

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy

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"Yes, just what everyone wants when they're searching for the perfect home," dad murmurs, sending her a smirking glance. Mom nods eagerly, like that's obviously true.

Jackson and I keep quiet, standing close together. Feeling my anxiety, he sends a warm pulse of reassurance down our bond and brushes his hand against mine. I smile up at him and send my thanks, but then I sigh and turn towards the doors as they open.

It's a short, quiet walk down the hall to the room where my professors wait, and when the five of us enter the Captain raises his eyebrows in surprise. Neumann just smirks like he was expecting it and then glances at his watch like he's eager to get this over with. Alvez, to my surprise, is the warmest.

"Ella!" he says, striding eagerly over and reaching for her hand.

"John!" she says, fond, taking his hand and leaning forward to exchange brief kisses on the cheek. My eyebrows fly up and I look, a little stunned, between Rafe and Jackson, who return my expression. I mean, we knew that mom hired Alvez, but we did not know that they were friends.

My dad clears his throat and Alvez murmurs his apologies, bowing quickly to my dad and taking his spot back on the other side of the table.

"If we could?" Neumann says, his bored voice ringing out in the room. "I have prep work to do, especially as the semester is starting so much earlier than expected."

My dad smirks and nods to Neumann. I frown at this as well. How well do these two know each other?

Why are all the adults friends and no one told me?

"Of course," dad says, gesturing for us three Cadets to line up next to him, which we do. Mom stands at dad's side, her habitual place, and he puts a casual arm around her, his hand resting on her hip. Neumann, Alvez, and the captain stand across the table from us, looking towards my dad with interest, the Captain's eyes a little wary.

"Thank you for meeting with us today," dad says, his voice even and business-like. "I'm afraid that my child has been engaging in quite a bit of deception this past semester, and I'd like your opinion on how we should handle it."

The Captain frowns as his eyes move immediately to Rafe, but Neumann and Alvez look at me, Alvez with a smirk, Neumann with a slight nod. "Ariel?" dad says, turning to me. "If you would?"

I sigh and then reach up, taking off my cap and letting my hair fall down around my shoulders. "I'm sorry," I say, looking between each of my professors. "I wouldn't have lied if I could have told you the truth and stayed in the school. But I think we're all aware that that wouldn't have happened if I had."

Neumann just looks back at my dad like he's waiting for him to make this worth his time, and Alvez looks at me with a deeper grin, his eyes moving slowly over the length of my hair like he quite likes it. A shiver passes through me and I glance at my mom, who doesn't seem to notice.

"Oh, goddess help us," the Captain murmurs, half dismayed and half frustrated. "The shrimp is a girl."

My pulse quickens as I turn to stare at my professor – as we all do. He covers his face with his hand and heaves a deep sigh, turning half away from us like he's embarrassed to have missed it.

"When I initially learned of my daughter's subterfuge I was vehement that she would not be returning to school this semester," my dad says, continuing on even as the Captain collects himself. "But my family," dad turns to frown at us like we're a great deal of trouble - which I suppose we are. "Convinced me to leave it in your hands."

The Captain drops his hand from his face with a sigh and looks at me evenly, a frown on his face.

"Ariel has passed all of her final exams with honors," dad says, looking at me, unable to keep a bit of pride from his voice. "And, despite her injuries, she did legally pass the examination by leaning on the strength of the bonds she has with her fellow cadets. By the rules of the academy, she has every right to continue as a student. But if you, her professors, will not have her here then I will take her home with me now and we will find another way use Ariel's talents to aid the nation in this time of war."

I stop breathing, my spine going straight as I look out at my professors - these three men who hold my fate in their hands.

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To one one's surprise, Neumann again glances at his watch. "I already told Cadet Sinclair that I'd be disappointed if she didn't return. I've put quite a bit of preparation into her continued enrollment this semester." He glances at Alvez and the Captain on either side of him. "If either of you have objections to the Princess's continued enrollment please be aware that you will incur my wrath as well as the...shrimp's." He smirks here, turning his eyes to me, clearly tickled by the diminutive he hasn't yet heard.

I scowl, hating that he knows my stupid nickname. And here I was, hoping to have his respect!

"I am pleased to continue," Alvez says evenly, folding his hands behind his back and smiling around the room at all of us. "Cadet Sinclair - Ariel, I mean, for clarity - is the only one of my students to have begun manifesting their powers. At least..." he takes a moment here to smirk at Jacks - a fact no one misses. "As far as I know."

Jackson doesn't react at all, staring back at Alvez with perfect equanimity. I fight a smile, pleased that Jackson's secret still remains safe with me.

