

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy

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"What is it?" Sinclair asks, his smile fading.

"I trust Jackson," Hank murmurs, still lost in his thoughts. "But I...do not think that the Community is done with him." He blinks and looks at his sovereigns, shaking his head with worry. "A boy like that - an incredible physical specimen? They will be angry to have lost him. I'm not a gambler, but if I were it'd be a pretty sure bet to say that they're going to try to get him back."

"Get him back," Ella says with a frown, "how would they do that?"

"I don't know," Hank says with a shrug. "Come and.....snatch him, or something?"

Ella just laughs, shaking her head and glancing up at her mate, the only person who is a rival for Jackson in terms of sheer physical prowess. "Trust me, Hank," she says, dry, "no one is making Jackson do anything he doesn't want to do. Except maybe Ariel."

"Or you," Sinclair murmurs, stroking a hand down the length of Ella's hair. "He's very devoted to you too, love."

Ella shrugs, not denying it but focusing on Hank.

"Either way," Hank says. "He is not... free of the Community by any means. I have long suspected that the Community has...unique and objectionable practices when it comes to children - it's good to have Jackson confirm that so we have grounds on which to make a move against them. Still...."

He hesitates and Sinclair raises his chin at his friend, urging him to continue.

"I would suspect," Hank says, feeling a little awkward about it, "that someone like Jackson has been...planned. That his height, his sheer physical prowess, his intelligence, and his abilities - his magic, if he has it is the result of generations of careful...breeding, for lack of a better word."

Ella stands straighter at this, a little horrified. "Breeding? Like...stock? Cows and horses?"

"Yes," Hank murmurs, his eyes going far-off again. "The Community obviously doesn't get new kids by a result of love matches, but instead likely through very careful planned pairings. It's a eugenic practice and completely objectionable but..." he sighs, looking back at Ella and Sinclair, "the Community is not going to be happy about losing its prime specimen. They won't let him go easily, whenever it is that they figure out he's defected." Ella and Sinclair glance anxiously at each other. "It seems," Sinclair murmurs, "that the Community's one major mistake was sending a Cadet clever enough to figure out how much he'd been brainwashed his entire life in the three months before he joined the Academy. If they'd sent someone a bit dimmer.....perhaps it would have worked."

"Dominic," Hank says, his eyes moving swiftly to Sinclair's, "we have no reason to think they didn't."

"What?" Ella gasps.

Hank shrugs. "If Jackson knew that another Cadet at the Academy was from the Community he would have told us, surely. But the Community is spread out on purpose - to prevent precisely the kinds of allegiances and affinities that Jackson was mentioning. Only those in the highest realms of power know how many people are there, and what they look like, and where they are. It's entirely possible that another - or several other - Cadets are here as Academy spies."

"God damn it," Sinclair murmurs, his mind moving quickly through the fairly lax admission standards they use for Candidates so that those from refugee or immigrant communities can enter even if they'd lost their birth certificates and other identification in their move.

"If that's true," Ella says, speaking aloud the thoughts they're all thinking. "Then the Community might very well be getting the information that Jackson was sent to find."

"And if my theories of connections to Atalaxia are likewise true," Hank murmurs, "then that information might be going directly into Atalaxian hands." "Shit..." Dominic says, hanging his head for a second before taking a deep breath and looking between his mate and his friend. "Looks like this is going to need a great deal more of our attention. We'll have to get Cora and Roger involved too - we can trust them and we need more hands."

"Oh," Hank says, a little sarcasm undertoning his words as he crosses his arms and looks between Ella and Sinclair. "What fun for me." "Cora likes you," Ella says, grinning at Hank.

"It's not Cora I'm worried about," Hank murmurs, heaving another sigh.

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When Jackson and I arrive at my room we find the door already open and Rafe and Jesse lounging casually in the living area. Rafe's eyes immediately snap to us. "So?" he demands, raising an eyebrow. "What the hell was that all about?"

"Oh, just mom," I say with a happy sigh, stepping into the room. "Telling me that I'm her favorite and assuring Jackson that he's her new Meatball." Rafe narrows his eyes at me as Jesse laughs. "Such an obvious lie," Rafe sighs, shaking his head. "Mom would never even joke about that. I'm her eternal favorite."

"Get in line, lil Prince," Jackson says, pulling me tight against his side. "I'm #1 son now."

Jesse laughs again as Jackson turns his head to look down at me, speaking softly. "I'm going to run to my room, unpack. I'll be back in a little bit?" "Okay," I say, standing on my toes and giving him a little kiss. "Um," I glance at my brother and my cousin. "Do you mind if I tell them what really happened?"

