

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 471

Daphne gasps, slapping a hand to her mouth, and we all turn towards her, grief in every set of eyes.

“Oh, Daphne...” I whisper, my heart breaking for my friend as Cora whispers the Goddess’s words to the rest of our family.

“Jesse’s only hope now,” the Goddess says, looking at Daphne like she’s very sorry for her grief, “is that the love grows strong between him and his mate. Strong enough that he can convince her to save him.”

Daphne stares at the Goddess in shocked silence. Until all of a sudden she breaks, and falls to her knees, and begins to sob, the little shadow kitten still clutched in one hand.

Jesse shouts in fear and outrage, shoving the dark figure away from him and stumbling back a few steps.

“Ow!” the figure gasps, stumbling too and raising a hand to her chest where Jesse shoved, frowning at him. “That hurt!”

The shadows begin to pull away from her, revealing a very small, very real girl beneath them. Jesse just gapes at her for a moment – this very tiny person – even smaller than Ariel, with her riot of waist-length black curls and her full lips pulled into an angry frown.

But in a blink Jesse is spinning away, turning, moving hastily beyond that realization, trying to take in where the fuck they are

But it’s-

They’re not even in the Castle anymore – not even in the same...world.

“Where...where am I?” Jesse whispers, shock hitting him like a brick, making his shoulders tremble as he looks over the barren expanse of hills under a dark, starless sky. He blinks hard when he sees the three moons hanging heavy over him. “You’re in the Land of Darkness,” the girl says, sounding absurdly...perky.

Jesse blinks again and spins back towards her, his mouth open, just...gaping.

Because the shadows are gone now, and he can...see all of her. And she’s just a girl – not some insane shadow ghoul with empty dark eye sockets and a pit for a mouth.

And she's...happy. His face twists in confusion as he tries to understand her expression, the smile pasted on her face like some sort of deranged...cheerleader.

Her expression falls a little bit. "What?" she asks, looking around. "You don't like it?"

"I don't...like it?" he repeats, shocked and completely not understanding anything. Anything at all.

"It's great here," she says, frowning at Jesse, defensive. "You'd better like it."

"Who are you!?" Jesse shouts at the girl, advancing towards her one step.

"Don't you take that tone with me, Jesse Sinclair," she growls, taking a step towards him in turn and snapping a hand up to point a finger in his face. "You have to be nice to me. Everyone says so."

"Did you bring me here!?"

"Yes!" she says, snapping her hands to her waist as that smile comes back to her face, looking immensely proud. "You're welco-"

"Take me back!" he shouts, storming close and grabbing her shoulders, giving her a shake. "Right fucking now!"

"No!" she shouts in return, a scowl taking her tiny features. "I'm never taking you back there! Not to that whore - "

Jesse gasps and then shoves the girl away from him. "Don't you ever call Daphne that ever again!"

"She is a whore!" the girl shouts, leaning towards him with her fists at her sides once she regains her footing from his shove. "A stupid, ugly whore who was willing to take your mark when she wasn't even your mate - which is illegal and a sin and -" Jesse just stares at this tiny person like she's insane. "It's not illegal you complete idiot, and Daphne is my mate -"

"No," the girl growls, stepping close again and sneering up into his face. "I am your mate, Jesse Sinclair. Not that stupid whore that you used to warm your bed. Me."

He blanches as he stares down at her. But even as he tries to deny it, his wolf gives him a nudge within his soul, a soft and whining one, glancing back at the girl again and again.

Because Jesse's wolf...he knows.

That it's right. That this tiny, insane girl is...

“My mate?” Jesse whispers, staring down at her.

“Yes,” she says, a smile blooming again on her face, so wide and pretty that it shocks him. She steps close and reaches up, winding her arms around his neck. “And we’re going to be so happy. We’re going to live here, in the Darkness, and we’re going to have eighteen pups, and we’re going to dedicate them all to Darkness and teach them all about the Shadows, and –” Jesse stumbles away, grabbing her arms and shoving them from his neck, staring hard at this...girl. This creature.

“But...Daphne...” He turns to his wolf again, who howls, completely confused. Because both are undeniable – it’s not like what he had heard before, that once you meet your mate all other girls pale in comparison. Daphne – his wolf still wants her, longs for her. But he also turns back towards this strange, tiny person, and...and wants her too...