"Anton Davis, of course, has manifested his - but he came in that way," Alvez continues with a casual sigh. "So, as you can imagine, I am eager to continue working with the one pupil whose course seems to be...working for her." He gives me another sly smile and I glance at my parents, still shocked that they don't seem to be noticing this.

Rafe too just blinks and nods.

But down the bond with Jackson, I feel his wolf raise his hackles. I send a little burst of panic his way, inquiring why no one else is noticing the way Alvez is looking at me. He sends back a feeling like a hand smoothing down my hair - cool and calm. I exhale slowly, leaning into that calm hand, trusting him.

But there's no time to consider it - not really - as the Captain begins to speak.

"So," he snaps, clearly not as happy as my other professors. "It's all down to me, then? To levy discontent, when everyone else is happy to let her break the rules simply because she's a princess?"

Anxiety turns in me, easily overtaking the cool calm that Jackson passed me a moment ago. Because he's right - of course he is. I'm only still here because I have the right connections.

"To be fair," my mom says, her voice calm and considering. "If another young lady had accomplished as much as Ariel this past semester and I were on a panel to decide whether or not she could continue her enrollment, I'd vote for it. My fondness for my daughter aside, I think she's earned her place here."

"I won't be accused of misogyny in this situation," the Captain snaps, looking my mother evenly in the eye and then ensuring that each of the rest of us get the same treatment. "I have no problem with women - I'm not the type who thinks that they're lesser than men, or weaker. But I was on this council at the start of this school twenty years ago when it was decided that single-sex education would be better."

"I was on the council as well," my dad says, and we all turn our attention to him. "And I remember that your opinion was split. Rest assured, Ivan, whatever your decision today - we won't hold it against you or make assumptions about your politics."

"I'm grateful for that," the Captain says as I blink, absurdly surprised by the fact that he has a first name and isn't just The Captain. "But I have to say that I agree with the decision. Girls at the school - it's too much chaos. I'm not saying it would be anything the girls themselves did - but the boys will get distracted. Falling in love, having fights over who is dating who." He shakes his head with a grimace. "It would be chaos - which we can't have, not at a serious institution that is working hard to turn out fine warriors."

I blush horribly when I realize that what he says is true - that all of that did happen when I showed up, and I'm just one girl. But...I mean, none of us are any further behind in our studies for it, are we?

"Your point about the chaos of enrolling young women is well taken," Neumann says, speaking quickly and on a bit of a sigh as if he really doesn't have time to indulge in this. "It unfortunately fights against hundreds of years of gendered ideology to assume that a group of idiotic young men won't go to pieces just because a girl is around. But luckily there is an easy solution to this."

The Captain turns to him, as the rest of us do, with eyebrows raised.

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"Ariel will merely continue to keep her secret," Neumann says, gesturing towards me. "Her brother and cousin will continue scent marking her to hide her scent. The realities of her sex and gender will be kept strictly secret amongst those who already know, which..." he pauses and gives Jackson a quick once-over, a little smirk on his lips, "apparently has already gotten out already."

I blush again, realizing that Neumann has probably guessed more about my romantic situation than I ever wanted him to know. But of course he does - why else would Jackson be here?

"It depends," the Captain says, snapping his eyes back to me. "Who else knows about this? How big has it gotten? Jesse Sinclair and..."

"Ben Ternicki and Luca Grant," I say instantly. I bite my lip, wondering if I should mention Daphne, but I hold my tongue, not wanting to get her in trouble.

"This is all?" The Captain asks, and when I nod he lifts his eyes to the ceiling, considering.

"If I may, sir," I say, taking a hesitant step forward. He returns his eyes to me, nodding. "I want to tell Tony," I hesitate, wondering if I should use his full first name, which I honestly just learned today. "I mean, Anton Davis as well."

The Captain's mouth pops open a little, I think appalled at the idea.

I continue in a rush. "He's the only one in our magic class that doesn't know," I say quite quickly. "And we've all already sworn ourselves to secrecy regarding our magical gifts - I'm confident he can be trusted. It's just...unfair, in a classroom of seven people for him to be the only one who doesn't know. Plus, counter-productive for our lessons."

"Anton Davis," my mother murmurs, drawing all attention to her even though she keeps her eyes on me. "The one who has manifested his magical gift?"

I nod to her, intrigued.

"I've met so few people with fully manifested magic - I'd like to meet him," she says, turning her face up to my dad. "Do you think it can be arranged? If we have time?" He frowns at her for a second and then shrugs as he nods, implying that it can.

"If we may," Neumann says on a heavy sigh, clearly done with all of this. He gestures towards the Captain, who stands with his arms crossed, clearly deep in thought.