He considers for a second. "No, that's fine," Jackson says, straightening up and taking a step towards the hall. "Just...the two of them, though? Is that all right?"

"Of course," I say, beaming at him. Jackson nods to me, grabs his backpack from its spot by the door, and waves as he starts down the hall.

"You got him trained up good, Ariel," Jesse says as I grab my own backpack and walk over to my beloved little Nook, tossing it onto the bed. "That wave was very nearly a goodbye that our favorite foundling gave us."

"Yes, he's coming along beautifully," I say with a happy sigh as I start quickly to unpack the very few things I was able to bring from the Palace. "So?" Rafe says, unwilling to be deterred by small talk and jokes. "What happened?"

With a glance towards the door to ensure that we're alone, I very quickly fill Rafe and Jesse in.

"Damn," Jesse says as I finish unpacking and move to my regular spot on the couch. "I mean, I knew Jackson's story was dark but I didn't think he was a spy."

"He's not," I snap, glaring at him. "So don't even joke about it."

Jesse raises his hands, silently promising he won't, while Rafe takes a deep and contemplative breath. "Things are getting serious," Rafe says, shaking his head slowly back and forth. "Atalaxia declaring war from our south and east, now the Community in the north working with them...I think big things are coming for us."

My heart sinks even if he's only confirming what I already knew. "What do you think it means for us, though?" I ask quietly, my hands clasped together in my lap.

"I think that if things get serious enough that dad and Uncle Roger won't hesitate to call up the Cadets," Rafe says, looking between Jesse and I. Jesse is unusually serious, simply nodding softly as he considers it.

"Wait, really?" I breathe, leaning forward towards my brother. "Do you - do you seriously think that we could see war? Like soon?"

"He won't send us out green," Rafe says, moving his eyes to me. "But if we can make a difference? Dad won't hesitate - and he shouldn't."

"A lot of the warriors in our class are ready for it," Jesse says softly. "Your Jacks among them. Me and Rafe too - Luca, if he works a little harder at the strategy and actual theory behind it. Physically, he's ready. Mentally," Jesse shrugs, like he's not sure he's willing to count Luca in yet. "I'm not ready," I say softly, looking down at my hands, shaking my head.

"Your program is different, Ari," Rafe says, his voice gentle. "And you haven't been training as long as the rest of us. Neumann will get you where you need to be the Captain too."

I nod, agreeing, trusting my professors who so clearly trust me. "I'll work as hard as I can."

"We know you will, Ari," Jesse says, his voice warm and cheerful again. I raise my eyes to see him smiling kindly at me, indulgent. "If there's a prize for hard work and dedication, you win it. And we all see that."

A little warmth thrums through me at my cousin's clear praise. "Thanks," I say, smiling at him. Rafe nods at me too, confirming that he too thinks what Jesse has said is right.

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A little knock comes at the open door and I turn, gasping with delight when I see Ben leaning against the door jamb, smiling fondly at all of us. "Well, you Sinclairs are a sight for sore eyes."

"Benny!" I shout, laughing and launching myself off the couch and towards him. Ben laughs as he catches me in his arms, giving me a warm hug.

"Hey, Clark," he says, smiling fondly down at me as I hug him back and then tug him into the room.

"Did the train get in already?" Rafe asks, sounding surprised.

"First one," Ben says, nodding. "The one that came from the city this morning - I was able to get on that, though I didn't see Daphne anywhere. There will be another later tonight for people coming longer distances."

"Was Luca on your train?" I ask, eager, as we sit down on the couch together.

"I sure was," Luca says from the doorway, and I gasp again, leaping to my feet and running this time over to him. Luca laughs as he catches me, spinning in a circle, holding me tight and murmuring his hellos into my hair.

Things are quite cheerful after that as our little group falls into our old routines, chatting happily and joking around. As Ben falls into a serious conversation with Rafe and Jesse about the roles of ambassadors in the upcoming conflict with Atalaxia, Luca tugs on my sleeve and nods over towards the nook, asking me for a minute.

I send an anxious glance towards the door and Luca immediately knows why.

"Just five minutes, Ariel," he murmurs, leaning close to me on the couch and drawing a hand down the length of my arm. "To make sure we're good before term starts?"

I bite my lip though, looking back at him. "I promised Jacks," I whisper, and I don't miss that Luca fights quite hard against a scowl at the mention of his name. "That I wouldn't do any displays of affection with you when he's around. And the same goes for him too - when we're all in a group like this, I think it's best to keep things pretty... platonic."

"Well, he's not here," Luca says, apparently accepting the terms and giving me a little shrug. "And I just want to talk for a minute - just the two of us."

