

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy

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Jesse nods once, agreeing to it, and I make the squeaking noise again, needing to know what's going on.

Rafe laughs and squares his shoulders, nodding to me and getting started. "Look, it's not a big deal, I just...I wanted to take a minute with the two of you alone. Because...because you two mean a lot to me."

My little wolf howls in my heart, bursting with pride and love for my brother and my cousin. But I do my very, very best to keep quiet, even as tears start to well on my lower lashes, threatening to fall.

"I just..." Rafe sighs, hanging his head for a second and collecting his thoughts. "It's always been the three of us, hasn't it? Growing up...I know I was first, but I can't even remember a time when I didn't have the two of you by my side, when you weren't my best friends. And Ariel, I'm so glad you didn't marry that asshole and came to school with us instead." He flashes me a big smile now, and Jesse follows suit, tightening his arm around me as he does.

And I can't help it - it's all too much. The tears start to spill down my cheeks.

Rafe grins at me, pushing forward, because he knows he only has so much time before I burst into sobs. "It wouldn't have been the same without you, Clark," Rafe says with a smirk. "And I think...I think it was meant to be - you there, with us, like you've always been. We were always meant to be together. But...we're growing up now. Aren't we?"

Rafe's smile falls a bit, and my mouth trembles into a frown. Even Jesse looks serious all of a sudden, which is a feat unto itself.

"And things are...changing," Rafe says, looking between us, heaving a sigh. "We're going to...grow up, and meet our mates - if we have them -" he glances at Jesse here, whose mate-status hasn't been confirmed, "and...follow our own paths. We won't be together every day - not forever."

I sniff, my free hand pressing again to my chest as more tears slip down my face. Because Rafe's right, and it's breaking my heart to think of it. "None of that's bad, though," Jesse says, and my head spins when I hear his voice is tight. Because, god, if Jesse cries I'm going to completely lose it.

"I know," Rafe says quickly, nodding his agreement. "I just..." he raises his glass again, toasting us. "I wanted to take a moment, while we have it, to say...what an honor it's been spending my life with you two at my side. You're my best friends and...I love you. We're really lucky."

Rafe hangs his head and quickly brushes his hands across his cheeks and I give a little cry, pitching forward and wrapping my arms around him. I spill my champagne but who cares -

"Ari," Rafe laughs, wrapping his arms around me in return. "We don't need to get maudlin about it."

"Yes, we do!" I moan, overwhelmed and miserable. And then I turn back to Jesse, desperate to have him close, and open up my arm. He laughs and joins our hug, all of us wrapping our arms around each other, and even Jesse's eyes are wet now.

"Look, why don't we make a pact?" Jesse says, quiet and eager. "No matter what happens in our lives - no matter how they change, and how many mates or children come and try to disrupt -"

I laugh at this, shaking my head, wondering that he can even think that far ahead with war on the horizon. But I don't bring it up - because I don't need to. I know we're all thinking it.

"Let's always meet, on Midwinter night, at midnight," Jesse continues, smiling at us, "always find space to have a secret toast. Just like this, just the three of us, like we're doing right now."

"That's a great idea, Jess," Rafe says, smiling softly at him. And then he drops his arms from around us and raises his glass in the center of our circle. "Midwinter at midnight, just us three. Every year."

"It's a deal," I sniff, raising my glass too. Jesse is last, clinking his glass against ours.

And then we all drink deep and take a moment to laugh together under the light of the midwinter moon, warmed by the idea that every year - no matter what - we'll return to do the same.

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We don't stay long on the roof - we don't need to. After all, tomorrow night we'll be together again, all sleeping in the same room at the Academy. There may be other nights, in the future, where we greet the dawn after our midnight toast - needing to talk for hours, to catch up, to laugh, to cry. But tonight isn't one of them. And I'm smiling, warm and pleased, when I press the door to Jackson's room open and slip inside.

I burst into a smile when I see that he's dozing against his pillows, Tiger seated neatly at his side, his wrapped present from me still sitting on the bed in front of him. Because even if he fell asleep doing it, I can tell he's waiting for me.

Softly, I climb up onto the bed, and he's awake before I can even move Tiger gently to a place of honor on top of the headboard so that I can take his place at Jackson's side. Jackson inhales a deep breath that turns readily into a purring little growl of pleasure when he sees that it's me, and he wraps me up tight in his arms, nuzzling his face warm against my neck.

"All okay?" Jackson murmurs.

"Yeah, everything's perfect," I whisper, wrapping my arms around his neck and kissing his cheek, his shoulder.

Jackson pulls away a bit, sniffing. "You've been crying." A statement, not a question.

I laugh, looking into his face. "You can smell that?"

