

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy

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Only twelve times, apparently, much to Rosie and Jesse's glee.

Mom, Dad, Cora and Roger stay in their own tight knit little group tonight, I think reminiscing about old times - one of their favorite hobbies - while grandpa Henry and the rest of the boys sit around the couch, joking and laughing about the usual boy stuff - sports, and fighting, and daring trials of masculinity or whatever. Jesse breaks away every few minutes to send the kids on another mission, or to tackle them, or to lift one up on his shoulders and spin them around.

I grin, watching him, loving how good of a brother he is.

Seraphina, to my delight, chooses to sit on my lap, over in the quiet corner where I'm sitting with Jackson and Juniper. Junie's reading a book - a nice, thick fantasy romance, I see, her favorite - but Jackson and I are just sitting quietly.

We were chatting quietly until Seraphina came over. But the minute she sank down in my lap Jackson fell a bit quiet, looking at my tiny cousin askance like he's a deer that's ready to run from the greatest predator of all time.

When I notice the tension in Jackson's body, I burst out laughing.

"What?" Sera asks, looking up at me with that mixture of joy, curiosity, and anger that only a four-year-old can manage. "What's so funny?"

"I don't know, Fifs!" I say, pointing at Jackson with my thumb. "You'll have to ask Jacks."

"Oh god," he groans, covering his face with his hand. "Please - don't draw its attention to me -"

"It!?" I gasp, cackling with laughter. Even Juniper looks up from her book, smirking.

"You tell me what's so funny, big boy!" Seraphina demands, turning in my lap to face Jackson and giving him a big shove on his shoulder. Juniper starts laughing too as my laughter deepens.

"Nothing's funny... Ser..fif...god, what's her name again?" Jackson looks desperately between Juniper and me. "Your family has so many nicknames for everyone I can't keep anything straight."

"SeraPHINA Liliana Sinclair!" my tiny cousin insists, glaring at my mate. "What is so funny!?"

"Nothing, I promise! Nothing's funny!" Jackson insists, leaning away from her tiny rage with his hands up. "Nothing's ever been funny, I'm sorry!" I cuddle Sera close to me, laughing and smiling down at her. "Go easy on him, Fifs, he's scared of little girls. He's never met one!" She looks up at me, shocked, and then over at Jackson like she can't believe it at all. "He's never met a little girl? Why?"

"Because," I sigh, shaking my head as I look pityingly at Jacks. "He's just been very, very unlucky not to have crossed paths with one before." Seraphina studies me and then Jackson for a long moment before she kneels on my lap and reaches out her hand, patting Jackson gently on the shoulder and giving him her best wide grin - which, I have to admit, is a little terrifying. "Don't be scared, big boy," Seraphina says, working hard to be gentle. "I will be nice to you."

Jackson thanks her very politely and she nods, climbing off of my lap and scurrying away.

"What is with you, Jacks?" Juniper asks, and we both turn to see her smirking at Jackson, a little delighted. "You're so weird."

"She's just so little," Jackson says, laughing at himself, spreading his hands out before him like it's obvious. "I have...no idea what she's thinking, or what she wants. And I feel like I'm always at risk of accidentally crushing her or something, which would make everyone here really mad -"

I burst out laughing at this, nodding at the understatement of the year, as Junie gives him a big grin before seeming to turn back to her book.

"Who knew," Juniper sighs. "That the one thing that strikes true fear into one of the world's strongest Alphas..."

"Was just a little girl," I finish, sighing too and shifting so I can climb comfortably into Jackson's lap, my favorite spot. He immediately closes his arms in a circle around me, holding me close. "Perhaps this is the military secret that Moon Valley needs to capitalize

on to defeat the Atalaxians. How can we incorporate Seraphina's terrifying girl energy into our military strategy?"

"I think we already have," Jackson murmurs, sighing and giving me a kiss on the cheek as he tightens his arms around me, drawing me even closer.

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At midnight, we all stand around while I light the fire with great ceremony, and there are a good number of Ooohs and Ahhhs that go around the room - mostly from the kids, but also Jesse - even though it is a small, unremarkable fire - especially after the bonfire I saw this evening.

As soon as it's lit, though, people begin to turn in - hugging and kissing their loved ones before heading off to their respective rooms. Even Jesse's family will stay here tonight - there's no point in going home when we'll all be together again for breakfast.

Jackson frowns at me a little, though, when I stay in place.

"What," he asks, giving me a nudge with his elbow. "No bed for you?"

