," she says, grinning at me. "Nobody actually expects Rafe

Sinclair to look their way. You cousin the duke,” she shakes her head, “a little too possible.”

I huff a sigh through my nose as I look down at my wine, not precisely disliking learning about this side of my brother and my cousin that I hadn't thought of before, but certainly unnerved by it. Daphne, perceptive, moves on.

“So, enough about me,” she says, leaning forward and smacking me on my knee.

“Tell me everything. Ari — how the hell did you get in here!?”

The time passes fast, then, as I fill her in on my journey. Daphne's a good listener

— rapt, asking questions when necessary, but always letting me take the lead. But

as the story continues, I see her perk up a little, her intuition tingling, when Luca's

name starts to be repeated more and more as I go on. By the time I get to the part where Luca and Ben are coming over to our room every night for dinner, there's a full-on smirk on her lips.

“What!” I say suddenly, interrupting my own sentence to lean forward and give her another little kick.

“Nothing!” she says, bursting into a laugh and grabbing the bottle to refill my glass of wine, just a little bit. “Just...you light up a bit, when you talk about Luca

Grant.”

“I do not,” I protest, but my cheeks redden..

“You don't blush like that when you talk about Ben,” she teases, her voice sing—

song as she leans back against the pillows.

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I sigh, leaning my head back, wondering how much to tell her.

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Daphne she's very easy to talk to and

, . :

I'm dying to have a girl to talk to about all of this mate stuff. But still I

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can't talk to her about it before I talk to Luca about it. That feels...unfair.

So, I compromise. The content is on

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Chapter 08

"Fine," I sigh. "I like him."

"Ariel!" she shrieks, giggling, "that is so cute!"

"It's not cute" I protest, sitting up and laughing too. "It's terrible

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Oh no it's not," she murmurs, cozying up against her pillows and holding her wine glass with both

"yg

hands. "It's adorable you two are totally going to end The content is on

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chapter there!

up together."

My blush deepens and I put a hand on my hot cheek. "It's so dangerous though."

"Yeah," she says, agreeing. "You've got to be careful. But...you should also

totally make out with him."

I burst into laughter, shaking my head. "You sound like my wolf," I murmur.

"Wolves are very wise," she says sagely. "You should listen to her. And then

come back here. And tell me everything."

"You just want gossip," I grumble, but I can't keep the grin off my lips.

"Ariel," she sighs, "beyond an enduring friendship that we can trust and build?

Yes. Gossip is precisely the thing I am starved for most."

I burst out laughing.

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And!" she continues, laughing with

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me, "Considering that you're a hidden princess at an all-boys Alpha

fl

Academy? And you've somehow gathered around you like the hottest collection of celebrity boys I have

ever seen? You are precisely in the
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best position to provide it." The
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1 grin, shaking my head, because I had not considered it in that light not
at all.

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Chapter 69

"Fine." I say, yawning into my wine. "Just for you, Daphne. I'll bite the bullet
and

make out with Luca Grant someday and tell you all about it."

She laughs with me, but...well, my wolf turns in an eager circle in my soul,
desperately hoping that I do.

"Thank you, what a martyr you

what a martyr you are," she says, sarcastic, but then she sighs and glances at
the clock. "I think it's time to get you back, though."

My jaw drops open as I look up at her clock too. "That's impossible," I murmur,
shaking my head.

"Deeply unfair," she agrees, putting her wine down and reaching for mine,
which I

hand to her. "Will you help me make some deliveries on the way up?" she
asks,

gesturing towards some boxes by the door. I murmur that of course I will —
I'm a

gentleman cadet, after all and she laughs as we both fill our arms with boxes.

Daphne leads me through the back corridors of the castle and, true to her
word,

we don't meet a single soul. I'm fascinated by the passages, which are so
different from the ones I traverse every day — much darker, smaller, and
more

secret. We take a freight elevator upwards and I'm a little surprised when the
door opens directly into the corridor where the majority of the cadet dorms
are.

Ben, I think, is somewhere on this floor.

"Oh," I say, surprised as we step out of the elevator and the doors close,
blending

seamlessly with the stone wall. I run my fingers over the place where the door
just was, fascinated. "God, you'd never know it was there..."

"I know," she says. "Cool, right? Come on," she nods towards the boys' doors

and we quietly walk along, dropping boxes outside of doors and giving a little knock before we move away. to the next one. Calls of thanks follow us down the

hall but Daphne moves quickly so that there's no time to respond.