He just frowns at me, not answering the question, wanting an explanation.

"It's okay," I murmur, cupping his face in my palm. "Happy tears. I just...love them. Jesse and Rafe. So much."

Jackson looks at me for a long moment, his expression softening, and then he nods, accepting the explanation, not needing anymore. And I smile at him, loving that he lets me have my little inconsequential secrets, parts of my life that are just for me.

But right now, I just want to be with him. "Are you ready for this one?" I ask, nodding over to the present on the bed, wrapped in the same gold paper as all the rest of the gifts this morning. I admit – I had mom wrap it when I ran out of time yesterday.

Jackson frowns, glancing between the gift and me. "You should have told me we were doing presents," he murmurs. "I would have gotten you something."

"Oh yeah?" I ask, quirking my eyebrow. "And what would you have gotten me?"

He just stares at me, completely without an answer or even an idea of what gift he would want to give. "You're right, this was kinder," he says, nodding seriously and making me burst into laughter. "But next year I am getting you two. And they'll be good."

"Okay," I murmur, reaching out and nudging the gift closer, really wanting him to open it.

Jackson sighs, I think still feeling guilty that he's getting a gift when I am not, but he pulls the box closer to him and begins to eagerly pull the paper off. When he sees another cheerfully colored gift box inside, he just frowns at me. "Why did you bother to wrap it? It's already in a box."

"Just open it!" I say, laughing, desperately eager for him to see the gift.

A little smile plays at Jackson's lips as he complies, using both hands to lift the lid off the box and then tilting it towards him as he peers inside. And then he goes very still, his mouth popping open a little bit.

I squeal a little with excitement, taking my arms from around his neck and fisting my hands beneath my chin, grinning eagerly at my mate. "Do you like it?"

"Ariel," he murmurs, reaching into the box and letting his fingers trace over the dozens of boxes of DVD's - dozens of television shows, all full runs. "This is amazing."

I squeak again with excitement, watching eagerly as he reaches in and lifts out the one thing that I thought might be confusing to him - a very clunky device that looks sort of like a laptop but...not.

"What...is this..." he murmurs, opening it and staring at the screen, trying to figure it out.

"Um, it's a TV?" I say quietly, reaching out to tap on the little opening where you can load the DVD's. "Actually, it's a portable DVD player - you can recharge it – I know it's an old technology Jacks – and it wasn't expensive, since no one really uses these anymore, but I figured that since we don't really have TV or streaming services or laptops at the Academy, that you could have this -"

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He turns to stare at me, his mouth open a little bit, completely shocked.

I grimace a little at his reaction, not really knowing what to do. "Do you...do you like it?"

"Ariel," he breathes, turning his face reverently back to the device and to the DVD collection. "I...I love it." Then he gasps a little, his eyes lighting on something, and quick as a flash he reaches into the box and pulls out a set of dvds. "How do you work it?" he murmurs, pulling open the case and glancing at between the device and me.

I laugh, and then show him, and he nods eagerly, listening and loading one of the DVD's, starting to press play.

"Jacks," I say, shaking my head and laughing, putting my hand on his arm. "It's late - I can show you all of this in the morning -"

"No," he murmurs, reaching out to put the DVD player flat on the bed as the first episode starts up. "I want...is it okay?" he whispers, looking over at me. "Are you tired? I know it's late, but I want to watch one. With you."

A slow smile stretches across my face as I look at my big tough mate. "It's not too late. That's perfect."

We take a minute to get settled - to put the rest of the DVD's in a safe spot on the floor - though I see Jackson glance at them as he puts them down, clearly desperate to look through them and see what he's got.

But he brings his attention back to me as I settle warm against him. Jackson again wraps his arms around me, and I tug Tiger down to hold in my lap as we focus on the screen, quietly watching the drama unfold.

"That's Raquel," Jackson murmurs, pointing at the screen and telling me information that I already know that I've known for years, frankly, because we've all seen Besties a thousand times. "She was supposed to get married but...she didn't."

"Sounds familiar," I say, my voice dry.

Jackson smirks at me but then turns his attention back to the screen. "And that's Russ," he whispers, like it's a great secret, pointing again when the dark-haired actor comes on the screen. "He's Raquel's mate, but she doesn't know it yet. No one does."

I hum interestedly and settle against Jackson's chest, inhaling a deep and contented breath, thinking about how lucky I am to be perfectly happy for the second time tonight.

But just as I'm sinking into the show, getting lost again into the storyline, Jackson reaches out and presses the pause button.