"There will be an uproar if she's found out," the Captain says, speaking his thoughts as he works through them. "I won't have that. But...as long as she's not found out, I'm...I'm not against her staying in the school. She's a fine shot and the military will certainly be able to use her - it would be a loss to send her away just because she's a girl. But if the other Cadets find out and break into protest, your Highnesses," he says, looking at my mother

and then my father. "My first priority is to the mission of the school, not to one student. Am I clear?"

"You are," my father says with a stern nod. Then he looks at me. "Do you agree to these terms, Ariel?"

"Yes," I say, my word barely a breath as happiness races through me and my wolf turns happily in my soul, her little feet prancing. I beam at each of my instructors in turn. "Thank you. You won't regret it."

"Make sure of that, young lady," the Captain says, giving me a stern nod.

Alvez claps his hands together and smiles at us as he moves forward around the table. "I'm sorry that my time is short here," he says, bowing to my mother and father and giving them all the proper obeisances. Then he turns to Rafe, Jackson, and I. "The three of you I'll look forward to seeing in class the day after tomorrow. Come ready to report any...progress."

He gives me another one of those sly grins alongside a little chuckle before moving out of that room.

"What a charming man," mom says with a little sigh as he goes. I stare at her like she's insane, and when mom notices she just frowns at me, clearly asking what's wrong. Unfortunately, there's no time to respond.

"And I will see you tomorrow, Ariel," Neumann says, stepping close as the Captain pulls my father aside for a word. "I've got quite a bit in store for you," he says with a smirk of his own - though his makes me nervous for a totally different reason than Alvez.

"Really?" I ask, my eyes going wide as I tuck my hands behind my back and clasp them together.

"Oh yes," he says, grinning wickedly. "We're going to have a lot of fun this semester. Or at least I will."

I nod seriously to him and then let out a little sigh as he goes, because this is clearly going to be a more exhausting semester than even the last.

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When my professors have gone and it's just the five of us left in the room, my father tuns and gives us all a sharp nod. "Good," he says, looking between us Cadets. "That went better than I thought it would. It seems almost as if...at least Neumann was already aware."

I give a little shrug, admitting it a bit with a small smile.

Dad huffs a laugh and then runs a hand through his hair, turning to Rafe. "Off to the room with you, Rafe," he says. "You're all finished here."

Rafe's mouth drops open for a moment. "But..." he looks at Jackson and I with a frown. "Where are they going?"

"Another meeting," mom says with a happy sigh, her eyes crinkling up a little as she takes Rafe's hands and pulls him forward for a little kiss on the cheek. "Not necessary for you. I'll miss you baby, be good."

Rafe sputters in protest, half torn between his desire to give mom a proper goodbye and protest that he wants to join the meeting. But dad just raises a single eyebrow at him, daring him to counter his decision, and Rafe scowls.

"Fine," he murmurs, giving dad as much of a glare as he dares. Then he gives mom a proper kiss and dad a hug before heading out of the room. "Take their bags!" dad calls, gesturing towards our backpacks. Rafe scowls again but does as he's told, taking our backpacks from us and using the chance to say a few stern words to Jackson, instructing him to escort me back to the room after whatever it is we're doing.

Jackson smirks as if he finds it humorous that Rafe thinks he needs to be reminded.

But I don't have time for any of that. "What are we doing?" I ask, frowning as I look between my parents. "What's going on?"

"Nothing to be upset about, baby trouble," mom says, slipping an arm around me and leading me towards the door. "Dominic? Where to?"

"Just down the hall," he murmurs, starting out in the lead. Jackson brings up the rear, of course, and I frown over my shoulder at him, silently asking if he knows what's going on. But he just shrugs, letting me know that he knows as much as I do.

"What is with all the secrets today," I growl, giving my mom a poke in the ribs with my finger.

She laughs and scoots away from me for a second. "It's not secrets Ariel - just not a great deal of time to give everyone a brief about our plans for the day."

"We had an entire helicopter ride!"

"Yes, my love," she sighs, reaching out to pat me fondly on the cheek. "But it was very loud, and I was very distracted by the magazine with all of its lovely pictures and hilarious theories, none of which actually matched the truth for true drama –"

I groan, shaking my head at her, knowing she's lying but giving in to it. If mom wants to keep her secrets there's no stopping her, and honestly she's probably doing it for a reason so I give in, just following along. I trust her, after all. Jackson willingly follows close behind, quiet as usual, but down the bond I feel his utter trust in mom too.

We follow dad down the hall to a door that he pushes open. His face breaks into a huge smile as he steps into the room. "It's been a long time, friend!"

Mom gives a little squeak of joy and rushes forward, tugging me along with her. I go willingly, even if I am baffled. I feel Jackson close behind me as I step into the room and see a man sitting on the other side of a small table, a laptop open before him - a human, and one I've met before.

