

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy

C 401-410

"They're beautiful," Rosie whispers, her voice reverent as she sorts through the pages of Daphne's designs.

"I can make you one too," Daphne says, peeling her eyes from Jesse and leaning forward to smile at the girl before her, just on the cusp of her teenage years.

Rosie squeaks with pleasure and hope, her hands flying up to clasp against her chest. "Really!?"

"Yes, of course!" Daphne replies, laughing.

"What about me!?" Bella gasps, not wanting to be left out.

"You too, Bella," Daphne replies, laughing a little and focusing on the younger girl at her side. Bella grins up at her, well pleased.

"But not Seraphina," Rose murmurs, looking back down at the drawings. "She'll just get cake all over it."

"It's true, isn't it, Fifs," Jesse says quite seriously, looking down at the baby of the family, who is at most four. The baby grins up at her favorite sibling. "I don't know why we dress you at all, considering your fabric-to-food ratio."

Seraphina giggles, and smacks Jesse lazily on the chest, turning her head away towards the TV where Rose's dance game is still running. "So, your mom's asleep?" Daphne asks quietly, a little dismayed.

"Yeah, but don't worry," Jesse says, reaching out around Seraphina and deftly scooping the designs back into the portfolio before deftly closing it. Rosie immediately runs back to her game, starting it over, and Bella leans against Daphne's side, nuzzling close. "I can give it to her. With as little chocolate sauce on it as possible."

"But not none?" Daphne asks, a grin starting.

"Never none," Jesse replies, shaking his head and laughing lightly as he lifts his eyes to meet Daphne's. "Not in this house."

The two take a moment, staring at each other and smiling, before Daphne sighs and looks around. "Man, it's really nice here. So...cozy and busy. I almost wish I'd stayed here, instead of the palace."

"You've only been here for five minutes. It's very charming for five minutes. And then someone bites you." He gives Chase another playful kick, sending the boy toppling over and laughing again.

Daphne laughs, turning her eyes back to Jesse. "No one's going to bite me here. I've promised them dresses."

"Don't be too sure of that," Jesse murmurs, resting his head back against the couch, his eyes dropping a little to Daphne's neck.

And Daphne, despite herself, drops her gaze to the floor, a faint blush marking her cheeks.

"Do you know," Jesse says after a long quiet moment, his voice shifting now to speak out to all the children, demanding their attention. "I bet that Aunt Ella didn't even feed Daphne before she left this morning."

The children all gasp dramatically as one, pretending to be scandalized, immediately in on the game.

"Bad auntie!" Chase declares.

"Inhospitable!" Caleb calls from the chair, showing off his vocabulary as he drops his phone and gives up the ruse of being too cool to play.

"Oh Daphne, you poor thing," Rose murmurs, pressing a sincere hand to her heart.

Daphne bursts into laughter, looking around at all of them in shock, not getting it yet.

"We have to fix this," Jesse says, nodding sagely and holding up one hand in the air. All the children go tense, and Daphne looks around at all of them, fascinated and baffled.

"Best to-go breakfast gets...ten minutes later to bedtime tonight!"

The children gasp, delighted at the prize.

"In three...!" Jesse calls, holding up three fingers and starting to count them down.
"Two...!"

But he never gets to one, because Chase shrieks and leaps for the kitchen and then the rest of them are off after him, shouting, calling him a cheater, pushing and shoving each other aside to get through the kitchen door first.

Daphne bursts with laughter as she spins to watch them go, truly delighted. Jesse, beside her, laughs too.

"Bribery," he sighs, and she turns back to him. "The only efficient way to get them to leave you the hell alone for a second."

"Oh, come on, Jess," Daphne says on a sigh, leaning her head against the edge of the couch and gazing at him, just a bit. "It's very clear that you don't want to be away from them, not for a single minute."

"I wouldn't be so sure," he murmurs, studying her face quietly. "Maybe just for one minute alone with our honored early-morning guest."

Jesse lifts a hand then in the space between them. But then hesitates and quickly lowers it, tucking it tight beneath his leg like he wants to keep it from escaping. Daphne lifts her own hand, brushing the loose strand of hair out of her face, tucking it back behind her ear.

"Home today?" he asks quietly. "To see mom?"

"Mmhmm," she replies, giving a smile. "I'm excited. It will be good to see her."

"I'm sorry," Jesse murmurs, frowning a touch, "that it looks like we stole you away for most of your winter break, now that we all have to go back to the Academy early."

"I wouldn't give up a minute of it," Daphne replies, grinning, meaning it. "It's been wonderful."