"Nah," I say, smiling at him and tilting my head towards the fire. "Ceremonial duties, after all. Has to keep burning. I'll sleep here," I say, lifting my chin towards the hearth. "I do it every year. Quite cozy and warm."

"None of us make her do this," my mom says, coming over and giving me a kiss on the cheek as she presses some pillows and blankets into my arms. "Her own insanity and superstition is all that keeps it going."

Jackson laughs but just nods, buying into it, letting me have my little tradition. But when the final door shuts, my last family member disappearing behind it, he's still here.

"What," I say, spreading my blankets out in front of the fire. "Your beds not calling you tonight?"

And I have to admit, I'm not really surprised when he grabs another pillow off the couch and comes to sit with me on the hard stone of the hearth. "Like I said, trouble," he murmurs, smirking at me in the firelight. "Where you sleep, I sleep. So if you're in front of the fire? So am I."

I grin and lean forward to kiss my mate, tugging off his suit jacket and letting him lay me out in front of the flames.

I wake up a few hours later in the very early light of dawn, blinking and sniffing. Groggy, I turn my head towards the fire and scowl when I see that it's smoldering low- that it hasn't quite gone out, but it's well on its way to doing that.

Sighing, I start to press myself up from my very cozy spot sprawled out over Jackson's chest, frowning with dismay when I realize that I drooled a bit on the black t-shirt he changed into to sleep in, but I go very, very still when I notice something...quite strange.

Jackson is sleeping flat on his back, as he always does, with one arm curved up over me. But his other arm, to my shock, is not flung out to the side as usual -

It is, instead, curled around a little tiny girl. I burst into a surprised and delighted grin when I realize that it's Seraphina - that she snuck in here and is now dead asleep, snuggled up to Jackson's side.

I mean, as one of the eldest cousins in a batch of ten kids, I'm no stranger to the kinds of sneaking from room to room that kids do at sleepover events. But this!? It's one for the books.

I go absolutely still as I look between the two of them, not wanting to wake either of them, because it's so cute -- the gigantic terrifying Alpha next to the tiny little baby girl.

But Jackson, as he always does, senses somehow that I'm awake. His eyes flutter open.

"Jackson," I whisper, my voice almost shaking with glee, "did you know about this?"

"Hmm?" he says, frowning at me, and then he looks down to where his arm is curled protectively around Sera. "Oh, yeah," he says, laughing a little. "You mean our midnight wraith? She who creeps in and stares at me until I wake up, scaring the crap out of me in the middle of the night? Honestly, I don't know how you slept through it, Ari."

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I laugh lightly at his description, and he grins, beginning to slowly stroke my back.

"Yeah, she came in about three hours ago," he says with a sigh, glancing down at her. "She shushed me, and told me not to wake you, and then just...laid down and went to

sleep. I...didn't want her to roll over and get burned or anything, so..." he shrugs and nods down at his arm, still protecting the little girl.

"You are so cute," I whisper, my eyes shining.

He frowns. "Why is that cute? It's...practical."

But I just laugh, and tuck my head down against his chest, and press a kiss there.

Seraphina gives a little mew and a yawn, stretching out and then lifting her head to frown at us. "Is it breakfast?" she asks, rubbing at her eye and speaking in a whisper like we are.

"No, Fifi, it's very early," I whisper, reaching out to drift a hand over her soft honey-brown hair. "Why are you here?"

"Because," she murmurs, blinking the sleep away and pointing at Jacks. "I said I'd be nice to him. He is my big puppy dog and I have to take care of him."

I laugh, delighted, and snuggle closer to Jacks. He growls vaguely, clearly not as charmed by this description as I am.

"Why are we up?" Sera asks, yawning. "If it's not breakfast time?"

"I just woke up because the fire is going out," I reply, nodding towards it. "I have to get it going again."

Sera nods at me very seriously like she hears this sort of thing all the time. But then she turns her head to the side. "Well, maybe we can have a treat," she whispers, nodding wisely. "Before breakfast."

I laugh at her and nod, leaning close and whispering like it's a great secret. "Why don't you show Jackson where Aunt Ella keeps the snacks? He's tall enough to reach."

"Wait, why am I involved in this -" Jackson murmurs, going stiff with anxiety. But Seraphina and I ignore his protest and she grins at me, grabbing Jackson's hand as I slide off of him and tugging him hard towards the cab above the bar, where mom keeps all the best treats.

Jackson groans, sending me a terrified look over his shoulder, but he bends down so as not to take his hand from Sera's and follows the tiny duchess, ready to do her bidding.