I hesitate again but then nod. "Okay," I whisper, taking his hand and pulling him over to the nook. We settle on the bed and I have to admit that I'm pleased when Luca makes no move to close the little velvet curtain. "What's up?" I ask, reaching out to take his hands as we sit across from each other. "I thought we left things...pretty okay."

"We did," Luca says, nodding seriously to me, and I can't help smiling a little as I stare into his pretty brown eyes, again take in his handsome face. "I just...wanted to ask how your holiday went."

I grin and give him the short story version which leaves out a lot of the best parts, which involve my deepening connection to Jacks. "What about you?" I ask, genuinely wanting to know.

"It was good," he says, dropping his eyes and giving a little shrug. "I missed you but...it was good."

"Luca," I murmur, reaching out and cupping his cheek in my hand, making him look up at me. "What's wrong? You're so...subdued."

"I'm still mortified, Ari," he murmurs, holding my gaze. "At...how I acted the morning after the fight. I'm so fucking ashamed of myself."

I groan, pitching myself forward so that I lean against him, hating that he feels that way. "I thought we were beyond that, Luca," I murmur, my arm slipping around his back.

"You might be," he murmurs, raising a hand to stroke over my head, down my neck, down my back. "I just...the self-loathing is a bit real. I am coming to realize that I have grown to be a very arrogant man with very little reason for arrogance."

My lips twist with regret as I study my mate, hating that he feels this way about himself. Luca just heaves a sigh, tracing his fingers across the soft green blanket that my brother gave me.

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"Luca," I say, lifting my head to stare at him dubiously. "You're an international boxing champion. You have some platform for arrogance."

He grins at me, his dimples flaring in that way that I love. "An international boxing champion who shouts at the woman he loves and barely passes his finals, trusting that his royal connections will get him through."

I twist my lips to the side, tacitly admitting that there...is room for improvement there.

"I want to be a man who deserves to be mated to you, Ariel," Luca says softly, sitting up straight and nodding. "I think...maybe that's why the Goddess had me meet you when she did. So that I could start working on myself before it's too late."

"You know I like you just as you are, right?" I say softly, looking up at him, meaning it. "I mean...I could do without the shouting - but everything else? You deserve me, Luca - there's nothing else you have to do."

"I want to be a better man," he says softly, leaning forward to nudge me with his nose. "Let me do it for you. Okay?"

I hesitate, not liking something about that. "Do it for you, Luca," I say quietly, pressing a hand warm against his chest, his heart. "You don't have to do anything for me - but if you want to be a better version of yourself then I'll support you all the way."

"Good," he says, giving a quick nod and then stealing a kiss so fast that it makes me laugh.

I kiss him back though, just for a moment, before beaming at him. "Does this mean you're going to really study now!?"

"Yes..." he says, narrowing his eyes, suspicious, "but...why do you look so happy about that?"

"Because!" I say, bouncing away from him and across the bed, reaching for my desk. "I can help! I got all of these new study supplies for Midwinter - mom gave them to me - I'll teach you my color coding system! We can -"

But Luca groans, laughing, and collapses on my bed, already exhausted by it. "I said I was going to study, Ariel, not become a complete nerd -" "They are one in the same, Luca Grant," I say, high and mighty, grabbing my collection of highlighters and colored pens and clasp them to my chest.

Luca laughs at me and I begin to lay out the pens next to him, explaining my system. He listens dutifully, either actually interested or doing a damn good job pretending to be, when another set of footsteps come into the room. I peek out from my nook and beam when I see that it's Jackson.

"Hi!" I call, waving to him as he comes into the room.

Jackson nods around to everyone and gives Ben a warm hug before coming over to me. My heart flutters a little with anxiety because, of course, Luca Grant is sitting with me on my bed and I don't know how Jackson is going to take that. But Jackson, to my surprise, has little to no reaction - he simply nods a greeting to Luca and moves his eyes back to me.

"Showing him the pens?" he asks, because of course he already got this tutorial on Midwinter morning when I opened my new pen set.

"Yes, he's not as excited as me." My mouth twists with chagrin.

"No one is, Ariel," Jackson says, dead serious. Then he moves his eyes back to Luca, even though he still speaks to me. "Do you mind? If the two of us take a minute to chat?"

My eyes go wide because...I mean, this is entirely unprecedented.

"Are you gonna...beat each other up?" I ask, looking between the two of them.

Luca scoffs and Jackson just shakes his head, looking back at me like he thinks I'm funny. I grin, loving that, because I've never been the funny one - not with Jesse around my whole life.

"Where to?" Luca says with a sigh, sitting up.

"Here is fine," Jackson says, taking a seat on the bed. Then he tilts his head towards the room, clearly implying that I should go.

I gasp, appalled. "Are you kicking me out of my own nook!?"