"Hank!" my mom says, abandoning me immediately and dashing over to her old friend. "It's so good to see you, I've missed you."

Hank is lucky enough to stand in time for my mother to run past my dad and barrel into him. He laughs as he wraps his arms around her. "It's good to see you too, Ella - you're right, it's been too long."

Mom beams up at Hank as dad comes to shake his hand, perhaps the fondest gesture dad gives to anyone outside of the family.

"You remember our eldest daughter, of course?" dad says, gesturing towards me.

I step forward eagerly, my hand out. "Hi!" I say, laughing a little. "I remember you! You came once to the palace when I was younger."

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"Yes, younger and smaller," he says, giving me a warm smile as he takes my hand in both of his, shaking it. "It's a pleasure to see you all grown up, Ariel - and I'm glad to hear that you're holding up your family's tradition of keeping things interesting."

I blush a little at this but laugh, knowing he doesn't mean anything by it. "This is Jackson McClintock," I say, half turning to gesture towards Jackson, who still stands awkwardly

by the door. "Another...Cadet at the Academy," I finish a little lamely, not knowing quite what to say.

"It's all right," Hank says with a happy sigh as Jackson comes forward to shake his hand as well. "Your parents already informed me of your rather unique situation. Two mates - it's very interesting. I mean, I'm a physician, but I've long been interested in how magic engages with the lycanthrope body. Fascinating stuff."

My mouth drops a bit as Jackson comes forward and shakes Hank's hand. Jackson, stoic as usual, doesn't say a word, edging a bit closer to me and starting to feel a little wary.

"Sit down, Ariel, Jackson," my dad says, gesturing to two chairs on one side of the small table. He sits down in the chair next to Hank's as Hank takes his seat as well. Mom hesitates and then takes a seat at the head of the table - between the two groups. I frown at her as she sits down, stepping closer to Jacks and slipping my hand into his.

Because something...something feels off about this.

"What is going on?" I ask, my voice a little snappier than I mean it to be. "Why...why are the five of us here?"

"We're here," dad says, folding his hands on the table and looking pointedly at the two open chairs. "To ask Jackson some questions. About his previous life in the Community."

My spine stiffens and I squeeze Jackson's hand. He squeezes mine back, suddenly wary. Down the bond, I feel his wolf's hackles raise. Neither of us say anything, both of us just staring stiffly at my parents and their old friend.

"Ariel," mom says, her voice pleading. "Don't get defensive, darling - it's not -"

"Then why spring this on us?" I snap, turning to glare at her. "Why wait until now, why not ask questions while we were at the palace?" "Because," my father says, quite evenly. "This is the soonest that we could get Hank here - he flew in this morning. Had the timing been different, we would have of course met him at the palace."

"Well, what does Dr. Hank have to do with it?" I ask, casting a hand out towards him. As the words fall from my lips I grimace, realizing that I'm being rude. I send him an apologetic glance and he nods to me, accepting my tacit apology, letting me know he understands.

"Because he's from the North," Jackson says quietly next to me, and I snap my head up to him at the sound of his deep voice. "Or," he qualifies with a frown, tilting his head, "if not from the North, than recently there."

"How do you know that?" Hank asks, leaning forward with a smile, intrigued.

"I can smell it on you," Jackson murmurs, lifting his nose and giving another sniff of the air. "You smell like home. Cool winds, snow. Kerosine, which the fancier households use to heat their homes." He shrugs.

Hank's smile broadens, impressed.

"We asked Hank to come because we trust him," dad says simply, raising an eyebrow at me and again looking pointedly at the chairs. "He knows more about the North than we do. We spoke to him this morning and he told us some things about the Community in which Jackson was raised that we found...concerning."

I clench my jaw, still angry about being blindsided by this. I look up seriously into Jackson's face. "You don't have to do this, you know," I say quietly, again squeezing his hand, letting him know that I mean it. "We can just...go to school."

"No, it's okay," Jackson says immediately, nodding down at me, even though I can still feel a kind of anxiety twining with his stoicism. He turns his head to look at my parents and Hank. "I don't have anything to hide."

"We're on your side, son," dad says, looking seriously at Jacksons. "We just have some questions."

Jackson nods once and takes his seat, not dropping my hand.

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I sigh sharply out of my nose and take my seat next to Jackson, giving my mom and dad a final glare for good measure. My mom nods to me, a small smile gracing her lips, letting me know that she isn't fully happy about it either. But, she wouldn't have let it happen this way if it wasn't necessary.

With a nod from my father, Hank begins by telling Jackson all about his years in the northern provinces - about working hard to bring medical aid to impoverished communities there, both wolf and human. Then he begins to speak of the Community, about never being able to break into it - listing the things he does and does not know, the gaps in his knowledge.