I grin, shaking my head at my mate as I start to restack logs in the fire, yawning as I set them up on top of each other in the smoking embers, making a vague pyramid shape. Jacks and Seraphina come back over a few minutes later, their arms filled with treats, and they settle down next to me, Seraphina bosses Jacks, telling him which snack packages to open and how to lay them out on the blanket. Jackson does everything she says without

complaint, opening way too much food. But I just smile and don't stop them, letting them have their fun. It's Midwinter, after all.

When I reach for the matches, though, Jackson reaches out a hand to stop me.

"What are you doing?" he asks, frowning. Sera, leaning against Jackson and stuffing gummy candies in her mouth, frowns too, instantly taking his side.

I narrow my eyes at my mate. "Jackson," I murmur, "Of all the things that I thought would need explanation today...the connection between matches and a live flame is not something I thought would crop up."

He smirks at me, and Sera looks up at him and then mimics his expression, smirking too. "Ariel, you're a goddess-blessed sorceress who can melt glass just by staring at it. And you don't think you can start a fire without matches?"

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My jaw drops open and I huff a disbelieving little laugh. "Jackson, I can't make flames."

"The flashpoint of wood is far lower than the temperature at which glass melts, Clark," Jackson replies, raising an eyebrow at me.

I narrow my eyes at my mate, not liking this smug new attitude. Or that he's right.

"What...what's happening?" Seraphina whispers, looking at me and then up at Jacks.

"Ariel is going to do magic," Jackson whispers back, ducking his head low in pretend secrecy. "Want to see?"

"Yah!" Sera exclaims, still in a whisper, looking at me eagerly.

I just sigh, and roll my eyes, and flop my hand out towards my mate, wanting to hold his. But all my bravado just covers up my anxiety. I mean...can I really do that? Jackson, all confidence, slides his hand into mine. And then I concentrate, breathing out slowly, working to fall into a meditative state like mom does when she accesses her gift.

And I think I hit it - though I don't know how I know - my eyes going half distant and half focused as I stare at the wood. I concentrate on it, breathing in the smoky, crisp, deliciously charred smell of the fire. And then I pull on something deep inside myself,

exhaling long and slow. I'm concentrating so hard that I barely notice as a long stream of smoke begins to drift upwards from the log on which I'm concentrating.

Jackson's hand tightens on mine, excited -

And then all of a sudden - flame.

I gasp as the little red blaze sparks to life, and then I laugh, turning to Jackson, delighted. He laughs too, staring at me in awe, thrilled, as Seraphina throws her arms up with a big whoop. I shriek and throw myself into Jackson's arms, grabbing Sera into my own, gibbering nonsense in my excitement about how cool that was and how amazed I am and how now I'm going to set everything on fire all the time -

Jackson laughs with me and I can feel down the bond that he's as excited, thrilled, and fascinated as I am. "Little fire goddess," he murmurs, raising a hand to cup my cheek. And then he shakes his head like he can't believe I'm real and leans in for a kiss. I laugh, even as I kiss him back - probably a little too passionately, forgetting completely that my little cousin is there.

But she reminds us, of course.

"Ariiii," she whines, smacking me hard on the arm with her little palms. "Let me go, let's do it again! What else can you melt!?"

I break away from Jackson, beaming at him before turning back to the smallest Sinclair. "I don't know, baby," I say, giggling in my excitement. "Let's find out! Where's all that chocolate you brought over?"

"There's my baby!" Cora calls about an hour later, coming into the living room a little swifter than she normally would. Which is normal, I suppose, when your youngest child disappeared from your room and could be wandering anywhere in the palace.

"Mama!" Sera calls, dashing towards her mom, her hands and her pajamas covered in streaks of melted chocolate.

"Whoa, baby!" Roger calls, coming in after Cora but moving fast to step in front of his wife, crouching and holding out a hand towards his youngest child. "What did we say about touching adults when our hands are sticky and disgusting?"

"We said do it!" she shouts, laughing like a little demon and running right for him, her hands stretched out.

"Defiance!" Roger growls playfully, snatching his baby girl around the waist and flipping her upside down. Jackson flinches a little at how loud Seraphina shrieks, looking at me with a worried glance. But then he settles, accepting it as an apparently normal part of child rearing when he sees me simply laugh and lick some melted chocolate off my finger.

"Clean that thing up," Cora says to Roger, waving at her daughter as she continues on her path towards Jackson and me, her cream-colored nightgown and robe floating around her rather majestically. Roger gives Cora a salute, tossing Seraphina over his shoulder as he heads out of the room to take her to clean up and get changed.