“Don’t say that filthy name ever again,” the girl snaps, raising her chin and pointing a finger at his face. “I forbid it.”

“Who the fuck are you?” Jesse mumbles, looking over his...his mate. This tiny, insane person who is so...undeniably his mate.

“Oh,” she says, her face breaking into that ridiculous, unreal smile again as she snaps her hands to her hips, almost like she’s posing for him. “I’m Midnight!”

His mouth falls open a bit because....he’s mated to a girl named...Midnight?

“That’s not a real name,” Jesse says, standing straight and crossing his arms.

“Yes it is!” The defensiveness with which she immediately responds lets him know he’s right.

He narrows his eyes. “No. It’s not. Tell me your real name.”

She snarls, vicious, and storms towards him, some of that dark energy again radiating off of her, shadows beginning to swirl. “That is my real name, Jesse Sinclair.”

“How the fuck do you know my name?”

“Because I’ve been following you,” she hisses, standing close and staring up into his face, daring him to defy her.

Jesse groans, turning away from his mate and covering his face with his hands, shaking his head in an attempt to clear it. Because it’s all so...bizarre. How the fuck did he even get here – to this other world? With this...girl!?

“Hey, you’re supposed to love me!” the girl snaps, livid. “I wish you would get over your surprise and get started on that instead!”

Jesse spins to stare at her, appalled. “You kidnap me,” he spits out, his energy matching her own, “from my girlfriend’s bed, you scratch her face, and drag me here to this fucking wasteland, and now you demand that I love you!?”

“You have to!” she says, pouting, actually stomping her foot. God, what, is she a child!? Suddenly he stands straight, freaked out that she might be – she’s tiny – but no, one glance over her curving form demonstrates that though she’s very small she’s ...definitely grown.

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 472

“Midnight,” Jesse snaps, feeling ridiculous to even say the name as he holds out a placating hand towards her. “I do not love you. I don’t want to be here. Just take me back!”

His heart starts to pound in his chest as he realizes that he’s actually been kidnapped from his world – that he left Daphne alone and bleeding – that there’s a battle that he’s supposed to be at tonight –

And he’s here. With this girl. Trapped.

He spins in a circle, desperate for some way out. But not only is there no way out, there’s just...nothing. Absolutely nothing.

“No,” Midnight snarls. “I’m not taking you back.” When Jesse turns back towards her he sees that she’s glaring at him with those soulless empty eyes, her arms crossed. A shiver runs through him completely, his entire self.

God, fuck, what was the Goddess thinking giving him this as his mate?

“I’m never taking you back there,” Midnight snaps, shaking her head, her voice dropping deep as shadows – shadows just like his, but darker and more menacing – start to swirl around her. “Not to that whore. Not to that terrible nation where women run wanton and commit their sins and get paid for it. I’m keeping you here, where I can be your good mate and give you eighteen babies. And we’ll be happy.”

Jesse just continues to stare at her, a string of desperate curses running through his mind in an endless refrain. What...what the fuck is he going to do?

Taking his shock as acquiescence, Midnight straightens her shoulders, her face returning to normal. “Good!” she says, perky again. “Come on, I’ll take you to my house.” She offers a cheerful hand.

Jesse just blinks at her before he leans far down so that his eyeline is even with hers. “Midnight,” he whispers. “I’d rather fucking die than go to your shit house in this shit world. Now take me home to my fucking girlfriend.”

He watches, almost interested, as the finality of his words settle into Midnight’s mind, as her face shifts from eager happiness to shock, and then anger, and then rage. Energy crackles through her hair, her fingernails edging into talons at the curved points of her fingers. Each of her breaths grow deeper with her violence.

But Jesse doesn’t back off or even straighten up. Because even if he hates her – and he does, absolutely, just...hates this tiny person in front of him – he knows her. Knows her to the depths of him already, knows she’s not going to strike out at him – that this is all just her temper flaring deep.

And so he smirks, and laughs a little, and shakes his head. “You’re not going to hurt me, Midnight,” he murmurs, allowing himself to be a little cruel. “Stop fucking around. Take me home.”

Her anger fades almost instantly when he calls her bluff.