"We'll give it back," Jackson says, giving a little shrug, unable to help his grin.

"Don't mess it up," I say, pointing a finger at each of them in turn before standing and putting the pens back in their spot on the desk and stepping towards the moon.

"No promises," Luca murmurs, smiling at me as Jackson - to my shock - reaches out and unhooks the curtain, letting it slip closed so that they have more privacy.

I step back to the couch and sink down next to Ben, but I don't say anything. Instead I just stare, slack-jawed, at the curtain, kind of desperate to know what the hell they're saying.

"What's going on in there," Ben whispers to me as Rafe and Jesse continue to chat, sending not-too-secret glances towards the nook as they, too, clearly wonder what the hell is going on and if a fight is about to start.

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"I have no idea," I whisper back, shaking my head.

"Do you think they're making out?" he whispers to me, leaning closer. "Please tell me they're making out."

I burst into a grin and elbow him in the ribs. "Your fantasy, Ben, is not mine."

"What, you never thought about it?" he asks, grinning at me a little wickedly. "They're both your mates, you never thought about -"

"Benny!" I gasp, giving him a harder shove that makes him roar with laughter. "That's gross! That's -"

But he laughs too hard for me to get anything else out and I lose it soon after, laughing along with him.

"Are you scandalizing my sister, Ben?" Rafe asks, peering at us as we continue to giggle, slumped against each other on the couch. "It's just so easy," Ben says, slipping a casual arm around my shoulders. "She's a lil innocent vanilla baby with absolutely no kinks." "Precisely as she shall stay," Rafe murmurs, giving a satisfied nod and glancing again towards the nook, which remains enclosed.

"Nah, I think baby trouble has some spice to her," Jesse says, winking at me from his spot draped across his chair, one leg over the arm. "She just needs some time to access it."

"Well, it's not like that's going to happen anytime soon with the new sex ban," I say, pouting and leaning against the arm of the couch.

"Wait, what's this?" Ben asks, delighted and scandalized at once, sitting up straight to look at me. "A new development?"

I groan, tucking my face into my hands, wondering how the hell he doesn't know about this already - he was there that day, after all - did no one tell him? Jesse quickly fills Ben in as I blush scarlet, but the boys generously give me my space until I again collect my equanimity. This lasts quite well until the curtain to the nook finally opens and Luca and Jackson come out, each looking a little tired but certainly unscathed.

Ben leans close to me, about to make a crack, but I whip a finger up and point it right into his face. "Be careful about your jokes, Benny," I whisper, "because someone has a new development as well, and if you push me too far I might spill it to Jesse, which will result in life-long torture."

Ben freezes and then it's his turn to blush as he laughs. "Peace, then," he says, lifting his hands into the air. "Peace - stalemate - whatever you want to call it."

"Accepted," I say, offering my hand, which he shakes as Luca sits down on Ben's other side and Jackson takes a spot on the floor next to me. "But don't think we're done talking about it."

Ben gives me a little nod and a smirk and I can tell that he's desperate to talk about his newfound mated-to-the-Atalaxian situation too - and probably glad to have someone to

talk to about it. My heart twists as I realize how much this must have been weighing on him.

"Talking about what?" Jackson asks, looking up at me.

"Nothing, Jackson," I say, giving him a warm smile.

Jackson flicks his eyes to Ben and then narrows them at me, clearly wanting to know. But when I laugh and just shake my head, he shrugs and gives in.

"So, we're all good here?" Rafe says, looking between Luca and Jackson, his voice surprised. "No...shifting into our wolves? No brawls?" "Nah, we're good," Luca says, turning his head to beam at me. I smile back, genuinely pleased.

"Boooo," Jesse says with a groan, tilting his head back dramatically. "You three were the only entertaining thing we had going on. What the hell are we going to do for drama anymore?"

"Hi!" a voice calls from the door, and we all turn and let out a collective shout of greeting when we see that it's Daphne standing there, a basket full of baked goods in her hands.

I get up and dash to my friend, wrapping her in a warm hug that she returns, both of us effusively expressing how much we missed each other in the past two days. We both laugh as I wrap my arm around her waist and escort her into the room, where both Rafe and Jesse stand side-by-side, waiting to greet her.

And as she moves forward, hugging each in turn...

I grin, suddenly having my answer about where we're getting our drama this semester.

"It's going to be so good," Ben whispers when I sit back down next to him, giving me a cheeky grin, clearly coming to the same conclusion as me.

"I know," I whisper back with a little squeak.

"What's going to be good?" Jackson asks, frowning up at us again.

"Nothing!" I say again, giving him a happy grin.

"You two and your secrets," he sighs, throwing his hands up. "I'm done with it."