"Did she come in here and bother you?" Cora asks, hands on her hips, peering down and our scattered morning snacks with curiosity.

"No bother," I say, grinning up at my aunt. "She's so cute. Plus, it's always fun to see Jackson terrified."

"I'm not terrified," he protests, appalled, but Cora laughs and just pats him on the head.

"Seraphina's little puppy," she coos.

"This puppy thing is not sticking," Jackson grumbles, brushing Cora's hand away and making her laugh harder.

"Is it time!?" Mom asks, peeking her head out from her bedroom suite. "Is it Midwinter!? Can I come out!?"

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"Yes, come out!" I call, the fire blazing cheerfully behind me.

Mom dashes into the room, coming over and giving us all Midwinter hugs and kisses as my dad, wearing pajamas for the one day a year when he actually lets anyone see him pajamas, comes out behind her. "I held her back as long as I could," he murmurs, sleepy. "You're worse than the kids, Ella."

"We just have lazy children and nieces and nephews," mom says. "But, I have a feeling that they'll start coming in now that they hear that we're up."

Mom's words are almost prophetic and the quickly room begins to fill both with people and noise. Everyone's in a good mood, of course, ready with kisses and hugs and Midwinter greetings. Mom bustles around, putting on soft holiday music, sending Rafe and Jesse down to the kitchens to collect the plates of prepared foods that the chefs have left for us, setting out stacks and stacks of presents.

Dad and Roger - when he comes back with a fresh and clean Seraphina - settle on the couch, glasses of whiskey already in their hands, shouting greetings to grandpa Henry

when he rolls in and settles close to his boys, a blanket spread warm and cozy over his knees.

I stay by Jacks, the only place I really want to be, curled up in our blankets by the fire. Jackson wraps an arm around me and sits quietly, observing it all with fascination as the holiday gets started in full swing. Everyone eats - toast and jam, pastries, donuts, coffee - while mom starts to pass out gifts, setting a slow, leisurely place.

I keep half an eye on Jacks as I start on my second donut, a cup of coffee carefully tucked into the blankets next to me. He watches curiously as the presents go around and I grin at the way his eyes go wider and wider when he sees the seemingly never-ending stack of gifts that mom produces from her room. But his mouth pops open with an audible click when she comes over to us with two in her hands - one for me and, to his shock, one for him.

"What?" he whispers, looking up at her, kind of appalled.

"Happy Midwinter, Jackson," mom says, quite softly, pressing the gift into his hand and then dipping down to kiss him on the forehead before walking gracefully away.

Jackson just stares down at the gift, awed. I have to bite my lip, a little undone by the shock and emotion on his face. He looks up at me, just blinking. "This is for me?" he whispers.

"Mmhmm," I reply, holding back all the things I want to say and just...letting him have this moment.

Jackson slowly turns back to the gift, holding it reverently in his hands.

I let him take his time with his and open my present, cooing with delight when I see the set of three little silver bracelets that my mom picked out for me - each engraved with the initials of one of my siblings. I love it, instantly, and call my joy and appreciation over to her. Mom just winks and blows me a kiss.

But I frown when I look over at Jackson and see that his present is still just sitting in his hands, fully intact.

"Unwrap it," I urge, nudging him with my elbow and smiling.

"I don't want to," he murmurs. "It's...so good, just like this."

"Well, it's one of like, forty Jacks," I say with a little laugh. "And she's going to get mad if you don't open any of them."

He whips his head towards me, his eyes wide again. "Forty!?"

"Forty-one," I say, closing one eye and holding up a finger. "If you count mine."

"Forty-two," Rafe says, coming over and tossing something into Jackson's lap that makes him jump. "Happy midwinter, puppy."

Jackson groans, even as he laughs, putting his head in his hands. "I didn't know about this!" he protests. "I didn't get anyone anything!"

I laugh, reaching out a hand to rub his back. "No one expected you to, Jackson! It's more fun this way. You're like...a little baby. First Midwinter. It's fun for us."

He raises his head, meeting my eyes with surprise, and then looks around the room where everyone is, indeed, watching him with a bit of glee. He groans again and buries his head again in his hands, I think completely overwhelmed.

I laugh and throw my arms around his shoulders, hugging him tight. "It's Midwinter, Jacks! It's family. We love you, let us show it."

But he just keeps his head tucked down for a second, his shoulders shaking a bit, and I let him have his time.

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When mom tries to come over with more presents, I give her a little frown and shake my head, mouthing "give us a minute." When she sees my reason why I think it takes mom every bit of strength she's got to not come rushing to Jackson's side and fuss over him.