When our boxes run low towards the center of the corridor, though, Daphne curses lightly under her breath, looking down at the one in her hands.

"What?" I ask.

"I brought the wrong one," she sighs, looking up at me and then back towards the

elevator. "Do you mind? We have to go back and get it

"That's okay." I say, smiling at her. "You go on — I'll drop off these two," I say, nodding to the ones in my hand, "and then continue upstairs."

Daphne bites her lip, looking over at me, clearly remembering her promise to Rafe.

"I'm two flights of stairs away from my room, Daph," I say, grinning at her. "I think

I can take the risk."

She laughs a little and nods. "Okay. But if his Highness asks, I walked you all the

way to the door, yes?"

"No worries," I say, and then I reach out to give her a quick hug before she scurries back towards the elevator.

I sigh with pleasure, thinking over the night with a great deal of joy as I drop the

last two packages off, giving little knocks on the door as I go. God, it was just so

great to be able to talk freely to someone. I mean, I can talk to Jesse and Rafe,

but not the way you would a girlfriend —

"Hey!"

I spin in the hall towards the voice behind me, suddenly wary.

My eyes widen when I see Alan Wright standing over the package that I just dropped at his door, glaring daggers at me.

"What the hell are you doing with my uniform!?" he snaps, stomping towards me.

"Nothing," I protest, stumbling a few steps back. "I just dropped it off—"

"Why the hell are you dropping it off!?"

"I'm just helping! I -"

Wright grabs my collar in his fist, yanking me closer to him. I gasp in surprise and

then grab his wrists, baring my teeth and kicking at his shin and his knee. "Let

me fucking go!"

He just shakes me, dodging my kicks and hauling me forward so I don't have the

room to get any good blows in.

you alone,

"You god damn rat," he growls, glaring down into my face. "I'm glad I finally got

you so I can rip you to shreds ="

"What the hell!" I shout, choking a little and scrabbling at his wrist, scratching and

smacking at it, trying to hurt him enough so he'll let me go.

"You!" he seethes, shaking me again, so hard this time that I my head snaps back on my neck. "You're the reason my brother didn't get in to the Academy!"

My mind half processes his words, though I'm truly concentrating on getting the

fuck away from him

"I know all about that stunt you pulled in the obstacle course! You and god damn

McClintock what did you do, pay him to help you!?"

"I didn't do anything!"

"You DID!" Alan shouts.

Doors start to open down the hallway, faces popping out as Wright shoves me away from him and raises his fist like he's going to beat me to a pulp. "You cheated, and you weaseled your way into this Academy, and you took my brother's spot and ruined his life —"

I flinch back as Wright moves towards me, because this man — he's strong, as

big as Jesse at least, and powerful

"I'm going to kill you!" he shouts, drawing his arm back now as I turn to run.

"You

god damn —"

"Hey!" a voice snaps, and I instantly turn back towards it instinctual, primal — even though everything else in my mind is telling me to run. I turn just in time to

see Luca grabbing Wright by the arm, hauling him back as Wright begins to throw the punch that would have connected with the side of my head, probably

sending me sprawling.

"Get the fuck off of me!" Wright shouts.

"Back off!" Luca commands, spinning Wright and shoving him, hard, so that he

stumbles back against the wall. A crowd gathers now, watching.
“They roped you in too,” Wright growls, his teeth lengthening into his fangs at the threat of a real fight, “these god damn royals getting whatever they want, bringing their pet weakling in, stealing spots from people who actually deserve them —”

“Clark,” Luca snaps, advancing on Wright now, “earned his spot here, just like everyone else.”

Beyond my fear, my heart swells to see Luca defend me like this.

“He” Wright starts to snarl, but Luca interrupts.

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« ” .

Enough!” Luca shouts, shoving Wright back against the wall again when he starts to stand up. Luca pins him there, a single hand flat against his chest. “One more word against

Clark,” my mate growls, “and I’ll knock your god damn teeth out.” The

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Wright seethes, glaring at Luca, his fangs still extended. But he doesn’t move.

“That’s right,” Luca says. He moves his hand, standing up and staring around the

hall at the gathered crowd. “And if anyone else has anything to —”

But before he can finish, Wright surges from the wall, releasing a guttural shout

as he lunges for me, fangs bared. I gasp, stepping back, raising my arms to

defend

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Wright is snatched back though, and I can barely see Luca grabbing his uniform from behind, tearing it as he hauls Wright back towards him. And then, when Wright stands stumbling

before him instead of lunging for me,
Luca raises his fist and winds back
his arm The content is on
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chapter there!