"He's lying," Ben mouths to me and I burst into laughter - because he's totally right.

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We have a really nice evening, especially when the food comes and then we get to share in on the muffins that Daphne's mother sent along as a gift, but even despite that I think all of our eyes are on the clock. Tomorrow everything starts again, after all, and we're all anxious to make a good start. We end the evening earlier than we usually do.

Daphne is the first to leave, making her excuses about having a ton of sewing to get started on in the morning, and we all bid very sorrowful goodbyes that she laughs off cheerfully, reminding us that while we have a workout in the morning she just gets to get up and have coffee and start sewing.

Ben and Luca stay a little longer, but they bow out soon after. After I give Ben his kiss goodbye on the cheek and wave him away down the hall, I take both of Luca's hands in mine and lean back against the wall of the stone corridor, looking up at him.

"So, what was that all about?" I ask, a little smirk on my lips.

"What was what all about?" Luca asks, blinking innocently and playing dumb.

I just narrow my eyes. "Your secret rendezvous with Jackson. Ben thinks you two were kissing, by the way."

Luca laughs and then strokes my cheek with his thumb. "Look at you, Princess," he murmurs, "practicing one whole hour of restraint in not asking that question." He steps close to me and presses a hand to the wall above my head, leaning in and looking down at me, just a bit. I bite my lip as I look up at him, thinking that he is...just a little too good looking in this little moment. My wolf agrees, giving a sharp howl and hopping around in an eager circle.

"Yes, I am a paradigm of self control," I reply, immediately belying my words by putting my hands on his hips and tugging him closer, a little shiver of delight running through me when his body presses against mine. "Now tell me - what happened between you and Jackson in the nook?"

Luca shrugs. "Nothing much. Just...established some ground rules between each other for how to behave. No beheadings, reduced frequency of insults. Rules of war. That sort of thing."

"Really?" I ask, legitimately surprised. "So mature."

"New man," he says, gesturing towards himself with his free hand before slipping it behind my neck and cradling my head. "Now, do I get a kiss goodnight? Or have we all grown so chaste that even that is forbidden?"

I laugh and tilt my head back, standing on my toes a bit, and Luca dips his head and presses his lips to mine. My body sings, my wolf prancing, to feel his mouth again on my own. I kiss him slowly and deeply, relishing it, pleased that things are more normal between us again. It ends too soon, if you ask me.

"I'll see you at breakfast?" he murmurs, so close that I can feel his words as breath.

I smile and nod, allowing my feet to fall flat again. "I'll bring you some of the pens," I whisper, grinning eagerly up at him and making him laugh. Luca kisses me swiftly one last time and then starts down the hall. I call him a goodnight and then move back into the room, where Rafe and Jesse are cleaning up the plates from dinner and carrying everything to the dumbwaiter. Jackson helps too, clearly doing my share of the work.

"Thank you," I say, laughing a little and working to take the plates out of his hand. "No, I can do this –"

"It's fine, Ariel," he says, laughing lightly and grinning down at me. I sigh, feeling lazy about letting the boys do the work - but honestly it all goes by so quick between the three of them that there's not much more for me to do. I slip into my nook, pulling out my pajamas for the evening, my ears trained for Jackson's footsteps because I know that he will not leave without saying goodnight.

When he comes over, I toss the pajamas on to the bed and take a step out of the nook.

"Ready to sleep?" I ask Jackson, reaching my arms up towards him. Instantly understanding, Jackson dips low so that my arms easily clasp around his neck as he picks me up, the arm around my back pulling me warm to his chest as he presses a kiss to my cheek.

"Yes," he says, giving a happy sigh and smiling up into my face, his dark blue eyes shining. "I'm tired - it's been a long day."

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"I know," I murmur, remembering the stressful meeting. "But I'm glad you're here. And I'm glad that you and Luca...worked things out, or whatever." "We couldn't keep going the

way things were," Jackson says, shaking his head at me sadly. "Our little timeshare will solve a lot."

"Timeshare?" I ask, confused, frowning.

"Oh, he didn't tell you?" Jackson asks, glancing towards the door as if Luca will still be there.

I shake my head no, wanting more information. Jackson nods and puts me down on my feet, clearly implying that it will take a minute to fill me in and he might as well put me down while he does it.

"Okay, goodnight, Jacks!" Jesse says, waving to him and heading for the bathroom.

"Yeah, goodnight!" Rafe calls from the side of the room where his bed is, where he tugs off his shirt, ready to change into his pajamas himself. "We'll see you in the morning, man!"

"Yup, you sleep well too, Rafe!" Jackson calls over to him.

And then to my shock Jackson gives a tired little sigh and grips his shirt with both hands, pulling it off in one smooth move.