“I won’t hurt you,” she says, her eyes clearing, her words almost a purr. Fear races through Jesse as those eyes shift, looking behind him, to someone standing there. “But he might.”

Jesse spins, and then stumbles back, terrified, when his eyes focus on a man standing there.

A man he horribly recognizes. Corporeal this time, when he was only shadow before.

“Hello, little shadow Duke,” the God of Darkness says, striding forward. Jesse gasps as the God comes close but doesn’t touch, instead passing him. Jesse spins to watch as the God of Darkness moves to Midnight’s side, slipping an arm around her shoulders. “I very much hope that you’re being kind to my girl.”

“No, papa,” Midnight says, leaning against the God and giving a very nearly ridiculous pout. “He’s been very cruel.”

Jesse just...stares, realizing that his life is dancing on a very, very thin string.

“Now now, Sinclair,” the God of Darkness says, tugging Midnight mockingly close to his side, making it very clear that this is his girl. “We musn’t be mean to my little Midnight here. Not when she’s waited so long to meet you.”

Midnight lifts her chin towards Jesse, glaring, righteous and proud.

Jesse just stares between them, not sure if he's supposed to apologize or...grovel...or...

"But girl," the God says, snapping Jesse away from the question as he turns his face to frown down at Midnight. "You did not follow the timeline I gave you. You have caused a great deal of trouble for me."

"But," she gasps, shaking her head and holding a hand out towards Jesse. "He was with the whore! He was going to give her his mark!"

The God of Darkness glances Jesse's way again, amused, before looking back at the girl. "Regardless, Midnight," he says, stern, shaking his head. "You were impatient, which is a sin. You've claimed your mate earlier than I told you to, causing a sincere disruption of my plans."

The God clicks his tongue shamefully and Midnight hangs her head as Jesse goes pale.

"Now," Darkness snarls, "I have to move up my plans in Atalaxia and we no longer have a spy in the midst of the royal family of Moon Valley."

Midnight sighs and murmurs a formal apology, but Jesse can't even listen as he finally begins to understand.

The spies.

The spy.

This whole time he'd been wracking his brain trying to figure out how Atalaxia was getting information about them - about Ariel, and where she would be that day of the battle - what she could do -

This whole time it wasn't Perry Gibson being some kind of spying savant, it was...him. Midnight, lurking in the darkness in the shadows through some sort of power she controls, watching...him.

He, Jesse, was the leak.

He groans, putting his head in his hands as the pieces finally fall into place.

"No need for that, boy," the God of Darkness says, letting his hand drop from Midnight's shoulders as Jesse again raises his head, his face agonized. "You'll be very happy here with the girl, I am sure. You," he snaps, turning his head sharply to the girl as Midnight jumps to attention before him.

Something about how she does it so eagerly, like a dog starving for scraps – sets Jesse's teeth on edge.

"Yes, master?" she says, looking up at the God adoringly.

"Keep him contained," the God says, reaching out a hand to grasp her chin, turning her face side to side like he's inspecting it and finds it wanting. "Do not, under any circumstances, take him back to the Earth."

"Yes, sir!" Midnight says, her face bursting into her strange fake smile.

The God of Darkness nods once and begins to walk in the direction that he came, fading and then vanishing as he goes, leaving Jesse awe-struck and dumb with shock, and fear, and agony when he realizes that...he's not going home.

He's not going to go see Daphne today to comfort her, or help Ariel win that battle, not today, maybe not...ever.

And that all of this – all of it has been specifically constructed as some kind of trap. So that whatever Atalaxia has planned for his family tonight and in the war...

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 473

It's big. And his family has no idea that it's coming.

"Isn't he amazing?" Midnight breathes, moving quickly to Jesse's side and staring up at him, delighted.

"That – that guy?" Jesse asks, gesturing over his shoulder to where the God of Darkness went. "That guy is amazing?"

"Yes," she says, nodding reverently.

Jesse hesitates. "Is he like...your dad?"

Midnight just laughs, shaking her head, her curls bouncing. "He's not my father father – I mean, I'm not nearly good enough to be so blessed," she says, even blushing at the idea. "But he raised me and when I'm a good girl he lets me call him papa."

Jesse's face twists with disgust and confusion. "And when you're a...bad...girl?"