"Ariel," he says, and I turn my face up to him, confused. I find his steady sapphire eyes looking at me intently as he reaches out and cups my face in his gigantic palm, holding it like a treasure. "This was the most...wonderful day. I could never have imagined it - that it could be so...nice, to just sit around with people. And play, and eat, and talk. Thank you, so much, for letting me have this with you. For sharing your family with me."

"Your family too now, Jackson," I whisper, reaching up and cupping his own face in my much smaller hand. "Forever. We get to do this every year." "Forever," he murmurs, smiling at me softly, turning the word over in his mouth like he's trying it out for the first time, seeing how it tastes. And then he smiles, like he likes it.

I push myself up a then, bringing my face close to his and pressing a soft kiss to his mouth. And he returns it willingly, almost reverently, but I pull away after a moment and smile, settling back against him.

Because we don't need to push it any further tonight. We have time.

So much time. Forever.

Feeling precisely the same, Jackson reaches out and presses play on the DVD player again, turning the show back on. Quite quiet, quite calm, we watch it together in perfect contentment.

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Ella and Sinclair wake up the next morning before their children do, curled in each other's arms as they always are.

"Stop," Sinclair commands, tightening his arms when Ella starts to move, to roll away towards the edge of the bed. "Don't. Stay."

"We have to get them up, Dominic!" Ella protests, laughing, but her body betrays her, going soft and pliable again in her mate's arms. "They have to go to school. And then off to war. And we have meetings."

"They're adults, they can get themselves ready to go off to war," Sinclair murmurs, his eyes determinedly shut as he pulls Ella closer and rests his head against her chest, sighing deeply at the comfort he feels when she's in his arms, when he can smell her scent.

"You hold your tongue," Ella sighs, running her fingers through his thick dark hair, only starting to grey at the temples in a way she quite likes. "I get to baby them until they're ny. That was the deal."

Sinclair grumbles something noncommittal and presses a kiss to her chest, just above the V of her nightgown, and then sighs and lifts his head, opening one eye to peer at her. "We have a meeting?" he asks, groggy after so much Midwinter whiskey.

"Yes!" Ella says, beaming at him. "With Hank! You know this! You remember!"

"False," Sinclair sighs, returning his head to her chest. "I remember nothing. Who is Hank."

Ella swats him on the head, laughing, because she knows he's lying and being lazy.

"Why did you even make that meeting?" Sinclair mutters. "Poor Hank. He deserves a holiday too."

"Because," Ella sighs, looking off towards the door as if she can see through it. "I have questions about the North, and he's the only one I trust to ask questions about it right now."

"You mean you have questions about Jackson," Sinclair says, sighing and starting to sit up, taking Ella with him.

"Yes," Ella confesses, nodding and looking her mate deep in his green eyes. "There are things we need to know, Dominic. That boy's background..." she bites her lip and shakes her head, worried. "And I want my questions answered while Jackson's still under our roof, so I can talk to him about it. If I need to."

"Fine," Sinclair says, sighing and closing his eyes even as he straightens his shoulders. He lifts a hand, waving it at himself. "Go ahead, little magical mate. Heal me up from this hangover so we can go to this ridiculously early morning Zoom meeting with my brother's mate's human ex and ask secret question about our daughter's mate's mysterious cult."

Ella laughs but obliges, reaching out and placing her hands on Sinclair's temples, closing her eyes and falling into the lavender light of her magical meditative space.

"You know, this feels like a gross misuse of privilege," she murmurs as the healing begins. "Just because you're a King and my mate doesn't mean you should get off scott-free from drinking too much."

"Yes it does," Sinclair murmurs, his voice rumbling a little with a growl that makes Ella laugh. "Now hurry up, demigoddess, we've got meetings to attend."

"Meeting, mortal. Singular. And then I'm saying goodbye to my first and second born, which will take my full attention."

"And many tears," he murmurs, but the King reaches for his Queen, even though his eyes are closed. He finds her exactly where he knew she'd be, and places his hands warm upon her thighs, letting her know he feels precisely the same.

About forty minutes later, the meeting is all set up and the screen flashes once before Hank's image appears.

"Hank!" Ella cries, pressing her hands together with pleasure as she leans forward towards the computer. "It's so good to see you - we miss you here in the capital!"

Hank smiles, warm and genuine, his eyes crinkling into little half-circles of joy. "Your highnesses," he says, dipping into a mocking little half bow that's even more ridiculous because he's seated. "How are you? How was your midwinter?"

"Gorgeous, amazing!" Ella replies as Sinclair and Hank give each other warm, stoic nods, fully understanding that their deep friendship doesn't need the kind of exuberance that Ella gives to every aspect of her life. "How are the kids?"

"The kids are fine, at each other's throats as usual," Hank murmurs, glancing over his shoulder towards the rest of the house. "We're snowed in, though it's been...a trial, all being boxed up together for more than a week."