And then Luca delivers one hell of a punch right across Wright's face,
ripping
across his cheekbone, making his head snap to the side.
My face goes slack as Wright falls instantly to the ground, out cold.
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Luca looms above him, his shoulders
hunched, his breath coming fast — a
champion boxer delivering a
knock-out punch and waiting,
almost begging Wright to get up so
he can deliver the next blow. The
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Holy hell, my wolf whispers inside of me. And for once, I have...no urge to
shoo
her away.

When Wright doesn't move for several silent seconds, Luca lifts his head,
glaring
around at everyone in the hall.

"Does anyone have anything else they want to say?" he shouts, his fists
still
clenched as he slowly turns and meets everyone's eyes.

No one says a word.

"Good," he snaps, and then he turns, taking two quick steps towards me
and
grabbing me by the arm. "Come on," he growls.

And then he drags me forward, into his room.

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Chapter 70

"Luca!" I gasp, still shocked as he slams the door shut behind him and locks it.
But he doesn't say a word as he turns towards me, still livid, his jaw clenched.
My

eyes go wide because — is he mad at me? Is he going to —

But he just closes the distance between us in one step, his hand flying up and
knocking the cap from my head in one swift move. I gasp again, my hands

flying
up to my hair —
“I fucking knew it,” Luca growls, his eyes roving over my face, my hair his
nostrils
flaring as he takes in my scent my real scent, which my hat has been hiding
for
weeks-
I barely have a moment to see his face soften, just incrementally, before he
grabs
me around the waist, and pulls me to him, and seals his mouth to mine.
Instantly, I melt, going almost limp against him as Luca kisses me, as I taste
him
for the first time in real life, in my real body. And it is so, so much better. I
moan
into his mouth as my arms wrap instinctually around his neck, pulling him
closer
as his lips move deliberately, desperately over mine. My mouth opens to him
and
he takes full advantage, deepening the kiss as his arms tighten around me,
pulling me tight against his chest.
I lose myself to it — to him completely, my mind going numb as my wolf howls
with
joy and pleasure. My body takes over as I kiss him back fiercely, shivers
running
all through my body, my skin tingling where every inch of it is pressed to his —
To my mate-
And god, the way he kisses me, the way his soft lips move firm against mine,
the
way my head bends back on my neck
God, I could fucking drown in it.
But to my shock, he pulls away. “I’m sorry,” he murmurs, pulling back just an
inch
and looking down at me with half-lidded eyes, his hands sliding up my body to
my neck, to my hair. “I’m so sorry, Ariel —”
1
gasp,
shivers running through me again as I hear him say my name-
Chapter 70
My real name
My eyes instantly fill with tears. “What?” I breathe, not understanding. “Why —
”

“I’m sorry,” he says again, the fingers of one of his hands burying themselves in the hair at the nape of my neck, his other hand making its way to where I’ve tucked the end of my braid in, making quick work of undoing it. “I’ve been suck a jerk this week I regret it so much, Ariel —”

I laugh, suddenly, shocked.

“I have!” Luca says, nodding quickly as his fingers start to comb through my hair, unraveling it so that it falls down below my shoulders, rose—gold and wavy from its wrapped up in my braid. “I figured it out but I’ve been so fucking mad at you —

time

The laughter falls from my lips, quickly replaced by a guilty groan. “Luca, no,” I murmur, pressing myself close to him again so that my body is flush against his, so that I look up into his face. He wraps a hand in my hair and grasps it in his fist, like a handful of gold he desperately wants and needs. “I’m so sorry it wasn’t right, to keep it a secret —

“No,” he says, his eyes going wide. “Ariel, I get it you had to keep it secret, even from me

“I did,” I say, tears starting to slip down my face as I nod. “And I hated it been torture-”

I’m so sorry, it’s

He groans now, clearly horrified to see me so sad, and he wraps an arm tight around me as he turns towards his bed, sinking down onto it and pulling me with him. I inhale sharply —

Because suddenly, I’m in Luca Grant’s bed —

But my mate simply lays me out next to him so that we’re face—to—face, our heads both resting on his pillow.