"Do you know?" Hank asks, clearly very curious. "About the status of the medical facilities within the Community?"

"I don't know much besides my personal experience," Jackson says, still feeling a little cagey. "I was trained as a warrior - they didn't...they didn't want me to know anything except what I was supposed to know. Everything I know about the medical facilities I know from being patched up inside them but..." he shrugs, "I heal very fast. I only had to go to the medical facilities once and from what I remember it was very...bare bones. Just a cabin like most of the others."

"What sort of supplies did they have inside?" Hank asks, eager, and from the way he leans forward I can see that it's all professional curiosity shining in his eyes. "Do you think that if we offered more supplies - completely free - just dropped at the door - that the Community would take them? Use them?"

Looking down at the table Jackson shakes his head sharply, his shoulders tense. But he doesn't say a word.

I squeeze his hand, anxious for him, feeling the tension radiating off of him like heat from a flame.

"What is it, Jackson?" mom asks, leaning forward towards him. When I look up at her, I can see that she likewise senses that something is off and that her heart is in her throat. I swallow hard, knowing that she loves my mate almost as a son now and hates putting him in a situation where he's uncomfortable.

Jackson raises his head and looks only at mom, the only person besides me who I think he's comfortable talking to. "I'll answer all your questions," he says softly, tentative. "But...you have to understand. The Community values secrecy above all else - I have been trained since I was a child to believe that if I told anyone outside the community anything at all that I'm committing the greatest sin. I am...fighting a great deal of indoctrination here. You'll have to forgive me if I don't find it easy." He shifts his gaze now to look between Hank and my father. "But I won't hold anything back. It might just...take me a minute."

"Thank you, Jackson," my mom says quietly, and I see her fight her urge to reach across the table for his other hand. "You take your time." "I agree, son," dad says, holding Jackson's gaze with a gravity I know is innate to him. "Thank you."

Jackson exhales deeply, hanging his head a bit, and continues. "The Community wouldn't take the medicine - they'd see it as a weakness. They'd throw it out - destroy it. Not only would they be suspicious of anything given from the Moon Valley government, they believe that illness and injury only make you stronger, and that if you're not able to survive it on your body's capacity alone then you...probably shouldn't live. Strength of the individual, and of the Community as a whole, was...critically important."

Hank exhales a long breath as he begins to type some notes on his laptop, shaking his head, I think hating that the Community thinks that way. His whole creed as a doctor, after all, is to help everyone - especially the weak and the sick.

Jackson and Hank continue to talk for a while, Jackson answering each of Hank's questions about the medical status of the Community to the best of his ability, though his answers are limited by the fact that the Community didn't let him in on most of the information. Dad lets Hank ask all of his questions, but I see his tension growing, see him waiting patiently for his own turn to ask Jackson questions of his own.

And as I see it, I frown because...if this meeting is not to increase Hank's knowledge of the Community's medical status and see what we as a nation can do to help those people, then what the hell else is it about?

My dad turns his head a little, feeling my suspicious gaze, and he sighs and nods when he sees it. A tiny confession that there is more to this than just what Hank wants to know.

When Hank turns to my father, letting him know that he's got all he thinks he needs from Jackson, dad finally begins to voice what I suspect is the real reason for this little interrogation.

"Hank has also told us some more worrying things about the Community, Jackson," dad says quietly, though his deep and resonant voice has no trouble filling the room. "About the Community's allegiances and their...stance regarding my rule."

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My eyes flash at this because...what?

"They're citizens, aren't they?" I ask, sitting up straighter and looking between Jackson and my father. "Of Moon Valley?"

"They are," dad says, nodding to me. "The lands the Community lives on are within the borders of Moon Valley - everyone born there has the rights of a citizen."

"That's not how they think of it," Jackson murmurs, looking down at the table.

"What do you mean?" dad asks.

My mate lifts his eyes to meet my father's. "I mean that...if they draw maps, they would draw the borders differently. They understand the Community to be a sovereign nation within itself. I mean, no one talked to me about it - not in those terms. But the way we were asked to think of ourselves? They...certainly do not think of you as their King, sir. And they do not at all see the laws of Moon Valley as applying to them."

"You keep saying 'them,'" Hank says quietly, curiosity thrumming in his voice. "Jackson, do you...not understand yourself as a member of the Community?"

"Not anymore," Jackson says instantly, turning his gaze to Hank. "Ella and Ariel know this - but I had some time living in the Capital before I came to school here, time during which I was meant to acclimate myself to Moon Valley customs so that I would not stand out so much at the Academy."