"I'm tempted to beg you to stay, you know," Jesse murmurs. He slowly looses a long breath. "Even if it's unfair to your mother...I'd keep you, if I could."

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy

"Don't beg," Daphne murmurs, taking a deep breath and staring at him, unblinking.

"You're not in charge, Daphne," he whispers. "I'll beg if I want to."

"Not proper, for a Duke to beg."

He smirks. "Depends on what he's begging for. And whether it's worth falling to his knees."

She laughs a little. "Surely, one more day with me isn't worth such disgrace."

"Don't undersell yourself, Daph. You're worth a great deal more trouble than that."

Silence reigns between them as the pair just stare at each other for what feels like a long, long time.

But god, what a silence. Daphne feels that if she had her sewing sheers in her hand she could cut the silence up into bits and sew it into an elaborate cloak, sell it for millions. But she wouldn't - she'd keep it whole and just wrap herself in it when she's alone. In the stillness, the peace.

It's all ruined, of course, a moment later when the kitchen door bursts open. Daphne nearly jumps out of her skin as another blush rises to her cheeks. God, when did she start blushing so much for no reason?

"Unfair, Chase!" Bella calls out, chasing her older brother, her voice thick with tears. "Jesse, he stole all the syrup!"

"It's my syrup!" Chase bites back over his shoulder, rushing into the room with a sopping wet paper bag in his hands. "Mom bought it for me -"

"Ooookay," Jesse says, instantly getting to his knees when he sees the impending disaster before him, grabbing the roll of paper towels at his side - which Daphne suspects he always keeps by his side in this house - and reaching for the dripping bag. Chase gives it to him and Jesse instantly begins to wrap it up.

"Daphne didn't even get to see it," Chase moans, his shoulders slumping as his breakfast offering disappears into layers and layers of absorbent white paper.

"But I can smell it," Daphne says, her eyebrows going up as she nods, not lying at all as the thick scent of maple fills the room. "And it is...a valiant effort. Thank you so much, Chase."

The little boy beams at her, well mollified.

At Jesse's bidding, the other four children ring around, holding out their offerings, which range from the very practical - Caleb's croissant and after- dinner mint - to the daringly creative - Bella's banana-flavored yogurt with a lollypop instead of a spoon.

But Daphne's heart tightens when she sees the last one, held out in Seraphina's tiny hands.

Just a very small, shallow desert dish, wrapped in a cloth napkin and filled with red and white jellybeans.

"Well, they're all delicious options," Daphne says, beaming around at all of the kids, "but this one, I think, will keep me full all day." Softly, she closes her hands around Seraphina's breakfast, accepting it, and the little girl gives a squeal of delight before throwing herself into Jesse's arms.

He laughs, catching his sister and giving her a big hug. "Well done, Fifs," he murmurs, giving her a kiss. "Ten more minutes before lights out, you lucky thing."

The other kids moan good-heartedly about the loss, taking their makeshift breakfasts with them as they go back to whatever they were doing before Daphne came in.

"That was so cute," Daphne sighs, grinning at Jesse even as she glances to the door, knowing that she has to go. "But, um," she looks down at the bowl and the cloth napkin in her hand. "I guess I can just...put the jelly beans in my pocket?" She moves to spill them out in her hand.

"No no," Jesse says, reaching out a hand to stop her. Daphne looks up at him in shock. "That's your bowl now. Your napkin too."

"What!?"

Jesse bursts into a grin. "It's part of the breakfast. Just take it, Daph, it's fine."

"Jesse," she laughs, shaking her head. "I can't just take your bowl."

"Oh no, you have to," he says quite seriously, his eyebrows going up. "You'll break her heart if you don't." He nods down at Seraphina, who likewise nods seriously, like it's a very real possibility.

"Break ma heart," Sera murmurs.

Daphne can't resist that - no one could. So she just smiles and ties the napkin in a knot, holding the whole package in her fist as she gets to her feet. "You'll make sure your mom gets that?" she asks, nodding towards the portfolio.

"I promise," Jesse says, standing with her, taking Seraphina with him, balanced on his hip. The little girl rests her head on her favorite brother's chest, perfectly content, gazing happily at Daphne as she does.

"You're the best," Daphne says with a sigh, glancing around the room at all the kids. "I wish I could stay - but I'll see you in a few days anyway."

Jesse nods happily to her and then walks her to the door. He frowns, though, when he pulls it open for her and sees the cab waiting there. "Rafe didn't send you in a car?" he asks, raising an eyebrow.

"Rafe didn't know I left," Daphne says, looking up at Jesse and giving a casual shrug.