But, knowing that would be too much, she moves away to fuss over someone else.

After about a minute, Jackson raises his head and nods solidly. "Okay," he says, his voice steely like a soldier about to go on a mission. "Where do I start?"

"Right there at the corner," I say, pointing to where the paper is loose. "Just...rip away, McClintock. Really show it what you're made of."

Jacks nods seriously and then does as I say, ripping into his gifts. After a joyful couple of hours of mom going around delivering more and more gifts to every single member of her family, and then Cora doing the same, and then Grandpa, Jackson and I sit cozy by the fire absolutely surrounded by our loot.

It's mostly clothes, of course - mom can't resist - but Jackson also got a gym bag from Rafe, a very fancy set of water bottles from Jesse, a stack of romance novels from Juniper, a set of colored pencils from Mark (though the reason behind that one's a mystery to me). My gift is coming to him later, but the real coup is a stuffed tiger gifted from Seraphina.

"I think that one is regifted," I murmur, noting that my cousin gave it to him crumpled up in already-ripped paper.

"I treasure it all the more," Jackson murmurs, seating the soft stuffed toy by his side with its little face towards the room, like a real pet. And I wonder suddenly if...well, if Jackson's ever had a toy before. And my heart breaks, thinking that Seraphina was the only one who realized that he might want

one.

"Stop that," Jackson says when he hears my little squeak of adoring pity, turning towards me with a laugh. He smacks at my hands, clutched to my chest in agony.

"I cannnn't," I groan, pitching myself hard against his side. "You just break my heart sometimes, Jacks! I want to give you everything - let's go to the toy store, you can have whatever you want! You can have all of them!"

"I don't want all of them," he says, giving me a squeeze and then, adorably, reaching out and patting his little tiger on the head. "I have this one, and it's perfect."

I groan again at the unbearable sweetness of my gigantic, terrifying puppy mate, burying my face into his shoulder. He laughs harder and just hugs me closer, pressing a kiss to my hair and then my cheek. "Thank you," he murmurs. "Today is amazing."

I sniff a little, lifting my head with a sigh and relaxing against him. "What are you going to name it?" I ask, glancing down at the fierce little stuffed animal, complete with felt fangs.

"I have to name it?" Jackson asks, hesitating like it's a horrible burden he's not sure he wants.

I grin at him. "Of course. It has a face. It needs a name." I shrug like it's obvious.

He narrows his eyes for a moment, studying it. "Fine. Then I name it... Tiger."

I laugh, my head falling back on my neck. "You're terrible at this, McClintock," I say, delighted anyway, despite my words.

"No, I'm not," he murmurs, taking full advantage of my bared neck and pressing a quick kiss there. "Tiger is perfect. Descriptive, concise."

"Very Jackson logic," I sigh, raising my head and cupping his cheek in my palm. "But you're right. Tiger is perfect."

"If you two are done being horrible," Juniper says, and we both turn to see her standing over us, her arms crossed, her habitual glare in her eyes.

I grin, curling closer to my mate, who doesn't move an inch, just looks curiously up at Junie like he doesn't understand what on earth she's talking about.

"Then it is time to go play the awful traditional sports game," my sister sighs, gesturing towards the door where my family - still in their pajamas - is filtering out, heading for the roof.

"Oh, fun!" I shout, getting up to my feet.

"What's this?" Jackson asks, anxiety in his voice at every new turn of midwinter events. "What are we playing?"

"You're playing football," I say, grinning at him as I stoke the fire with a couple of extra logs so it won't go out while we're upstairs. "The girls are just drinking white wine."

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"As is our right, as royal ladies," Juniper says, flicking her hair back over her shoulder. "Not yours," I say, laughing and flicking her nose when I stand up straight. "Underage!"

"Ariel!" Juniper groans, following me as I tug Jackson eagerly towards the door. "Come on! I thought we were finally cool! Just sneak me one glass!" "I'll think about it," I say casually over my shoulder, grinning at her. "If...you'll agree to be my servant. All. Day."

Juniper groans, but then considers her choices, and nods with a sigh.

The three of us hurry after our family, picking up the tail of the group as we all start up the stairs.

The day moves too quickly after that, ushered along by a great deal of laughter and joy. Jackson, even though he doesn't know the rules of football, is of course instantly good at it and a credit to his team, made up of him, Mark, Chase, and Roger. The game goes on for what feels like a very long time, especially considering the tiny space provided by the little patch of green on our roof and how many Alphas they're trying to squeeze into it, all bashing into each other.