Mom's mouth twitches a little, like she's aware that three months was not nearly enough. But Hank and my dad stay still, letting Jackson continue. "During that time," Jackson says, moving quickly now, I think not wanting to remember it, "I...learned a great deal about the world, and about Moon Valley, and all the things that the Community purposefully kept from me. All the lies they told me, which they asked me to believe were true."

He hangs his head now and I tighten my hand in his, wishing there was something else I could do to make this easier for him.

"I made a decision in those three months," Jackson says quietly, looking down at the table, "even before I met Ariel that...I was never going back. What they do to people is not...right. I'm not stupid," he says, raising his eyes again and looking hard at my father and Hank, "but...I am ignorant. What I don't know about this world could fill a library - but I do know that what the Community does to its people is wrong. That there should be more...free will. If that's a thing."

My heart breaks for my mate as it does every time he tells me about his life in the Community. Once glance at my mother lets me know that she's feeling the same. Dad, however, remains stoic, his eyes on Jackson.

"I have to ask you, son," dad says, his voice tight and stern. "Why the Community would risk your learning so much about the world by sending you away. Why did they send you to the Academy?"

Jackson straightens shoulders and looks my dad in the eye. "I was sent as a spy, sir," he says, solid and even.

My eyes flare in shock at this bland confession.

Jackson glances towards me but then looks back at my father. "It's not a secret - it's never been," he says, shaking his head. "I told both Ariel and Ella that I was sent to the Academy to learn cutting edge military techniques and technologies. That when I felt I had learned enough I was expected to drop out and desert, to return to the Community to share that knowledge with them."

Dad raises his own eyebrows in surprise, glancing between me and my mom, perhaps wondering why we didn't tell him this. I blush terribly - but honestly, Jackson isn't doing that anymore, so why would I tell?

"And are you still a spy?" dad asks, returning his hard gaze to Jackson.

"I am not," Jackson says, almost harsh in his vehemence. "I'm never going back there. I'm not telling them a damn thing."

Dad studies my mate for a moment, clearly working hard to decide whether or not he's telling the truth. My spine stiffens at dad's even needing to think about it and I glare hard at my father, even though he doesn't look at me.

"You're enrolled in a military academy and receiving a salary from Moon Valley, Jackson," my father says, straightening up and leaning across the table a bit to look hard at Jackson, to impress him with the depth of his meaning. "Part and parcel of your education and your pay is the assumption that you're willing to fight for our nation. If you're no longer allied with the Community, does that mean you understand yourself as a citizen of Moon Valley now? Are you a patriot?"

Jackson takes a long moment to stare at my father, his throat working hard. Then slowly, without looking at me, he squeezes my hand. "No sir," he says quietly, looking hard at my father. "It does not."

My gasp rings out in the silence of the room.

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"Please," Jackson says, snapping his eyes to me before looking around at everyone else in the room, all of whom sit in shocked silence. "Let me explain."

My father narrows his eyes and nods once to my mate as I continue to gape at him, appalled.

"My entire life," Jackson begins, "I have been raised to believe wonderful things about the Community and horrible things about Moon Valley. In the past six or so months I'm coming to realize that I've been deeply misled and that actually the opposite is true – that the Community is a bad place and that Moon Valley is much fairer than I'd ever believed. What I had been taught about you, sir," Jackson says, lifting a hand towards my father, "has been...directly countered by our personal interactions."

Dad nods slowly, hearing him, but the frown tugging at the edge of his mouth lets me know that he, too, does not yet understand.

"I'm inclined to believe that Moon Valley is a good place," Jackson says, "but if you're asking me if I love it enough to give my life for it?" Slowly he shakes his head. "It would be easier, sir, to simply lie to you and say that I am a patriot. But you've been incredibly good to me," he looks at my mom now as well "both of you. And I won't lie to you. I don't love Moon Valley and I'm not a patriot - at least not yet. I...haven't had the time."

My father raises an eyebrow. "Then why should we allow you to continue in this school?" he asks. "We are attempting to raise an army against a serious foe, Jackson, and you could be an incredible asset for our teams -"

"Oh, I'll still fight for you," Jackson says, leaning forward, quite serious. I just stare at him, baffled - because honestly none of this is adding up. "Please," my dad says, leaning forward and holding up an open hand, begging for an explanation. "Make this make sense, Jackson."

"The only thing to which I have any allegiances in this entire world is Ariel," Jackson replies immediately, turning to look at me. My eyes go wide again as his gaze sweeps over me once, as if to reconfirm what he already knows to be true before he turns back to my dad. "She is...the only thing in this world that I know to be true and good - I don't have faith in anything else, not really. Our bond is the only thing that's real to me. I'll never betray her. And Ariel, I know, is a patriot - which is enough for me."