Sinclair frowns at the idea, leaning closer to the computer, while Ella gasps like it's the most fabulous thing that could ever happen to a family, to be forced into uninterrupted company for so long.

"A week?" Sinclair asks, worried. "That's quite some time - are you low on supplies?"

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Hank grimaces. "A little," he says, shrugging. "It's a miracle, honestly, that we even have wifi."

Ella and Sinclair immediately look at each other, unspoken ideas passing to each other down their bond.

"Nope!" Hank says, pointing at the camera on his computer. "Whatever it is you're thinking - stop. We're going to be fine - we do not need help."

Ella sighs and just glares at the screen, thinking Hank knows her a bit too well, but Sinclair just moves on. "We apologize, Hank, for getting you up so early the day after the holiday."

"Yeah, what's up?" Hank asks, his voice deepening with worry as he runs a hand through his fully grey hair. "You two - it's not like you to insist on a meeting like this."

"It's war," Sinclair says seriously. Hank's face pales. "The Atalaxians are pushing their attack - they've promised to destroy us within a month." "God," Hank breathes, shocked and dismayed. "But, what does that have to do with me? I'm...about as far from the front as I can get up here." "It doesn't," Ella says with a sigh, glancing at Sinclair, who nods to her, giving her permission to take over. "Hank, we want to talk to you about our daughter's mate."

"Luca Grant?" Hank asks, smirking a little.

Ella laughs, a little delighted. "You follow the gossip columns way up there, boxed in with the snow?"

"I have to admit," Hank says, laughing with a shrug, "my youngest was devastated at the news. I think she had always imagined herself with the Champ - has his poster on her wall and everything."

"Oh, Annabell," Ella says, pressing her hands to her heart and pouting. Sinclair clears his throat, though, urging Ella to get back on task. "But actually, Hank," Ella says, dropping her voice a little. "It's about Ariel's...other mate."

Hank's eyebrows go steadily up as Ella quickly spills out the story of Ariel and Jackson, of Jackson's upbringing in a place called the Community, of his strange lack of knowledge about some basics regarding the world that everyone else they know takes for granted. By the time Ella finishes, Hank is looking at the pair of them with real shock.

"Seriously?" Hank breathes, staring between them. "From the Community? Are you serious?"

"What?" Sinclair snaps, leaning forward with a frown. "Is that bad?"

"Um, I'm not sure it's bad," Hank replies, looking away and running a hand again through his hair. "It's just...that's amazing. I've been trying to get an inside look at the Community for years, Dominic - but they won't let me in. Not at all. I've offered them everything I have - free aid, medical knowledge, funds. But they don't trust humans, and they certainly don't trust someone as close to the crown as I am."

"Really," Sinclair says with a frown, looking at Ella with concern.

"Hank, he's a lovey boy," Ella says, drawing Hank's attention back to her. "Do you...I mean, is it something to be worried about? I don't like that they stonewall you out - they're our people, they're entitled to your care."

"Entitled to the crown's care if they want it," Hanks says with a shrug. "But...Ella, it's a cult. A straight cult - with a charismatic leader, and people falling in line beneath him. And not even the kind of cult that falls apart after a few years from too much drugs and weird sex - like, they're very strong, and very dedicated. From what I do know life inside is absolutely brutal - and the children raised within it are...militant, with little to no knowledge of the outside world. And absolutely allegiant to the Community - there's no doubt about that."

"What aren't you saying, Hank," Sinclair bites out, harsher than he means to. But Hank ignores it - he's known Sinclair for years and is used to him snapping by now.

"I'm saying that if this is a lovely boy, Ella?" Hank replies, quite serious. "That...he's either a miracle, to have come out that way, or he's...a very good actor."

Ella goes white, staring at the computer screen and then up at Sinclair. "No..." she breathes, shaking her head. "Not...not Jackson."

"Look, Ella, I'm...I'm really not happy with the idea of a Community member in the palace," Hank says, putting out a hand and leaning forward towards his screen. "But they would be thrilled to have someone that close to the royal family. If they could accomplish it, they would. And any information they had...they'd be feeding to the Atalaxians."

"What?" Dominic breathes, staring at the computer in shock.

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"You're aware that not all wolf communities were happy with your rise to power twenty years ago, Dominic, when you declared wolves and humans equal citizens in the nation," Hank says, shrugging like it's obvious.

Dominic nods, because it's true - and he's well aware.