But still, I don't mind. I just sigh and drink the glass of wine that my mom constantly refills. I secretly always pour half of my cup into Juniper's glass as well - and spend the time chatting with my family and just...watching my mate play.

God, but he's just so...good at it. Good at all of it - dodging, throwing, strategy, knowing precisely how hard he's able to tackle Caleb without hurting him. Something about physical activity just comes easy to my mate. Much easier than to me and I think most people.

I smile softly as my eyes follow him, my glass resting against my shoulder as I lean back against the countertop of the little outdoor kitchen. I get lost in it, if I'm being honest, not even paying attention to the conversation of the ladies amidst whom I stand.

"Ohhhhh," Cora coos, her voice loud and teasing enough to pull me out of it. I snap my head towards her, curious, and then blush when I see that they're all looking at me - that I got caught, a bit, in my reverie. "Someone's got it bad!"

"Oh, shut up," I reply, laughing and tossing out a hand to smack my aunt on my shoulder.

"No, I'm jealous," Cora sighs, moving closer to me and leaning against me as my mom stands on her other side, beaming. "I miss that newly in-love feeling. So much fun." Juniper turns towards us too, an unsurprising frown on her face as Rosie, Sera, and Bella play with one of Bella's new toys at our feet.

"So?" Mom asks, grinning over at me, eager. "Is that what it is? Are you in love, Ari?"

I blush terribly then, ducking my head and laughing in my embarrassment. Because, I mean, I instantly know that the answer is yes. But I haven't even said that to Jacks yet - not out loud - and shouldn't I?

And, honestly, I'm not sure that I feel comfortable confessing my feelings to one of my mates with my family without discussing the other - because I've fallen hard for Luca too.

But can someone even be in love - really in love - with two people at once? Even if they're you're mates?

God, but it's confusing.

Luckily, my little sister comes to my rescue.

"Well, I hope not," Junie says, frowning and turning towards the boys. "Love ruins everything."

"What!?" Mom and Cora shout together, appalled - and even I turn towards Junie with surprise.

"It does!" June says, laughing a little and shaking her head. "You fall in love, and then you get pregnant, and then you pop out a bunch of kids, and then your life is just that, and everything else..." she flicks her fingers in the air all at once, like an explosion. "Poof! Hopes and dreams! Gone!"

"Oh, Junie," mom sighs, smiling over at my little sister indulgently. "It's...not really like that."

"Well, it wasn't for you," June says, turning to mom with her eyebrows lifted. "Your hopes and dreams were to have kids and a family and the whole domestic bliss thing. That's what you wanted!"

"Well, what's yours, sugar?" Cora asks, reaching behind me to stroke a warm hand over Juniper's long black hair. "What is it that you want?"

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"I don't know yet," Juniper murmurs, her eyes going distant as she stares off into space. "But...something big. I want to do all of it. I want...I want to do everything, feel everything. See...the whole world."

Cora lets her hand drift away from Juniper and both she and my mom look at my little sister with a great deal of soft love in their eyes. But they let Junie have her space, turning away with each other to open another bottle of wine.

When they're gone, I step closer to Junie, slipping an arm around her waist and pouring more of my wine in her cup. "Don't write off mates so fast, June," I murmur. She turns to me with a frown, combative. But as usual, it just makes me grin. "You know, the goddess wouldn't give you a mate that wasn't suited to your hopes and your dreams, your fate. If you want a big life, your mate will too."

Junie just leans her weight on me and sighs, shaking her head as she takes a sip of the wine and turning back to the boys. "These Alphas," she murmurs. "They just seem to...steamroll their mates into whatever life it is they want. Like, mom was never going to be a Queen until she met dad. And Cora's not a doctor anymore - not really. She's just a mom."

"Cora and mom do a lot of work healing people in the community, and they're both very happy with the work they do," I murmur, needing to point that out and trying to strike a balance between the truth and letting my sister make her point. "But...I mean, Jackson doesn't steamroll me. Not yet."

"He's known he's your mate for like, a week," Juniper points out, dry, glancing at me. "Give him a minute."

I burst out laughing, tightening my arm around her. "Well, if he does, then I'll have my little Junepiper come and beat him up."

Juniper smirks at the old nickname - what Mark used to call her when he stumbled over his words a lot as a kid. But she still sighs, and shakes her head, looking at me out of the corner of her eye. "And what about the other one?" she asks.

"Luca?" I ask, a little surprised.

Juniper nods, looking at me fully now.