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy

"What, you snuck out? Didn't...tell him?" Jesse asks, his frown deepening in his confusion.

"What did you want me to do," Daphne asks, giving him a genuine grin, "go knocking on bedroom doors and wake everyone up just to tell them I'm leaving? It is very early, Jesse, even if you keep psychotic child hours."

"No, definitely don't want you...knocking on doors..." Jesse murmurs, studying her for a moment as he processes the subtle information about closed doors and sleeping arrangements in the Palace last night. Then he works hard to fight a pleased smirk and turns his face away, lifting his chin towards the cab and starting over towards it. Daphne follows, suppressing her own grin.

As Daphne pulls the back door open and settles her breakfast inside a small pocket in her bag, Jesse knocks on the cabby's window and has a quick exchange with the driver. Then he comes around, still holding Seraphina up against his chest, and leans down to give Daphne a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Safe journey, Daphne," Jesse murmurs, standing straight and giving her a sad little smile, like he really does wish she could stay.

"Happy Midwinter, Jess," she replies, beaming up at him.

"Byebye," Seraphina whispers, giving a little wave, and Daphne laughs, leaning forward to give the little girl a kiss on the cheek before she hops into the cab and Jesse closes the door shut after her. Daphne looks backwards as the cab pulls away, a little too pleased to see that Jesse and the little girl still stand in the driveway, watching her go.

Then her eyes glaze over and Daphne loses herself in thought for the next twenty minutes. Deep thoughts - about...possibilities, and her life, and her future. And what it is that she really, really wants. When the taxi comes to a stop and the cabby clears his throat, Daphne blinks back to herself and is shocked to realize that they're already at the station.

"Oh," Daphne says, straightening up, embarrassed. "Sorry, sir. How much do I owe you?" She reaches for her bag, knowing her wallet is inside. "Nothing, miss," the cabby says, his voice very, very happy. "The young Duke paid for your journey - tipped me so heartily that I don't even have to work the rest of the day, or tomorrow. Can just...spend the holiday with my kids."

Daphne's mouth hangs open for a second as she stares at the cabby, shocked, but he just grins at her and she presses her jaw shut, blushing again. "Well, then I hope you enjoy it!" Daphne says, truly meaning it as she reaches for the door handle and starts to press it open and step outside. "You too, miss! A happy holiday to you as well!"

Daphne shakes her head a little as the cab pulls away, pulling her bag up onto her shoulder and sighing, thinking of the mystery of a too-generous, too-caring boy who wants everyone to believe the opposite of him.

And with that thought heavy on her mind, Daphne turns towards the train station and starts on her journey home.

Mom bans all war talk for thirty-six hours.

"In honor of the gods!" she says at breakfast, staring around at us all like we're blasphemous heathens. But every single one of us - Jackson alone perhaps excepted - just smirks at her, because we know her real reasons. Mom loves the holidays and won't let anything spoil her good time. Not even the impending threat of war and destruction.

The morning passes cheerfully, as midwinter eve always does - with a big breakfast, and then decorating the living room with fresh pine boughs brought in from the forest, and stacking the wood high in the hearth. We can't have our own traditional bonfire, after all - not inside, at least - but fire is a very traditional part of the holiday, and I intend to keep it burning for all twenty-four hours of midwinter. It's tradition, and it's been my job since I was a little kid.

Still, as the hours slip past and the sun starts to sink towards the horizon, I bite my lip, glancing surreptitiously at the clock.

"Just go," Jackson says, kneeling next to me at the fireplace, handing me little sprays of pine that I'm tucking between the logs so that the fire will smell all balsamy and fresh.

"What?" I ask, spinning to stare at him with wide eyes.

"You think I use this Alpha hearing for nothing?" Jackson says, smirking at me and gesturing towards his ear. "I know Luca asked you to take a few hours with him this afternoon. It's fine, Ariel, no one will care - just...go get ready and take the time you need."

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy

I gasp a little, pretending to be more scandalized than I am at his eavesdropping. But then my shoulders slump and I glance over to where my parents are sitting, mom finishing up wrapping some of the presents that we'll open tomorrow.

"Luca kind of got in trouble with my dad yesterday," I whisper, anxious.

"So, what, you don't think your dad's going to let you go?" Jackson asks, likewise looking over at my parents, frowning like he kind of doubts it.

"No," I say with a sigh, slumping back on my butt and resting my weight back on my hands. "I just...wish we had peace."

"It'll work out," Jackson murmurs, reaching out to tuck a sprig of pine behind my ear. But I don't miss that his wrist, just too casually, brushes against my neck as he drops his hand.

gasp, smacking at his arm. "Jackson!" I growl. "Did you just scent mark me!? Again!?"