“Then he beats me,” she says, blinking like it’s the obvious answer. “And makes me call him Master and Great One and Dark King.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” Jesse murmurs, raising a hand to cover his face, agonized for this poor girl. “Who – who are your real parents?”

“I don’t know,” she sighs, dismissive of the point. “Who cares?”

“Midnight,” Jesse sighs, dropping his hand and frowning at her. “You should care – how – how long have you been here?”

“What?” she frowns at him like she’s confused. “I’ve been here forever.”

He balks at her, unsure how to believe that. “How old are you?”

“I’m twenty-three,” she says, beaming at him. “Just like you!”

He frowns at her. “But you’ve been here...forever.”

“Oh whatever,” she sighs, crossing her arms and rolling her eyes. “Stop trying to trap me in my thoughts. Time is stupid.” “Do you ever remember not being here?”

“No.”

“Do you remember where you’re from?”

“Stop being so boring,” Midnight groans, tilting her head back. “Let’s go – we’re in love! Start acting like it!”

Jesse is about to protest, again, that they’re definitely not in love but his wolf interrupts with a sharp bite to his soul.

Look at her wolf, Jesse’s wolf whispers, suddenly horrified. Jesse flinches, surprised that his wolf is interrupting so important a conversation, but then Jesse shifts his focus inwards. His wolf is peering across a dark space – a space where, Jesse suddenly realizes, their bond will be if he accepts it.

He gulps, wanting to rush away from it, wanting that bond to be with Daphne not this girl – not wanting anything to snap into place by accident –

But his wolf howls, and nips at Jesse, and insists – absolutely insists that he look. So Jesse leans closer, peering in to the darkness where...where Midnight’s wolf suddenly appears.

Jesse gasps when he sees her, horrified, because the wolf is...she’s wrong. She stands still with her four legs splayed wide and unsteady in what looks like a huge puddle of oil. Her teeth are bared, and she’s panting but staring unseeingly forward into the void – not at

Jesse, not at his wolf, just...into space. Her eyes shine darkly with a strange blue light and all over her fur drips with that oil. Like she's soaking in it, like it's...it's pulling her down, begging her to collapse and to drown –

Jesse groans, stumbling back, eager to get away, his own hand moving to grasp his own healthy wolf's fur. His wolf stumbles back with him, afraid, not wanting to touch her – knowing that he, too, will be sucked down into that oil if he does.

That he will become corrupted by it, as Midnight is.

“Come on!” Midnight says, snapping Jesse out of that inner space, eagerly holding out her hand to him. “Let me show you my house!”

Jesse just stares at Midnight, and then down at her hand, and then back at her face, completely blank.

Because if he takes her hand, it means he...gives into it. Into the reality that he can't go back – can't go to Daphne, the woman he loves.

But if he doesn't take her hand...

What? He just stands here...forever?

“Don't you even like me, Jesse?” Midnight asks, breaking him out of his trance.

Jesse just stares at Midnight as she bites her lip.

“Jesse,” she whispers, shaking her head softly, her curls shifting as if on the wind. “I've been waiting my whole life for you and...you don't even like me?”

Jesse blinks his dry eyes and stares down at Midnight, at this poor corrupted girl staring up at him with such hope and sadness mingling in her eyes.

And his heart just...breaks.

Jesse just stares at the girl standing before him, wondering if this is some sort of game, some ruse she's playing to trick him into feeling sorry for her. Because he's got a tender heart – he knows that, as much as he tries to hide it from everyone else. Could this girl have figured that out and is now using those big brown eyes, that sad question, to trick him? But even as he thinks it his wolf nips him, hard.

Can't you see it? His wolf hisses, livid with Jesse. This girl is neglected and all alone. The God of Darkness has ruined her wolf – and he's been using her to spy on you. She has nothing, and you cannot even be kind to her?

Jesse's wolf nips him again, hard, ashamed.

And Jesse flinches and blinks again, staring with pity down into Midnight's sweet, broken little face. Because even if it sounds absurd, when Jesse looks into Midnight's dark eyes he knows...that it's absolutely true. That she is some kind of...bizarre orphan of Darkness, raised here alone, with the sole purpose of spying on him and his family.