Jackson turns his eyes back to me now as mine start to fill with tears, as my mouth starts to wobble a bit.

"If Ariel's fighting for Moon Valley," Jackson says softly, "then I am too. She's a Princess of this nation and she takes that role quite seriously, and thus so do I." He turns his head back to look at each of the three others in the room in turn. "You never have to doubt me - not a single moment. Ariel would give her life for her country and I will give mine before I let her do that. I think...it amounts to the same thing. I'll fighting for Moon Valley because that's what Ariel is doing. To my death, if you ask it."

Jackson shrugs as if it's the simplest thing even as the tears start to slip down my cheeks. When he glances at me and sees my wet cheeks he frowns, reaching out to gently brush my tears away with his thumbs. "Don't cry," he murmurs, shaking his head like he forbids it. "It won't come to that. I won't let it."

"Jacks," I croak, totally shattered by the sweetness of him, about the depth of this confession that I don't think he truly understands.

"Please stop crying," he says, laughing a little like he doesn't know what to do as he takes my cheeks in his broad hands. "I - I can't think when you're like this. Please -"

"I can't," I say, melting a little at his touch but laughing at myself anyway - because I know I'm being ridiculous and that everyone is watching. "Yes, you can," Jackson

murmurs, smirking at me. "Come on, Clark - pull yourself together. You're a soldier, after all."

"Oh, shut up, McClintock," I say, laughing and taking my face from his hands, swatting him away and brushing at my cheeks with my sleeve. "It's all your fault anyway - quit making such touching confessions and I won't have to cry so much."

Jackson just laughs again and we both turn back to the others in the room, a little more embarrassment running through me as I see that all of them are just staring at us, looking rather touched themselves. Mom wipes her own tears from her cheeks with the heels of her palm, taking a deep breath and trying to settle down.

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"I'll take that," dad says quietly, holding Jackson's gaze. "Your offer to fight for Ariel, if you're not yet ready to call yourself a patriot of Moon Valley, as it does amount to the same thing. But I hope that in time you will come to love this nation as she does. As I do."

"Oh, I think I'm well on my way, sir," Jackson replies, giving dad a steady nod.

Dad nods back and then turns back to Hank. "What else do you need?"

"Oh, a lot, unfortunately," Hank says, turning to my dad with raised eyebrows. "If what Jackson says is correct then the Community is enacting great injustices against its citizens - huge violations of their human rights. I think..." he glances anxiously at Jackson here, "that you have an obligation to intercede, Dominic."

Dad hums a little consideringly and then turns his gaze back to Jackson. "And the Community," my father says softly, "you believe it strips its citizens of their free will?"

"In every way," Jackson says with a solid nod. "It denies them choices. It denies them even the knowledge of choice - knowledge that a different life is possible. There are no...options, only commands. They...take children away from their parents - raise them in different sections of the Community where they have no connection to their biological family, no chance to foster affection, because those things are marked as weakness. It's a move that strips and isolates people - allows their only allegiances to be to the Community itself. It is..." he sighs again, shaking his head. "A bad place, sir."

I see a muscle flick in dad's jaw as he works hard to keep his emotions off his face. Family, we all know, is incredibly important to him - and the idea of someone taking his children away...

Dad takes a deep breath, tucking the thought away and turning back to Hank. "How would you suggest we proceed?"

"If young Jackson here is willing," Hank says, glancing at Jackson for a moment, "I would like to continue asking him questions - quite a lot of questions. The information needs to be amassed and could save lives."

Dad turns to Jackson with a raised eyebrow and Jackson nods, agreeing to it.

"It means my relocation to the Capital," Hank says with a sigh, raising his hand to rub at his temple. "God, Sarah's going to kill me. But...it's important work. I want to do it. Maybe...I come here once a week, to continue my interviews with Jackson? Until we feel like we're done? In the intervening time I can confirm his answers and start coming up with a plan."

Hank raises an eyebrow at Jacks to see if this works for him and my mate nods, steady. Warmth and pride for my Jackson raises steadily in me and honestly, I can't take my eyes off him.

Mom squeaks in delight at the prospect that Hank and his family will be moving closer and leans forward to him, instantly beginning to make plans. "You two can go," dad says, sighing and pushing himself up from his chair. "I think we're done for now." He comes around the table and holds out his hand to Jackson, who shakes it warmly, dropping my hand for the first time to do it.

"Thank you, sir," Jackson says, holding my father's gaze steadily. "For believing me."

"Oh, how could I not," dad says, a little Sinclair smirk pulling up the corner of his mouth. "Someone who clearly loves my daughter that much is... difficult not to believe."