"Whatttt?" he asks, playing dumb. "No!"

"You liar," I hiss, but I can't help laughing as I lean forward towards him.

Jackson growls too and grabs me, pulling me into his lap. I laugh, curling up with him there and smiling up at him. "You don't mind if I go? Leave you here all alone with my family, on a holiday of all things?"

"Nah, I'll be fine," he says, glancing around the room at where my family happily prepares for the party tonight. "I'll...find Juniper. She'll protect me." I grin, loving the idea. "I'll be home in time for dinner," I say, sitting up straighter and pressing a kiss to his jaw.

"If you're not, I'm eating your food," Jackson murmurs, helping me stand up from his lap by pressing me upwards with a hand placed a little too conveniently right on my ass.

"Don't," I snap, glaring at him and pointing a finger down at him even as I back away towards the hallway to my room. "Because none of the cooks will be here tomorrow, and we'll just be on leftovers and whatever the hell mom can whip up, which is usually just cheese and crackers. And chocolate."

"Hey!" mom calls from across the room, frowning over at me, insulted. "I can also boil pasta and put butter on it!"

But I just grin at my mom, mischievous, and dart down the hall towards my room. Because I have a date with my mate, who has been very absent, and with whom I need to have a very serious chat.

When I come out of my room a short bit later, wrapped up for the winter weather with a scarf wound around my neck and a pair of fluffy earmuffs perched on top of that, I'm surprised to see Rafe waiting outside my room, leaning against my wall with his arms crossed.

"You look cozy," he says, giving me a grin as he takes in my winter wear, which is already making me a little over-warm. Mom keeps our private apartments pretty hot in the winter, always citing her years of freezing in an orphanage as an excuse.

"What?" I ask instantly, my voice filled with dread as I look up and down the hall. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong!" he says too innocently, uncrossing his arms and spreading his hands out, giving me a false smile.

"Rafe Meatball Sinclair," I growl, stepping close and glaring up at him. "You'd better tell me."

His smile falls instantly. "That's not my middle name -"

"Tell me!" I snap, giving him a smack on the arm.

"Fine," he huffs, looking over towards the living room. "Luca's here but...dad won't let him in. It's super awkward. He made him...wait in the hall." "What!?" I gasp, horrified and mortified at once. "Why not!?"

"Says Luca owes him something," Rafe murmurs, shrugging. "And he can't come in until he gets it."

"Oh my god," I groan, running both hands down my face, worrying about my mate standing alone and embarrassed in the hall.

"I just thought you'd want to know," Rafe says with a sigh, looking at me like he's worried for me.

"Thanks, Meatball," I murmur, reaching out and giving his forearm a brief squeeze. "You're the best."

Rafe rolls his eyes at me but follows as I dash down the hall and into the living room, where everyone - except my dad - waits awkwardly for the scene to unfold.

I scowl around at my gossipy family, whose ears are all perked up to hear every word of what happens next.

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy

Dad, of course, just sits with his arms crossed, waiting for me. Everyone continues to sit quietly, idly working on making decorations or wrapping gifts, pretending they're not listening as intently as they are.

I scowl at all of them - even Jackson, who is pretending to be very interested in the perfectly-stacked logs for the fire. Gossip vultures, each and every one. But they all pretend not to notice.

"Ariel," Dad says, drawing my attention to him. He nods towards the door to the apartment. "Your young man is waiting for you."

"Dad," I sigh, my shoulders slumping. "Can you just...be cool?"

"I am always very cool, Ariel," dad murmurs, smirking and raising an eyebrow at me. "Right, Ella?"

"Not involved, Dominic!" mom calls, her voice light and sing-song.

Dad's smirk deepens and returns his eyes to me. "He'll be welcome in this home again when he fulfills his end of the bargain."

"What bargain!?" I burst out - hating the fact that my dad has some kind of bargain with my mate that I don't know about.

"Ask him," dad says, giving a lazy shrug as I narrow my eyes at him, thinking that he's enjoying this a little too much.

"I love you, but you're the worst," I sigh, storming for the door. I take a moment on my way to pass close to Jackson, to let my hand brush through his hair, to send a long pulse of joy and happiness and assurance down our bond. He sends it right back, which settles me a great deal.

"Home for dinner!" dad calls after me, laughing a little.

"Yeah, yeah!" I call back, pulling open the door and stepping through it in a huff.

My eyes instantly land on Luca, standing against the wall across the hall from me, leaning against it with his head down.