My mouth drops open and Jesse stops in his tracks, almost stumbling over his feet as he reaches for the bathroom door.

"What..." Jesse says, staring at Jackson for a long moment and then at me. "What is happening here?"

"Huh?" Jackson asks, turning towards Jesse with a frown.

"What...why are you...disrobing?" Jesse asks, gesturing towards Jackson's half-naked form.

"Oh," Jackson says, looking down at himself with a frown. "Well, this is how I sleep."

A slow grin starts to spread over my face as I start to figure it out.

Rafe's footsteps echo in the room as he slowly walks over to us. "No, no," he says softly, like he's trying very hard to come up with an explanation for this that is not the obvious one. "I need answers too. Why, again, are you...preparing for bed in our room?"

"Oh," Jackson says, turning to look between my brother and my cousin. "Because I sleep here now." Jackson casts a hand out towards my bed in the nook as I press my hands together behind my back and work very hard to not grin.

Jesse breaks into appalled laughter as Rafe just gapes at Jackson. But Jackson does nothing, just looks between them, confused in turn. "Jackson," Rafe says, stepping forward and clapping a hand on Jackson's bare shoulder. "I love you, man, but you do not sleep here now."

"Yes, I do," Jackson says, stating it like it's a fact as he stares at my brother.

"No!" Jesse says, striding over, vehemently shaking his head. "You do not!"

"Okay," Jackson says, a little awkward now, glancing at me. "I mean, I didn't think you wanted Ariel to sleep anywhere but this room, but...I guess we can go downstairs to mine - the bed's smaller, but we'll manage -"

"WHAT is happening!?" Rafe shouts, casting his hands out, a little panicked now.

"Nothing has changed! Ariel sleeps here! You sleep downstairs! I... this is how it is! These are the sleeping arrangements!"

"Oh," Jackson says, nodding like he finally gets it. "Well, no, that's changed now. I sleep where Ariel sleeps," he says, pointing at me like this is the great clarification that will solve all of the problems.

"What!?" Jesse gasps, scandalized.

"Um," I say, my voice high and ringing as I step forward, hoping to make this a little easier. "We kind of got in the habit of it over Midwinter. We haven't spent a night apart since...well, since the night of Luca's fight."

Jesse guffaws and stares between us as Rafe goes pale.

"Seriously!?" Jesse sputters, "even after the whole sex ban, you guys just...ignored it!?"

"No, it's not like that," Jackson says fast, frowning at Jesse like he's making this dirty when it's really not. "We just like to...sleep together. To be together when we're asleep. It's..." he shrugs, "it's really nice. I sleep way better than I did before. Plus, I know she's always protected."

I nod eagerly, looking at my brother and my cousin, desperately excited at the prospect that Jackson could start sleeping here but trying very, very hard to be cool about it.

Obviously, I fail, and Rafe scowls just stares at me, livid.

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"Absolutely not," Rafe growls, looking between me and Jackson. "This is ridiculous – Jackson, you can sleep in your own damn bed –" "Again, I'm fine with that," Jackson cuts in, I think starting to get frustrated. "But Ariel would be coming with me."

All three boys look to me and I only hesitate for half a second before stepping close to Jackson's side.

"I would," I say, nodding. Because, I mean, I too had assumed that we would be sleeping separately while at school - but now that Jackson has suggested it? I really can't imagine any other way.

"Are you serious, Ariel?" Jesse gasps.

"I am," I say, nodding and holding his gaze and then Rafe's. "If you two are strident about not letting Jackson sleep here, I'll go with him."

"It's not safe!" Rafe snaps.

"Seriously, you think Jackson can't protect me? Behind a locked door?"

"But the secrecy element!" Jesse protests. "You can't sleep down there - people will see you coming and going and figure it out!"

"Which is why it makes sense for me to sleep here," Jackson says, casting out a hand. "Your hall is mostly empty - mine is full all the time." "Absolutely not, Ariel," Rafe snarls, stepping towards me with a growl. "If you go down there I will just carry you back upstairs!"

"And he will carry me back down!" I shout, frowning at my brother and stepping towards him in turn. "Don't you try to intimidate me, Rafe Sinclair, you big bully -"

"I'm not being a bully!"

"You are too! I'm my own person, I can sleep where I want to! And you're being all snarly and puffed up because you think you can scare me out of it!" Rafe pauses and steps back, realizing that I'm right - that he was using his bigger size to intimidate. But he gets over his shame quick enough and groans in frustration, turning away from me and sinking his fingers into his hair, cursing under his breath as he clearly tries to figure something out. Jesse just laughs, low and derisive, shaking his head at us. "I can't believe this is happening."