Jackson blushes lightly but nods, dropping my father's hand as mom comes flying at us, wrapping Jackson in a big hug before darting over to give me a kiss, murmuring lots of things about how much she loves us and how grateful she is for Jackson's information.

I hug my mom tightly, pressing my eyes shut, not wanting to let her go. "You'll be fine, baby," mom whispers. "Stick with this one and you'll be fine." "I know," I sigh back. "Just gonna miss you."

"Oh, I'm sure you'll see me around," she says, and I pull back a little in surprise to see her grinning a little wickedly. "Because if Hank is coming here every week by helicopter - I'm sure I'll catch a ride every so often."

I burst out laughing and hug her close again before kissing my dad on the cheek, shaking Dr. Hank's hand, and moving to Jackson's side.

Our family is still calling their goodbyes as we slip out the door, pulling it shut behind us. As soon as we're alone I reach my arms up, standing on my toes, emitting a little squeak of demand. My mate immediately complies with my unspoken command, letting out a little snarl as he pulls me up into his arms, lifting me completely off the floor.

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Jackson hugs me tight against his chest and falls back against the wall outside the interview room, sighing deeply as he does. I tuck my head against his shoulder, letting him hold me, going almost completely limp against him. "I'm sorry," I whisper. "That was intense. And they shouldn't have sprung it on us like that."

"It's okay," he murmurs against my hair, giving a little shrug. "They just...care. I don't mind and I've got nothing to hide."

I pull my head up a little bit, studying him, running a hand through his dark hair. "I love you too, you know."

Jackson bursts into a deep grin. "What?"

"When dad said you were in love with me? And you didn't deny it?" I look at him steadily. "I want you to know it. I'm in love with you, Jackson. And I'll fight for you and die for you too if I need to. Our allegiances are the same."

Jackson exhales, long and slow, before he closes his eyes and presses his forehead gently to mine. "I love you too, Ariel Sinclair. I always will."

I murmur his name like a prayer, raising a hand to his cheek and letting my thumb drift over his cheekbone. Jackson raises his chin and kisses me, swift and desperate, and I can feel down the bond how incredibly much it means to him to hear me say that - and then to say it back. We stay like that for a long time - connecting with each other, passing love and faith and devotion up and down the bond.

But Jackson breaks away what feels like too soon, glancing down the hall, clearly more aware than I am that we are indeed back in the Academy - that we've got to be more discreet than this. After all, I just promised the Captain that no one would know I'm a girl, and even if most of the other Cadets aren't here yet, if anyone sees us like this?

Yeah. It's going to raise questions.

"Also," Jackson says, returning his eyes to mine when he's assured that we're alone. "No more of this talk of dying for each other, all right? Neither of us is dying for a long, long time. So. Let's just go hang out with your brother and your cousin and put that out of our minds."

"Okay," I say, wrinkling my nose at him and pressing a kiss to his mouth. Jackson holds me tight for a second before lowering me to the ground. And then, even if it is a little less discreet than we've ever been at school, we walk back to my room hand-in-hand.

Back in the chamber, Hank, Ella, and Sinclair watch as Ariel and Jackson leave, the door closing softly behind them. All three are quiet for a long moment.

"So," Sinclair says, his voice low. "What do you really think, Hank?"

Ella squeaks in protest, her head spinning to stare at her mate. "You can't possibly disbelieve a word that boy said, Dominic!"

Sinclair laughs, turning to his wife. "I didn't say what I thought, Ella," he says, grinning at her. "I'm just asking Hank for his professional opinion." "It's not a professional opinion," Hank murmurs, still studying the door, "I'm a doctor not a...I don't know. Whatever kind of person is in charge of interrogating people who were raised in violent cults."

"So?" Sinclair asks, Ella moving to his side and wrapping her arms around his waist, leaning against him, her eyes on Hank the whole time.

Hank sighs and turns towards the two of them as Sinclair wraps his arms around Ella in kind. "I think that boy's been fucking through hell. I think he's lucky to have found his mate, to have a kind of...north star as his entire knowledge of the world falls apart and he struggles to rebuild it." Sinclair nods, accepting this. "And?"

"And I'm inclined to believe and trust him," Hank says, giving a little shrug even as he crosses his arms. "I don't think he's faking it. I don't think that anyone could pretend to be that passionately in love. He is...very dedicated to your daughter."

Ella and Sinclair grin, looking at each other, a silent communication passing between them before they look back at Hank. "We think so too," Ella says, clearly pleased.

"I'll never get used to this," Hank murmurs, gesturing between them. "The whole...mindpeak thing."

Ella grins and Sinclair just laughs.

But Hank twists his mouth to the side, looking off into the distance, his eyes unfocusing as he does.