"I'm so sorry," I murmur, pushing the door shut behind me and rushing over to him, placing both of my hands on his hips and peering up into his face. Luca lifts his head and gives me a sad smile. "Nothing less than I deserve," he says, shrugging and raising a hand to my face. He takes a moment to look at me seriously, his eyes so sad that my little wolf sits down hard on her haunches and lifts her nose in a mournful, sharp howl. "I am so sorry for how I behaved yesterday, Ariel."

"Luca, it's -"

"No, please, don't forgive me so easily," he replies, shaking his head. "Storming around the palace like that, shouting for you, trapping you into deals by threatening to leave you - it was...fucking horrible, Ariel. I regret it, every instant of it."

I forgive him, instantly - just like that. The sadness and regret in his face is enough to convince me that he really does understand the full picture what was wrong, and why I'm upset, and why I need him to never act like that ever again. But, well. We still need to talk it through, don't we?

"Come on," I say, tugging on his hip and turning towards the steps that will lead us down to the front of the palace. "Let's get out of here - go somewhere cozy, where we can chat."

Luca surprises me by turning the other way, though. "No, this way," he murmurs, gesturing down the hall. "To the...elevator down to the garages? Which is...very cool, by the way."

I grin at him, nodding and turning towards it. "Why?" I ask, curious. "You could have just...pulled up out front."

"Wanted to avoid the paparazzi," he says with a sigh, looking down evenly into my eyes with his pretty brown ones, even as he slips an arm around my shoulder and pulls me close as we walk. "I learned my lesson on that point too. Today is...just for me and you, yeah? Not the press."

My smile deepens as I nod, loving that idea.

Down in the garage, Luca surprises me by leading me to a very simple brown car. When I raise my eyebrow at it - because I know from the tabloids that Luca actually is the owner of at least one very fancy, very flashy sportscar - he sighs and says he borrowed it from his cousin.

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy

"More inconspicuous," he murmurs, opening the door for me. When I slip inside and buckle my belt, he goes around to the driver's seat and climbs in, starting the car.

"Such a new leaf, Luca," I say quietly, turning in my seat to smile at him. "No press at all?"

"No press," he says, giving me a sad, ashamed little smile as he starts to pull out of the garages. As we go, I note that another car follows us - black, but likewise inconspicuous. Almost assuredly filled with bodyguards that my dad sent after me. If Luca notices, though, he doesn't say anything. And neither do I.

"Where are we going?" I ask, looking out fondly at our beautiful city as it passes by. Night is already encroaching on this, the second-darkest day of the year. Everyone complains about it - wanting summer sun at all hours - but honestly, I kind of like it. Something about the brief days and the long, quiet nights...I don't know. It's peaceful, and mellow, and full of secrets.

"Not far," Luca says, smirking a little as he drives, being a bit cagey on purpose. He glances at me and I just smile at him, happy to let him have his secrets. He's not wrong, though - we drive about fifteen minutes towards his neighborhood and then stop, to my surprise, on what feels like a random street by a public park.

When I see the groups of people - families mostly, little kids eagerly clutching their parents' hands - I gasp, delighted.

"We're going to a bonfire!?" I gasp, sitting up in my seat.

"Is that all right?" Luca asks, grinning at me and producing two knit caps from the back seat.

"Yes!" I say, almost bouncing in my eagerness. "Yes, yes!"

Luca laughs and pulls the black knitted cap down over my conspicuous hair. I take his meaning immediately, tucking the ends of my hair into the hood of my coat and pulling my scarf up so that it covers half my face. When I look over and see him doing the same, I grin, because he really does look disguised. I mean, there aren't that many well-muscled Alphas around that are his height - but at the casual glance, there's no real sign that it's Luca Grant under there.

"Very mysterious," I say, laughing, loving it.

"Just for a few minutes," he says, nodding to me and taking tucking a spare bit of my hair up beneath my cap. "We'll get some cider, and then find a spot, and then the darkness will do the work for us."

I nod eagerly, agreeing to the plan, trusting him. And so we get out of the car, and Luca grabs a blanket out of the back seat and comes around to my side. I slip my mittened hand into his gloved one as we start forward, eager and excited. Because bonfires - they're traditional midwinter activities and almost every neighborhood has their own. But I've never been able to go to one - my family, we're just too obvious when we go out into big crowds like this.

But as Luca and I slip through the gathered people, I realize that when I'm just with him, all wrapped up like this? It's enough - we're just...two normal people here for the celebration. Not Princess Ariel, just some girl here with her boyfriend.

And I absolutely love it.