“Don’t cry,” he murmurs, stroking my face softly with his thumb as he wraps one leg around mine, possessive and greedy and sweet. “I don’t know what I’m going to do if you start crying I’m going to have to go punch someone else —”

I burst into laughter at this, shaking my head and lifting my hand to wipe away the few

spare tears that worked their
I've been dying to talk to you "ay out. "I'm not crying — not really it's just...this
is a
lot
about this for weeks —
cheeks as his
"I know," he murmurs, pressing a series of sweet kisses to my mouth and my
hand moves from my face to my hair, stroking it. "God damn it, Ariel, I could
have
killed that fucking Wright guy when I saw him threatening you —
"How long have you known!?"
"What the hell were you doing walking the halls by yourself?"
"Why wouldn't you talk to me all week!?"
But then we're kissing again, and we both lose ourselves to it, all of our
questions
forgotten for the moment as my fingers stroke through his hair, as the warm
summer apricot scent of him floods my nostrils and makes me go limp with
wanting him. Luca rolls a little so that his weight rests slightly on top of me,
taking
charge of the kiss. And god does that feel good — I didn't even know I'd like
something like that
Too soon, he pulls away.
"No," I murmur, raising my mouth to his again.
"Please," Luca says with a soft laugh, shaking his head at me, his rich brown
eyes happy. "Ariel, if you say one word to stop me, I will kiss you all god damn
night. But we we have
to talk."
I sigh, loosening my hands from his hair and dropping one to cover my eyes
as
he rolls his body away so that we're facing each other on the pillow again. I
take
a few seconds, trying to compose myself, trying to force my mind to come
back.
But it is....very difficult. Inwardly my wolf lays languidly on the ground, panting,
desperately happy but also still wanting more more of him, more of this, hours
of
it.
Luca wraps a hand around my wrist and gives it a tug, pulling my hand away
from my face. And then he slides his palm against mine as I take a deep
breath,
taking in the handsome lines of his face, closer than I've ever seen it before.

And

up close he is...breathtaking.

"I'm sorry," he says again, shaking his head just slightly.

"You don't have to

"No," he interrupts, firm. "Let me get this out, Ariel."

I smile, again, to hear him say my name. Seeing my expression, Luca smiles too,

unable to stop. But then he forces his face into more serious lines.

"I was an asshole this week," he says, squeezing my hand. "I was mad at you, but I acted like a petty little baby. I should have gone right to you, the moment

I

figured it out

"When was that?" I ask, desperate to know.

"Oh, like immediately," he says, laughing and shaking his head at himself.

"The

moment you ended that dream? After your hat fell off, and your hair fell down?"

He groans as he laughs, rolling over onto his back and covering his face with his

hand, shaking his head at himself. I close the distance he created, resting my cheek on his shoulder.

"God, I was so stupid before," he mutters. "Seriously, the thing that made it click

for me was just that you had long hair under that cap? After all of the other clues?"

I grin, a little pleased. "Go easy on yourself, we are very good liars."

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" , » .

I mean, you're not," he says, turning

« .

to glare at me. "Seriously, you

Nes 5 5

couldn't figure out a better disguise name for Ariel than Ari? When the Princess is notoriously missing and you hang out with Rafe and Jesse all day, pretending to be their cousin?

i iE Tle » 5

I'm just an idiot." The content is on

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chapter there!

My smile deepens as I unconsciously raise a hand, stroking a finger along the length of his jaw. "Pretty idiot."

A smile takes over his face and his dimples flare as his eyes move slowly over me. "If I'm pretty, you're beautiful, Ariel."

"Really?" I say, a little anxiety twisting in me now. "You're not...disappointed? That I'm not... Shrimp?"

"No!" Luca says instantly, laughing and wrapping his arms around me again.

"Though, honestly, you're going to have to pay a little bit for making me question

my sexuality like

that

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It was very sweet," I murmur, grinning and stroking my hand over his cheek, where a little stubble is

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starting to let itself be known, "that Nh "

you were willing to go gay for me.

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He sighs, shaking his head and pressing his eyes shut. "Most...confusing few weeks of my life."

"Worth it, though?"

"Ariel, you're my fucking mate," he says, his eyes opening in a flash. He stares at

me, almost in disbelief. "So, so worth it. Every god damn minute."

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Luca wraps an arm around my waist

again and pulls me close. My hands

wrap in the fabric of his uniform as

he kisses me again, slow and

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deliberate, like he's savoring every

moment of it. Just as I am. The

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My lips part as I tug on his shirt, wanting to feel him on top of me again, and

Lucal graciously obliges, when

We both go very, very still when a knock sounds at the door.