"Well," Hank continues, "some of the more militant groups are eager to see your rule end and the nation returned to what they understand as more 'traditional' policies with wolves on top and humans down low. And especially a group like The Community, with its

views on women's role in society? The Community doesn't have any real power beyond a couple of dozen very fierce warriors, but any information they do have they pass to the Atalaxians. They're traitors, Dominic." Hank's voice falls low here, laced with regret. "There's no way of beating around that bush. The Community is vehemently anti-Sinclair, and it worries the hell out of me that you've got one of them in the Palace spending the holidays with you."

Ella tenses, watching Sinclair clench his jaw and tap his fingers against the table in front of him a few times, clearly thinking.

"That's it, Hank," Sinclair says, snapping his gaze back up to the computer. "We're sending a chopper for you - today, now. I want you here, asking Jackson McClintock some questions. Seeing what he knows."

"Dominic!" Hank groans, holding his hand out, palm up, pleading. "Please, I have work to do -"

"You're just sitting snowed into a cabin, Hank," Sinclair snaps, glaring hard at his old friend. "What on earth could you possibly be doing?" "Paperwork! Planning! Writing reports and essays for medical journals! Processing tests! Writing aid proposals!" Hank takes another breath to continue his list but Ella talks over him.

"Oh, Hank, you know we'll give you all the aid you need!" she says dismissively. "The helicopter will be there in what, four hours?"

"Three," Sinclair says, likewise standing and peering at the screen, brooking no more protests. "Pack up your family, Hank, bring them too - Ella will want a visit and it's better than leaving them starving in the snow."

"Dominic!" Hank shouts, half enraged and half dismayed. "Ella!"

"Byeeee, Hank!" Ella coos, reaching for the mouse to end the meeting. "See you soon, can't wait!"

She presses the button and then exhales a long breath, looking up at Sinclair, who looks steadily down at her. "EI-"

"No, Dominic," Ella says evenly, cutting off his idea before he can even say it.

Sinclair sighs, putting his hands on his hips and looking away.

"Our faith is with Jackson right now," Ella insists, quiet and calm, as she always is in moments like these.

Sinclair sighs again, heavily and nods. "Until he proves otherwise," Sinclair says quietly. "We believe our daughter and her mate. But god damn, I wish the Goddess had given us an easier path than this."

"Had given Jackson an easier path than this," Ella corrects, taking a deep breath. "Because if what Hank is saying is true, Dominic..." she grimaces. He nods, finishing her sentence. "Then this is far worse for him than we thought."

We're all gathered on the other side of the roof, far away from the rooftop garden, dressed in our Cadet uniforms with our backpacks stuffed with whatever gifts we can fit in them to bring to school. I sigh, anxious, as a helicopter settles down onto the roof top. Jackson, next to me, doesn't squint at all in the wind it makes - just watches in fascination, not even blinking.

"Amazing," he murmurs.

"You're going to get something in your eye in all this wind," I mutter, smacking him on the arm and then reaching up, standing on my tiptoes to shade his eyes. He just smirks at me and swats my hand away. "God, why does our method of transportation have to be so loud?"

Jackson just smirks, glancing at me, before returning his eyes to the machine as its blades start to slow.

"I can't believe you're stealing mom," Juniper growls, stomping over to stand with me and Jackson, giving us a little side glare like we honestly had something to do with it. Rafe, hearing her, comes to stand closer, his arms crossed across his chest.

"What did she say to you, June?" he asks, frowning over at where our mom is giving Mark a kiss goodbye and what can only be a warning to behave himself while she's gone. "She didn't say a word about why she's coming to the Academy with dad today. I don't get it."

"She didn't say anything," June groans, being very dramatic and looking more like Mark in this moment than she'd be happy to hear. "She just said she's going for the night to get you guys settled - and that I have to stay with Aunt Cora and the ducklings." Junie shudders, pressing her eyes shut and hugging herself like it's the most horrible fate. "It's so sticky over there."

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Jesse laughs, coming over to us, his backpack slung over his back. "Rosie's all ready for you, June," he says, grinning and patting her on the shoulder. "Says she's giving you a makeover."

Juniper groans louder now, tilting her head back and venting her rage to the sky. I can't help but laugh, but I don't miss that Rafe doesn't join in on it. "What?" I ask, turning to him. "What's wrong with mom coming to school?"

"Something's up," he murmurs with a shrug. "She wasn't planning on it this morning. Something...changed."

"No point in worrying on it," Jackson murmurs passively, turning his eyes from the helicopter to frown at Rafe. "She'll tell you when she wants to, not before."

"I love this attitude," Jesse says with a happy sigh, grinning at my mate. "Your tacit nonchalance in the face of Sinclair chaos is why you fit in so well, buddy."