Luca leads me to a little stand where a woman is selling hot mulled cider for charity at what seems like a ridiculously cheap price. Luca buys two and when the woman leans forward, asking if we'd like to spice that up a bit, he laughs and nods. She grins at him and pours a generous portion of whiskey into each cup. Luca tips generously and I smile at the woman - who of course can only see my eyes - before taking my cup and walking close at Luca's side over to where the bonfire is just being lit.

Unlike most of the crowd, though - which gathers eagerly around to watch the flames start to lick up the wood - Luca and I head to a slight hill behind the bonfire, shrouded with trees and darkness. There, Luca hands his drink to me to hold for a moment and then spreads out the blanket.

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy

As we sit, I notice with a little smile the two dark figures who come to stand behind us - even more inconspicuous than we are. And I'm grateful for them - grateful for my dad for always wanting to keep me safe - even as I know that nothing's going to happen. That even if anyone did want to hurt us, Luca - my mate - would protect me.

But, well. Dad's will be dads.

"What do you think?" Luca asks, his voice more cheerful than it's been all night as he sits down next to me and I hand his drink back to him.

"I love it," I say, grinning at the orange light of the fire that's slowly starting to spread out. The heat, too, that I can start to feel on my face. I tug my scarf down and take a sip of my whiskeyed cider, knowing no one will notice. "How big will the fire get?"

"Pretty big," Luca murmurs, slipping an arm around me and taking a sip of his own drink. "Especially as the night passes, and people get...a little liquored up. And start burning all the old chairs they don't want anymore."

I burst out laughing, looking over and up at him. "Does that really happen?"

"Stick around, Princess," he murmurs, smirking and still staring into the flames, taking another sip of his drink. "You're in for one hell of a sight."

I laugh, and snuggle closer to him, and enjoy the warmth of his body alongside the fire. We're quiet for a long, long time as the fire builds and someone brings out some speakers, beginning to play old traditional songs that everyone knows and can sing along with.

"Why did you bring me here, Luca?" I ask quietly. And I know, through the bond, that he knows that I'm aware that this isn't just any date - that he picked this location, and this level of secrecy, for a reason.

He takes a deep breath, I think wondering where to begin. "I thought I'd handle it differently, Ariel," he murmurs, contemplative. "I thought that...all I'd have to do to win you over would be to show you how boring Jackson is, and how fun and exciting I am."

I burst out laughing here, giving Luca a little smack on the chest. "Jackson is not boring," I protest.

"Yes he is," Luca murmurs, his eyes falling a little to the spot on my neck where Jackson scent marked me not long ago - his own little petty shot at Luca, which I now see has found its mark. "Jackson is dull as rocks, Ariel, if you're an idiot like me and think that the only way to be interesting is to be flashy, and loud, and to have VIP status at all the hottest clubs."

My heart sinks a little as I start to realize where Luca is going with this.

"But," Luca continues, "when I started to realize that Jackson doesn't have any of that - and that you sometimes like him better anyway -"

I open my mouth, desperate to protest, but Luca gives me a pleading look. I hesitate but close my lips.

"It made me realize," Luca continues, "that, of course, you're not actually a girl who cares about any of that bullshit. And it made me freak out because...I also realized that the only thing I've got is that bullshit."

My heart sinks because, I mean, is that how Luca really sees himself?

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy

Luca looks off into the fire now, his arm heavy around my shoulders, as he confesses what might be his deepest truth. "I'm very afraid, Ariel, that I don't have any substance at all. That I'm just flash, and that the moment I run out of interesting twists and turns that...everyone will see that I'm just a fraud. And that I'm boring, and never will do anything interesting or important. And that...you'll see that too."

My heart sinks to hear Luca say this because I couldn't believe anything less to be true of my sweet, brash mate. I scootch closer, not protesting because...well, he told me a secret, didn't he? And I don't want to immediately throw that in his face by telling him that it's not true.

But I know he can feel it, down our bond, in every pulse of my heart. That that's not at all how I see him.

And he groans a little, and grits his teeth, and lowers his forehead to press against mine. "You're too good for me in every single way, Ariel Sinclair," he murmurs, shaking his head slightly. "It took me way...way too long to realize that. But your dad...really helped me see it. And I'm going to spend the rest of my life endeavoring to deserve you. Whatever it takes."

"Luca," I say, mournful now, because - I mean, whatever my dad said to him, it was clearly too much. Luca was beat up by it and has lowered himself too far.

"Ariel, please -"

"No," I say, definitive, pulling my face away from his and looking clearly into his eyes. "You said your part, now I get to say mine."