But Jackson just shrugs, meeting Jesse's gaze, clearly inviting him to do something about it. Jesse just rolls his eyes, giving in. "Fine," Rafe snaps, turning back towards us and

striding back over so that he's looking Jackson right in the eye. "But I have two rules." Jackson pauses for a moment and then nods, agreeing to hear him out.

"Hello!" I say, waving my arms in the air and standing on my toes. "I exist! I'm part of this negotiation!"

But they ignore me.

"One," Rafe growls, holding up a single finger. "Absolutely no funny business. And if that defies translation, Jackson, then use your god damn imagination. You sleep in that bed, and, at most you talk. Nothing else."

"Not a problem," Jackson says, crossing his arms. "Like I said, we just want to sleep in the same space."

"I, too, consent to this!" I shout, slapping my hands on my hips, fully realizing that they're not even bothering to pretend to listen to me.

"And two," Rafe says, putting up his second finger. "No excess noise. You snore? You talk in your sleep? You so much as creek too much in the bed and you are out!"

"Rafe you are such a hypocrite!" I exclaim, stepping forward to smack him hard on the arm. He snaps his head to me at that, finally paying attention. "Jesse snores more than anyone I've ever met and you're fine with it - you sleep like a baby! Jesse could win a medal for the sonorousness and frequency with which he snores!"

"A gold medal," Jesse qualifies, crossing his arms over his chest with a proud nod.

"Yeah," Rafe snaps at me, ignoring Jesse and not contending my point. "But I've been used to Jesse snoring since we were kids! I've acclimated! He!" Rafe gestures vehemently at Jackson now, "is new! His sound are different - they'll wake me up!"

"He doesn't even snore!" I roll my eyes.

"Yes, that's her," Jackson murmurs, pointing at me.

Rafe rolls his eyes in turn, ignoring all of these points, and snaps his attention back to Jackson. "No funny business, no excess noise. And this is a probationary period," he growls. "Jesse and I both have veto power - either of us can say at any time that this is done. All right?"

I squeak with glee, all my previous rage wiped away the moment my brother gives in. I throw myself at Rafe, seeking a hug, but he just shoves me away. "I'll get you some pajamas," my brother murmurs, glaring hard at Jackson as he strides back to his side of the room.

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Jesse sighs and walks back towards the bathroom as I find my balance. "Welcome to Casa Sinclair, new roomie," he murmurs. "Good to have you here."

"He's not a roomie!" Rafe calls over his shoulder, angry. "He just sleeps here!"

I squeak with joy and throw myself at Jackson next. My mate laughs and catches me, holding me to his chest as he falls back on the bed and takes me with him.

"This is the best," I whisper, a bit shrill with excitement. "When did you think of this?!"

"I didn't think of it, it's not a scheme," he murmurs, smiling up at me as he tugs my cap off and tosses it onto the desk. "It's just the way it's got to be." "Good," I murmur, dipping my head to press a kiss to his chest. "We need to -"

"I heard a kiss! No kissing!" Rafe shouts, and then something soft hits me in the back of the head. I'm laughing even as I turn to gather up the pajamas that Rafe hurled at me. I ignore him.

"Here," I say, smiling at Jacks. "These are for you."

"Thank you," he murmurs, taking the pajamas from me but immediately putting them aside as he pulls me in for a quick kiss, right on my mouth. Inside me, my wolf goes a bit jelly-legged with glee.

And as I grin at my mate, I'm not sure I've ever been so excited to go to sleep.

We all take a few minutes then to get ourselves ready for bed, changing into pajamas and brushing our teeth. I even steal a quick shower, eager to get the dust of this long day off of me. By the time I get to my bed the room is already mostly dark, the only thing shining on Rafe and Jesse's side being their little reading lights as they begin to wind down their day.

I work very hard to hold back a hum of happiness as I jump into my bed, flicking my little velvet curtain off its hook as I do so that it falls shut in a soft shush of fabric. My mate is ready for me of course, snatching me out of the air in his big arms and pulling me down next to him with a soft snarl.

"Silence in there! Remember the rules!" Rafe calls, still a little mad. But Jacks and I just ignore him.

"Are you cozy?" I ask, turning on my side so that Jackson and I are laying facing each other with our stomachs touching. He has an arm around my waist, holding me tight.

"I'm fine," he murmurs, his voice a happy rumble.

"Do you..." I hesitate for a second and then sit up a little bit, peering towards the other side of the nook. "Do you even fit on this bed?"

He laughs a little and I gasp when I see that his feet do indeed hang off the end of the mattress.