Jackson huffs a laugh and sends a grin Jesse's way, but down our bond I can feel that Jesse's words touched him quite a bit. Jackson - he's laughing it off like a joke, but he likes very much being told that he fits in with us, I think especially because he feels like such a mismatch.

Juniper whips her head back up at Jesse's words, a wicked grin taking over her face. I turn to her in surprise, wondering what the hell she's got up her sleeve.

"Yeah, well, Jesse's not the only one noticing that you're fitting in." Juniper quips, gleeful. She reaches into the little messenger bag she's got slung over her shoulder.

I lean towards her, taking the bait, desperate to know what's going on. "Wait," I say, frowning, "who else is noticing?"

"The press," Juniper says, whipping a skinny tabloid magazine out of her bag and holding it out for all of us to see. I gasp, grabbing the paper out of her hands, my mouth falling open with shock and a little bit of delight when I see that the cover is pasted with pictures of Jackson - Jackson walking with our group out of the train station, Jackson standing with mom on one of the palace balconies, Jackson helping Jesse and Rafe haul in yule logs from the truck outside, even one of me and Jackson standing close, chatting, laughing with each other. God, when had the press gotten that? And

more.

"Oh my god!" I whisper, reverent, staring at them. But I burst out laughing when I read the hot-pink headline emblazoned over the top. WHO'S THE HUNK!?

"Ohhhh my god!" Jesse gasps, leaning close to me, his face the mirror image of mine. "This is - this is amazing -"

"What is it?" Rafe asks, frowning, trying to get in to see. Jackson likewise peeks.

"No worries!" Juniper quips, thrilled, pulling more copies out of her bag and handing them around. "I have enough chopper reading material for everyone!"

I look worriedly up into Jackson's face as he takes a copy from my sister's hand. He frowns for a moment, but the second he realizes that it's him on the cover he goes pale, his mouth dropping open, and then he blushes scarlet when he, too, reads the headline.

I squeak, unable to help it, and immediately rush for him, wrapping my arms around his waist and looking up into his face, my magazine copy still gasped in my fist.

"What...what is this?" Jackson murmurs, passively folding one arm around me while he stares at the magazine cover.

"Looks like an expose," Rafe says cheerfully, looking up at Jacks with half humor, half worry. "The press got curious about you hanging around with the Royals all Midwinter break."

"And the theories abound," Jesse says, flipping through the magazine with wide eyes. He bursts out laughing, looking at Jacks. "Everything from a new plain-clothes bodyguard to Mark's boyfriend."

"Mark's boyfriend?" Jacks asks, kind of appalled, frowning at Jesse. "He's like...a million years younger than me."

"Plus, straight." Juniper chimes in, still delighted at her revelation.

"Is he?" Rafe asks, curious, looking at our little sister.

"Mark's not-so-secret p**n collection under his bed would suggest so," Junie says with a sigh, like she'd much prefer that he either be gay or that she hadn't stumbled upon that particular collection, making us all burst into laughter.

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"Oh, you're making that up, Juniper," I sigh, flicking through the magazine myself now with a happy sigh. "My baby Mark doesn't have a p**n collection – he's just a little baby. Plus, p**n is all on computers these days anyway."

June shrugs. "He likes it vintage."

"Are you okay with this?" I ask Jacks, peering up at him as he stares down at the cover of the magazine, I think still a little baffled by it. His blush has faded now and honestly he looks a little pale.

Jackson takes a moment and then looks over at me. "I don't know, should I be upset?"

I slowly shake my head. "I wouldn't be, if I were you," I say quietly. "I mean - we're in the public eye, tabloids run stuff like this all the time. If you keep hanging out around us it's bound to happen."

Jackson nods slowly, considering it.

"Yeah, don't worry about it Jacks," Juniper says, stepping close and putting a hand on his arm. "Last year they ran a whole issue on whether I was sent to a boarding school to have a secret Atalaxian baby."

He looks over at her in surprise, and then drops his eyes down to her stomach.

Juniper bursts out laughing and smacks him hard on the chest. "I mean, I didn't!"

Jackson blushes again and apologizes, making us all laugh, but we're interrupted when mom and dad come over to the helicopter with us.

"All right," dad says, gesturing towards our mode of transport. "Everybody on. Except you, Junepiper." He gathers her close and gives her a little kiss that she pretends to hate before sending her off, back into the palace and downstairs to catch a ride with Mark to Aunt Cora and Uncle Roger's. Everyone else starts to move towards the helicopter but I stand very still, shocked. "Wait!" I call.

Everyone turns to look at me, dad with a frown on his face. He looks at me curiously, waiting for an explanation.

"Why...why are we getting in now?" I ask, a little frantic, gesturing back towards the door to the palace. "Luca isn't here yet!"