Luca sighs but nods, recognizing the fairness in that.

"I know you're not going to believe me if I say that none of that is true," I whisper, looking up into his brown eyes. "Because I am...biased." He smirks a little, because that would indeed have been his argument.

I smile in turn, unable to help it. "But listen to me, Grant," I say, a little growl in my voice as I lean forward and wrap my hand around his scarf, pulling his face a little closer to mine. He grins at me, I think entertained at my minute ferocity. "You may doubt my opinion on the matter, but the goddess?" | shake my head. "She doesn't make mistakes. And she doesn't give mating bonds between mismatches."

Luca's smile grows, but he doesn't say anything, not wanting to fight me on it.

"You do deserve me," I whisper, nodding to him. "You don't need to endeavor to do it. Even if...well, even if you do need to behave better in the future."

I loosen my grip on his scarf, but he just smiles at me and lifts his hand to stroke over my cap and then down my back. "To treat you like the very literal goddess you are," he murmurs.

I laugh a little, wondering where he got that idea. "Well, I mean," I say, shrugging, a little uncomfortable with the idea. "Demigoddess, at best." Luca laughs, and leans forward to kiss me, and I wrap my arms eagerly around his neck, glad to have him close again - glad to have my mate back, for everything to be okay between us.

We kiss for what feels like a moment, but what must actually be a rather long time, because when Luca pulls away and I open my eyes I realize that it's quite a bit darker than it was when I closed them.

"I really am going to try, Ariel," he whispers, leaning close to give me a little peck. "I promise."

"Okay," I whisper, nodding to him even as I turn my eyes towards the fire, resting my head on his shoulder. The bonfire is raging now, leaping up towards the sky, and my skin shivers with delight as I hear the flames crackle. I smile as my eyes take in the ragged red edges against the black starry sky, the bright yellows and whites down by the logs at the center.

"Do you like it?" he asks, lifting his chin towards the bonfire.

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy

"I love it," I reply, breathy. But then I frown, looking up at him. "You never answered my question, though. Why did you bring me to this?" He smiles down. "Because I intuited you'd love it, little pyromaniac princess."

I burst into laughter, sitting up straight.

"What," he says, grinning at me, "you always tend the fires at school, and insist on building one, even when it's stifling hot in that room –" "I so do not!"

"You do," he insists, raising a critical eyebrow at me, and I scowl before leaning back against him and tacitly admitting it. But...well, a fire is nice! And I like it when the bricks on the fireplace stay hot all night and warm my little nook.

"But beyond feeding your rather worrying preoccupation with flame," Luca says, a little dry, making me laugh, "I brought you here because...I've been trying, for twenty-four hours, at least, to...go back to my roots. To remember things that make me feel...real. And not like a fraud."

I ignore the parts about him being a fraud because I know he doesn't want to have that fight right now - me insisting that he's not, and him having to dig further into his current state of self-loathing to insist that he is. So, I focus on the other thing that he said.

"So, this," I say, raising my chin at the bonfire, at the small community gathered around it - simply enjoying being together, and having a few drinks, and laughing and singing in the firelight. "This makes you feel real?"

"It does," he says on a tiny sigh. "We used to come here every year to this fire. Mom...we lived alone, in a little apartment, before we went to live with Gran. After...after dad left. And we didn't have a lot - mom says we survived on crumbs and pride, and we laugh about it now but...the reality wasn't too funny."

My heart swells with pain, and I try to keep it from the bond because I want Luca to tell me these things, even if I know that his core instinct is to just tuck this part of himself away, his dark memories, his sadness. But I pull my mitten off, and wrap my hand around the back of his neck beneath his scarf, wanting to feel my skin on his.

Just for a moment. Just so he knows I'm real, and I'm here. And I'm not going anywhere.

Luca smiles at me. "Yeah," he says, laughing a little, his brashness coming back as he pretends that the memory doesn't hurt him as much as it does. "Dark days, then. But we'd always come here at Christmas, and...you know, there was always something to eat. And mom would have some drinks, and I'd run around with the other neighborhood kids, and it was always..."

He gets a little choked up, and I press myself close to his side when I see silver line his eyes.

"It was always a good night," he murmurs, looking out towards the fire, pretending not to notice the little tear that drifts down his cheek.

I do my very, very best not to cry. And I only fail a little bit, but Luca just laughs and wipes my tears away with his thumb. "I'm very grateful to you, Ariel," he murmurs gently as he does. "For...helping me figure out who I really am. Even if I'm not there yet."