I sigh, and shrug. "I'm figuring it out, Junie," I say softly. "Day by day. But, I will say that I wouldn't give either of them up if it meant the opportunity of a different life. Besides..." I frown at my sister for a second, looking her up and down. "Do you even...have a mate?"

She sighs like it is a deep and real tragedy, tilting her head back to look at the darkening sky. "Yeah. I made Cora tell me like, a year ago. I have one she saw it in my baptism prophecy."

"Oh, really?" I ask, bursting into a smile, so incredibly excited for my little sister but also trying to hold my enthusiasm back if it's something she's worried about. "Are you sure?"

Junie frowns at me. "Yes, I'm sure," she replies. "Cora told me, she wouldn't lie."

"Yeah," I say, a little wicked now as I wrinkle my nose at her. "She told you that you have a mate but...did she tell you if it was just one?"

Juniper's face suddenly drops in horror and she looks, frantic, between me and our aunt. "CORA!" She shouts, her voice lit with panic as she scurries over to where Cora is standing with my mom, both of them looking shocked at Juniper's outburst. "I need some clarifications! NOW!"

The football game ends right about the time, about half an hour later, Cora finishes assuring Juniper for the eighteenth time that she only has one mate. Or, at least, as far as Cora could see. Juniper groaned and dashed off to Roger, the only other person to see her prophecy, intent on a second opinion the moment the game broke up.

"We won," Jackson says, coming over and slinging an arm around my shoulders, looking quite smug about it.

"Of course you did," I say with pride and utter assurance as I run a hand over his sweaty hair and hand him my glass of wine so he can take a sip. "How could they lose with you on the team?"

"It's unfair," Rafe complains, stalking over to us with a frown, Jesse scowling at his side. "We didn't pick Jackson because he didn't know how to play - we didn't think he would be good -"

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"Never bet against me, Sinclair," Jackson says with a sigh, flashing my brother a beautiful grin.

"Yeah well, next year," Rafe grumbles, narrowing his eyes. I laugh, pleased to see my brother have to deal with losing - it's not something that happens often to him. "You're on my team. Jesse, you're out."

Jesse squawks with injured pride, taking a step back and pressing a hand to his chest. "This is war, cousin," he says, quite seriously, before flashing his eyes to Jackson. "Jacks you're on my team next year - we're best friends, after all -"

A great deal of laughter goes around, the debate continuing as we all troop back downstairs and cobble together what we can for dinner. This is always my favorite part of Midwinter, if I'm being honest - the fact that every year mom freaks out about not having enough food prepared even though, of course, the chefs leave us more than enough and we've never gone hungry.

And so she has the boys continually going down to the kitchen for tray after tray of food, and cheese, and cookies, and cakes, and ice cream - so much that by the end of the evening we're all completely stuffed with little tiny portions of snacks and food, and there's a huge stack of plates in the corner, and everyone's lazy and full and ready to digest.

But of course, Roger lets no one rest. Instead, he and Jesse rouse everyone to laughter as the hours pass, organizing games and pouring drinks and keeping the mood light and fun. By the end, we're all a little drunk - or more than a little - and that's when the music comes out. Mom moans and begs Juniper to play the piano, and Juniper pretends to resist until mom's practically on her knees, and then Junie sighs, and stands, and flumps down on the seat of the piano hidden away in the corner and begins to play an incredibly complex concerto.

Jackson's eyes go wide with shock the moment he hears her start to play. He watches Juniper's hands fly over the keys and I grin, turning my face to watch him instead of Juniper.

"How does she...do that..." he whispers, fascinated, his words a little slurred. Jesse and Roger have been targeting Jackson in particular tonight with their refills, determined to get him to come out of his shell a bit.

"Junie's been a concert-level pianist since she was a kid," I whisper to him, letting my full pride in my sister's ability be heard in my voice. "But don't tell anyone - she'd rather die than let anyone outside this room know. She thinks that talent isn't very cool."

Jackson just glances at me, agape, before turning his eyes back to June.

"No, no!" Cora says, giving Juniper an angry little tap on her shoulder. "Don't play that - you know what we want!"

Juniper stops mid-chord and turns a wicked grin up at our aunt. "You mean, you want...this?" And she bursts immediately into the rock-and-roll riff of an oldies song we all know and love, about a too-talented man playing piano in a bar for a group of people with big dreams. Markie lets out a big whoop and bursts into the chorus. We all join in a second later.

Jackson stares around at everyone in a little bit of shock, but I wind my arm around his waist and pull him close, and he just laughs and gives into it, shaking his head and attempting to join in when he can. With the way his voice croaks as he tries to find the notes, I actually wonder if Jackson's ever tried singing before.