Rafe grimaces awkwardly and Jesse quickly turns to the helicopter, taking Jackson with him in a clear indication that this is family business. Dad turns to look at me with pity in his eyes.

"What!?" I breathe, appalled.

"Ari, sweetie," mom says, coming to put her hands on my shoulders, shooting dad a look that clearly reads that she'll handle this. Dad sighs and climbs into the helicopter while Rafe comes to stand with me, offering his silent support.

"Mom!" I protest, shaking her hands off my shoulders. "Luca's not coming!? Is he - what -"

"He's taking the train, baby," mom says, soft and calm, "with all the other cadets."

"Why!?" I exclaim, starting to get mad about it. Livid, if I'm being honest.

"Well, why wouldn't he!?" mom says, throwing her hands out a little. "You're not upset about Ben and Daphne taking the train -"

"They're coming from much further away! Luca is right here in the city! Mom!" I cross my arms and glare at her, seriously angry now. "It would have taken fifteen minutes for Luca to get to the palace - just as long as it's going to take him to get to the train station. He's only not here because you didn't invite him!"

"Fine," mom sighs, crossing her arms and glancing anxiously towards the helicopter. "Your dad is...still mad. About that little act Luca pulled the morning after his boxing match."

"But Luca apologized, a lot! And...gave dad whatever was in that envelope that you won't tell me about!"

"Your father gets over his anger in his own time in his own way, Ariel," mom replies, calm but standing strong in her position. "There's no rushing him, you know that. Luca is doing everything he can to make amends and your father will get over it - he's just not there yet."

I narrow my eyes. "Really? You're just going to let dad take the blame for this, when we all know you're the one who makes all of our family's travel arrangements?"

"There were six seats, Ariel," mom says, blinking innocently at me. "What can I say. Chopper was full."

"You're playing favorites," I growl, taking a step forward to glare at my mother.

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"I am not!" Mom says with a sigh and a dismissive wave of her hand, clearly done with this argument. "It just made sense. Now if we can please get on our way, beloved daughter?"

I scowl and storm away, not looking back over my shoulder, pissed as hell.

Ella moves to follow Ariel, but Rafe reaches out, tugging on her sleeve and making her hang back. Surprised, Ella looks up into Rafe's face. "You are playing favorites, you know," he says, smirking down at her.

Ella's mouth drops open, appalled, but when Rafe just raises an eyebrow at her she gives up the act, a sly grin shaping her lips.

Rafe laughs and shakes his head as the two of them start off towards the helicopter. "You're not being fair, mom. You always play favorites."

"A game from which you benefit deeply, my little meatball," Ella says, wrapping an arm around her eldest son's waist and pulling him close to her side. Rafe slows his steps. "So, you really like Jackson better?" he asks quietly, glancing towards the helicopter where Ariel sits curled at Jackson's side, fastening her seatbelt.

"Oh, come on," Ella says, dry, and Rafe looks down into his mother's beautiful face. "You want me to choose between the guy who made millions publicizing the fact that he's mated to my daughter and the guy who carried her for hours across a battlefield and then sobbed for thirty minutes straight while I worked to heal her?"

Rafe bursts into a smile. "I didn't know you saw that."

"I see everything, Meatball," Ella says, tugging him towards the helicopter. "It's really not a contest. But...don't tell Ariel I have favorites, okay? Luca's family too now, and I do love him. Jackson's just...special to me."

"Secret's safe with me," Rafe murmurs, climbing into the helicopter and then holding out a hand to help his mother up.

I'm still scowling as mom and Rafe climb into the helicopter, and when we take off and start to fly south towards the Academy. But as I turn to look out the window, the sight of Jackson reading through the magazine article about him breaks my mood and makes me smile.

"What do you think?" I ask, leaning my head against his arm and peering at the magazine open on his lap.

"It's weird," he murmurs, glancing at me with a little smile and then back down at the page, where more pictures of him with the Royals are printed alongside rampant speculations about why he spent Midwinter at the palace.

"You're gonna have fans now, Jacks," Jesse says, leaning over me a little to look as well. I laugh to find myself squished a bit between the two big Alphas, my cousin and my mate. "All sorts of girls trying to find you on social media, wanting to slip into your DM's."

Jackson glances up at Jesse with a frown and then shakes his head with a sigh. "I'm not even going to ask what a DM is," he murmurs. "I don't want to know."

"You might," Jesse says with a wicked grin. "Lots of pretty girls in this city, and you didn't get to meet any of them because Ariel kept you hidden away in the palace where none of them could get at you."

I growl, possessive, and elbow Jesse in the ribs. He laughs and grins at me, wicked.

"I met girls," Jackson murmurs absently, still flipping through the pages.