"You're magnificent, Luc," I murmur, taking his cheeks between my hands and pressing a serious kiss to his mouth. "Thank you for letting me in." He gives me a wink, some of his cheeky confidence coming back. "Anytime."

Someone clears their throat behind me, and we both look back to see one of my bodyguards stepping close. He looks significantly at his watch, letting me know that time has run short. Has probably run fully away with me, if I'm being realistic.

I sigh as I look back at Luca.

"Let's get you home, Gorgeous," he says, giving me a sly grin and a final kiss before he stands and helps me up.

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy

I grimace as I slip through the dining room door to dinner, because I am well aware that I am both late and underdressed.

But I laugh as I try to quietly press the door shut behind me, because a huge cheer goes up from my gathered family at my arrival, letting me know that I was a complete fool for thinking that I could just...quietly sneak into the room and pretend that I was here the whole time.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" I protest, putting my hands up, a little envelope held tight in one of them. "I'm very rude and the worst child of the year." "Oh, you're forgiven, baby," mom says, holding her arms out to me as the rest of my extended family - including Jackson and Jesse's whole pack - turn back to their conversations and their food. Grinning, I move swiftly to my mom's side and let her wrap me in a big hug. "All okay?" she asks.

"Yeah," I say, grinning down at her and her gorgeous silver gown. "Nice dress, mom! You look great!"

"Nice sweater and muddy jeans!" she returns, grinning at me, impish.

I laugh, blushing and look down at my simple clothes - because of course, the rest of my family dressed for a formal dinner, and here I am in jeans smelling of bonfire. "Should I go get changed? I didn't want to be even later -"

"No, baby," dad says, his voice rumbling, drawing my eyes to him and his broad smile. "Just relax, enjoy the night – no one cares what you're wearing." He eyes the envelope in my hands. "Is that for me?"

I narrow my eyes a bit, even as I smile and hold it out to him. "How did you know? What's in it? Why won't anyone tell me?"

"In due time," dad murmurs, taking the envelope from me and tucking it into the inner pocket of his suit coat. Then he cheerfully turns back to his conversation with my grandpa, waving me off towards the empty seat I see at Jackson's side. I beam at my dad, dropping a kiss on his cheek as I scurry off towards my mate, who I'm desperately pleased to see sitting quietly next to Juniper at the end of the table.

"Let me see!" I hear mom say behind me, and I glance over my shoulder to see her fishing into dad's coat, trying to get the mysterious envelope out. "Ella!" dad sighs, half exasperated, half loving it as he swats her hand away.

But I grin and turn my eyes back to Jackson as I draw close to my empty seat, beaming as I take in his beautiful blue suit. It was the perfect selection for him – setting off his tanned skin, his dark hair and – of course – his stunning eyes. "Hi," I say, sinking into my chair, beaming at him. Jackson immediately wraps an arm around my waist, pulling me closer and pressing a kiss to my cheek, wanting me near.

"Took you long enough," Juniper murmurs, dry, looking at me with a lazily raised eyebrow as she pushes her dinner around on her plate. "Jackson and I had to endure all of this without you – and you know we like to use you as a shield."

"A shield?" I ask, surprised, laughing already.

"Yes," she says on a sigh. "A tiny, perky blonde shield, drawing all the attention away from normal people like us. You have no idea what we've had to put up with without you."

Jackson nods at me sagely like this is all very true. "People asking about our day. Our opinions on things. It's...terrible."

"Oh god," I say, laughing and rolling my eyes at both of them as one of the chefs brings me a plate. I thank him and then turn my eyes back to Team Taciturn. "You two," I say, picking up my fork and waving it between them, "are the true match of the evening. Doom and Gloom, ladies and gentlemen – finding a way to turn familial love and interest into the greatest burden anyone can bear."

"It is," Junie groans, even as she grins and turns back to her plate.

Jackson just leans close, taking a deep sniff of my hair. "Missed you. Glad you're back."

I smile and press myself warm to his side as I start to eat, losing myself to the evening of family warmth and joy.

Midwinter eve, as is traditional, goes very late, all of us staying up to greet the holiday at midnight and to light the ceremonial fire that will burn for twenty-four hours to keep the darkness at bay. In the meantime, though - while we wait for the proper time - there is a great deal of drinking, and laughter, and games to be had.

The kids, I know, have the most fun, all of Jesse's siblings running screeching around the room chasing each other, playing, laughing. Jesse's behind it all, I know, whispering secret missions in his siblings' ears - telling Chase to try to slip salt into Rafe's whiskey, promising him a present if he can do it without getting caught. Urging Rosie to see how many times she can call Mark "Mork" before he completely flips out.