"Jacks!" I hiss, appalled. "We'll have to get a new bed! But will a bigger one even fit in the nook? We have to -"

"It's fine, Ariel," he murmurs, pulling me back down to my spot with the heavy hand still on my waist. "I don't fit in any beds - I haven't since I was a kid. The first bed I've slept in in like a decade where my feet didn't hang off was the one your mother gave me."

"Yeah, well," I murmur, not too happy about him potentially being uncomfortable, "she's used to accommodating giants."

Jackson laughs lightly and strokes a hand down over my still-damp hair.

"So," I say with a happy sigh, snuggling down into the mattress. "Tell me about this timeshare that you and Luca came up with."

"It's pretty simple," Jackson murmurs, and I can hear the sleep starting to sneak into his voice. "We both agreed that you've got limited free time to spend with your mates and neither of us are crazy about the idea of sharing it. So, we'll split it."

"Oh, really?" I say, my eyebrows going up and my wolf going a bit still within me, wary. "And...um. How did you decide to split up my free time, Jackson?"

"He gets dinners with the groups. I get nights."

"And did...either of you think to ask me what I think about this?" Jackson sits up a little, instantly less sleepy. "Are you...mad at us?" "Well, yeah, Jackson!" I say, casting out a frustrated hand. "Kind of!"

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"I'm sorry," Jackson says, and I can tell by his devastated tone that he means it very much. "I'm so sorry, Ariel."

"Jackson," I sigh, frustrated - because it's very difficult to be angry with him when he's being so sweet. "What are you even sorry for?"

He pauses and it's instantly clear to me that he has no idea what it is that I'm mad about - he's just ready to apologize for anything. I laugh a little and so does he when he realizes what is happening. He tucks his head down against my shoulder and I wrap my arms around him.

"Please," he murmurs. "I am sorry if I've upset you - but I don't understand. Please tell me."

"It's just - it's happened twice tonight, hasn't it? And more in the past few weeks. It's like all of you boys make these decisions and strike these deals, usually with me at the center of them, and no one really asks me what I think. And sometimes I need that help - like the morning when Luca came and banged on your bedroom door and I had no idea what to do. But other times - like this decision about the timeshare? Jackson, you and Luca can't just decide how I split my time without asking me about it."

He nods, and down the bond I can see that he instantly understands and feels terrible. "We were just trying to make it easier on you," he whispers. "It's complicated - and we both get so riled when you're between us."

"I know," I sigh, stroking his hair. "But just because it's easier for you to decide without me sometimes doesn't mean you should." "You're right," he sighs, pulling back a little to look me in the eyes. "I won't do it anymore. I promise."

"Thank you," I whisper, smiling at him and continuing to stroke his hair. Then I frown, thinking about the deal that he struck with Luca. "You're really fine with that? Just hanging out with me at night?"

"Well, I didn't quite say at night. I just said I wouldn't come to dinner and study time - that Luca could have that. Which is fine by me - I don't know how any of you get any studying done in a big group like that anyway. I know Luca just talks the whole time."

I smirk a little. "You grew up in a room full of boys too," I say quietly. "I would have thought you'd have learned how to tune them out as well." "Yeah, but we knew how to be quiet," he says, frowning at me like it's obvious and making me laugh.

"So," I say quietly. "Luca knows that you...sleep here now?"

"Oh, no," Jackson says, laughing a little. "He never would have agreed to that."

I gasp a bit and smack him on the arm, not used to a tricky side of him. He laughs a little too, enjoying himself. "Well then what does he think 'at night' means!?"

"Probably the dream state," Jackson murmurs with a contented sigh. "Which we can use. But I'm not sure we'll need it if I get you all night, and all morning, and in magic class..." he shrugs. "I think it's fair."

I bite my lip, a little uncomfortable that Luca doesn't know that Jackson sleeps here now but...also knowing that he's going to flip out if he finds out. I sigh, wondering what the best route here is - peace or transparency?

"I'm sorry," Jackson says again, pressing a kiss to my shoulder. "I'll do whatever you want. We can talk to Luca and change the plan - we'll do anything you want."

"Oh yeah?" I say, raising my eyebrows and grinning a little at him in the dark, wicked in my own turn. "And what if I said that I wanted Luca to sleep in the nook too?"

"What?" Jackson says, pulling back a little to stare at me, appalled.

"Yeah, you know," I say, working hard not to laugh, "like, a little Ariel sandwich -"

Jackson snarls even as he sees that I'm kidding, tugging me close against him, possessive. He doesn't say a word, but his answer to that proposal is clear. I laugh, I can't help it.

Across the room, Rafe clears his throat in a loud and obvious way that lets me know we're getting a bit loud for his tastes. I glance towards him and then back to Jacks, grimacing a little. He nods, letting me know he understands too, and that it's time to settle down and get to sleep.