But no one says anything, or makes note of his slightly off-key mostly wordless contributions to the songs. Because he's family now, and he's here, and whatever he adds is the perfect addition to our little chorus.

And even though the future weighs hard on each of us, we take a moment to set our fears and our worries aside. And so we sing, and laugh, and drink - all of us, together, for the rest of the night, appreciating this perfect moment for precisely what it is.

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Around midnight, the family starts to fade.

"Actually," Rafe murmurs at my side, looking around the room as mom and dad herd a sleepy Mark off to his bedroom, Juniper following close behind, and Roger and Cora bid their farewells to their oldest son, who is staying overnight here so that he can go to school with the rest of us in the morning. "This might.....be the perfect time..."

"What?" I ask, frowning up at my older brother, Jackson slumping slightly on my other side, I think already half asleep. I laugh a little as Jacks rests his weight against me, because if he thinks I'm going to be able to hold his weight then he is sincerely overestimating my strength.

"Hey, Jacks," Rafe says, giving Jackson a nudge on the shoulder as Jesse kisses his mom and gives his dad a big hug before the pair march out with their ducklings in tow. "Do you think I could... steal Ariel for a bit? Just for a few minutes?"

Jackson growls a little, low in his throat, his arm slipping around my waist as he lifts his head to glare at my brother.

I burst out laughing at this, giving him a smack on his chest. "Jackson!"

"My mate," Jackson murmurs, sleepy and half drunk. "You...can't borrow her. She's mine."

"My sister first," Rafe laughs, I think as tickled as I am to see the ever-controlled Jackson in this state. Rafe raises an eyebrow to me as Jesse comes to stand with us. "Do you think he can get to his rooms by himself, Ari?"

"Yes, he's very capable," I say, grinning up at Jackson, who nods at me with assurance.

"Ohhh, are we doing secret cousin stuff?" Jesse asks, grinning around at the three of us and figuring out what's happening lightning-fast, as he always does.

"Just for a minute," Rafe says as I stand on my tiptoes and whisper to Jackson that I'll meet him in his room shortly, and not to open the present that's waiting there. Jacks gives me a swift kiss on the cheek and murmurs his assurances that he won't, waving his goodnights over his shoulder as he heads out the door.

"What's going on?" I ask, turning to Rafe, just as eager as Jesse now. Because this - a secret meeting of the three of us on Midwinter? It's entirely unprecedented.

"Come on," Rafe says, grinning at both of us, I think a little abashed. "Lets...go to the roof."

"What?" Jesse gasps, delighted at the secrecy and the mystery. I squeak a little with joy, instantly agreeing, and then the three of us quickly head out of the now-quiet living room and up the stairs, back to the little roof garden, which is still kind of a mess from the day's activities.

Rafe shoots us a grin and heads for the little fridge in the tiny outdoor kitchen. "Don't get excited," he sighs. "I didn't plan anything big." He bends over, grabbing a bottle of champagne out of the back and beginning to unwrap the foil that covers the cork as he stands straight.

I watch in fascination as Jesse gets glasses, likewise baffled and pleased. "What's this all about, Rafe?" Jesse asks, placing three glasses on the counter before he leans against it.

Rafe doesn't answer, instead popping the cork with a satisfyingly loud sound and then beginning to pour three glasses. "Now don't freak out," Rafe says, smirking a little. "But I'm going to get...sentimental."

Immediately, I freak out.

"Rafe!" I gasp, clasping my hands beneath my chin, my eyes already welling with tears. "What - why are you getting sentimental!? What's happening!?"

"Oh my god, Ariel," Rafe laughs, grinning, tilting his head back like he can't believe it, or should have expected this, or both. Jesse laughs too and just wraps a warm arm around my shoulder as Rafe sighs, tilts his head back up and begins to hand us each a glass of champagne.

I give a little squeak of anxiety low in my throat, looking at my brother and my cousin with wide eyes as Rafe sighs and raises his glass. Jesse and I instantly raise ours, clinking them together, willing to play along even if we have no idea what's happening. That's always been our vibe, after all - the three of us, always in it together, no questions asked.

"Seriously, Rafe," Jesse says, a little smile on his lips as he sips his champagne. "You've always been the stoic one, out of the three of us. If you keep mixing up our roles we won't know what to do next."

"You just keep cracking jokes, Jess," Rafe says, smirking at our cousin and slipping his free hand into his pocket. "Keep us steady."