Jesse's gasp of delight rivals my squeak of horror as I turn my protest towards Jackson now. "What!?"

"At the bar," Jackson says, frowning and sending me a confused glance. "The night of the fight. A couple of girls came and introduced themselves - one bought me a drink. Two drinks, actually."

"What!?" I nearly shriek, making everyone in the helicopter turn to me.

"What's happening," Jackson asks, putting the magazine down and glancing between me and Jesse with a frown. "Is that bad? Am I...should I not be meeting people?"

I just stare at Jackson, completely conflicted, while Jesse cackles with glee and elbows me back. "Can't precisely forbid him, can you, Ariel?" Jesse says. "Not when you're out the same night with another man. Why shouldn't he do the same?"

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"I wasn't out with another girl," Jackson protests, frowning at Jesse but still clearly not getting it. "Is that...bad? Is..." he frowns, clearly thinking back on it. "I just thought she was being friendly. Plus, free drinks....."

I just scowl at Jesse and wrap my arm possessively around Jackson's, not liking this at all. "No, Jacks," I say bitterly. "It's fine. You didn't do anything wrong." But I keep scowling, glaring at Jesse who is delighted and, I'm sure, planning to milk this for all its worth. Still, a little part of me is quite smug and pleased that we're heading off to an all-boys academy where the only other eligible girl is my friend and dating my brother.

I raise my foot and give my still-smirking cousin a sharp kick, but he just laughs a little and turns away, waving a hand at me to let me know he'll drop it. For now.

"I like this one," Jackson says quietly, and I blink, pulling myself out of my thoughts and turning my attention to him.

"What?" I ask, looking up into his face.

"This one," he says, tapping the magazine. I look down to see his finger tapping on the image on the cover, the one of him in profile looking down at me with a beautiful smile on his face, of me laughing as I look up at him, the wind blowing my hair a bit. And I smile, all of my jealousy immediately wiped away. Because Jackson liking another girl...god, I'm wasting my time worrying about that, aren't I?

"Yeah, that's a good one," I say, wrapping my arm tighter around his and pressing myself closer. "Maybe we can get a copy. Have it framed." "Oh," Jackson says, turning to me with surprise. Then he smiles too. "Yeah, I think I'd like that."

I nod once as he turns back to the magazine, looking through it again, and I look over at my mom who is sitting across from us. She sends me a quick wink, letting me know that she's heard and that she's on it.

I smile at my mom, grateful, not really angry at her anymore. Because I can't wait to see Luca again, but if he'd been here, we wouldn't have had this moment.

And so I turn my attention away from all of that and towards the future: to the Academy where we're going and the war that awaits us beyond that. As my stomach turns with anxiety I realize that my mate drama is the least of my worries - and that it's time to pay attention again to the things that really matter.

As we start to land at the Academy on the lawn by the candidate barracks, I sigh and slip my cap onto my head, carefully tucking my hair back beneath it and mourning, passively, that I'm going to have to do this every day again. Not that it's a big deal it's just...annoying.

"Ohh, is this Ari Clark!?" mom says, leaning forward and grinning at me gleefully. "Ugh, you're such a cute boy." She presses her hand to her chest, clearly meaning it and turning to my dad. "Should we have another? A little boy this time that looks like me -"

"No more children, Ella," dad murmurs passively, like this is a discussion they have all the time. Mom sighs but there's no more time to think on it as the helicopter touches down and we all start to climb out.

"Jesse," dad says, nodding to him as we walk through the gates and start into the castle. "If you wouldn't mind going to your room and settling in? The rest of us have a meeting with Ari's professors."

My mouth falls open just as Jesse's does as our little group makes its way down the hall.

"Why am I being left out!?" Jesse protests.

"Cousins," dad says, dry, "don't need to be part of this." We all move towards the elevator and my stomach plummets. Because honestly, I forgot dad's ultimatum - I passed the Examination and all of my finals, but he did insist that all of my professors know that I'm a girl. God, what if the Captain protests? What if Alvez does something weird?

"Why does he get to go!?" Jesse protests, pointing a finger at Jackson.

Dad just quirks an eyebrow at Jesse. "Because he doesn't ask as many questions as you."

Jesse scowls but gives in, glaring at all of us as he climbs into a separate elevator from ours.

"It's so cool here," mom whispers eagerly, bumping her shoulder with mine as the elevator doors shut and we start to move upwards. "I wish I lived here."

"Mom, you already live in a palace," Rafe laughs, glancing at her over his shoulder. "Now you want a castle?"

"Yes, it's much spookier here," mom says with a tragic sigh. "Very atmospheric. Like there could be a ghost. Or six ghosts. Ten!"