Or perhaps as...punishment? For him, for his family, for the Goddess? God, but Jesse doesn't know – he doesn't understand anything at all.

And as he realizes it, Jesse's heart reaches for this strange lost girl. For his fated mate, the girl the Goddess picked for him. "Of course I like you, Midnight," Jesse says, quiet and gentle, taking a step closer but not taking her hand, still wary of the corruption in her soul. "Go ahead. Show me your house."

Midnight's face breaks into that dazzling smile, the truly happy one, not the fake one, and she laughs as she spins and begins to dash away across the packed dirt of the wasteland before them. "Come on!" she says, cheerful. "It's just over this hill!"

Jesse sighs, hangs his head, and with absolutely nothing else to do and no idea where his life will take him next, follows. With each and every footstep, Daphne's name echoes in his heart.

I don't have long to kneel at Daphne's devastated side, doing my best to comfort her as she adjusts to the impossible news that the man she's in love with – who she was so sure was her mate – isn't. And that he's been swept away to another world by a dark magical person who actually is his fated mate, confirmed by the Goddess herself.

The Goddess left, finally, to get more information about Jesse and to leave us to our grief as we fall apart. In the few quiet minutes after her departure my dad leaves me with my friend to hold her while she cries. But it's too short a time before he comes and presses a soft hand to my shoulder. I look up at my dad, at the grief and worry on his face and nod once, understanding. There's just...too much to do.

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 474

I murmur a few words to Daphne, explaining, and help her get to her feet. Honestly, I'm not even sure if she hears anything, she's just too lost to her grief. Ben – sweet Benny – is waiting with open arms and I pass Daphne over to him. He gives me a steady nod as he wraps his arms around Daphne and pulls her in for a hug.

I take a moment to nod back to Ben, and to shift my eyes to Daphne, watching as she cries into his chest, Jesse's little shadow cat curled mournfully on her shoulder. But that's all I

have time for as Jackson slips a hand around my waist and gives me a little tug, pulling me along to the small group on the other side of the tent that needs my attention now.

Because, of course, I have a thousand roles to play today. Not just friend, but worried sister, and nation's princess. And the magical source that has the power to make a change in this battle that is so clearly ramping up.

That is, of course, if I can access my magic.

I grit my teeth, looking up at Jackson as we cross the tent. His eyes are already peering down at me, his mouth set in a determined line. But he simply nods and sends a very intense swell of love and support down our bond that does wonders for my poor wounded heart. I step closer to him, pressing myself to his warm side as we join Rafe, our parents, and my aunt and uncle in the corner.

Mom can't help the little tears that swell in her eyes as Jackson and I step close. Her gaze sweeps between us and a little trembling smile takes her lips – because she likes us together, I know. Likes his kindness and his steady presence and the way I am the center of his whole world. And she was worried for us after Luca marked me – but now here we are with our arms around each other.

It does her good, I know, to see her daughter so loved when she's not around to do it.

My dad inhales sharply through his nose when we step close and I shift my gaze to him.

"Things are complicated, Ariel, but we need to –"

He gasps mid-sentence – we all do – as a huge sound breaks through the air, something loud and horrible soaring through the air over our heads. I gasp and clutch Jackson's shirt in my hands, and he wraps his arm more firmly around me, one hand tucked behind my head. We all turn towards the sound as it passes us and then wait a beat before –

BOOM.

A huge explosion sounds somewhere in the distance, but obviously on our side. Clearly, the attack has begun.

I snap my head to my father to see him pale, his jaw set. "Roger," he snarls, a command.

"On it," Roger says, striding away, tugging Cora with him as he goes, unwilling to be away from her any more than he has to.

"Ariel," dad snaps, drawing my eyes back to him. Mom and Rafe step closer, closing our circle. "Something – something is happening. We're still scrambling to figure out all the details. We don't know if it was coincidence, or designed to align with the funeral for the

two Cadets since they knew I was away from the battlefield, but soon after Juniper was taken the Atalaxians started this assault. It is...a big one.”

Dad sighs, dipping his face into his hand, clearly trying to hold it all together – his role as King, and as father whose youngest daughter is missing, who is about to ask his eldest daughter to risk her life.

“Whatever you need, dad,” I say, taking as much of a step forward as I can, wrapped in Jackson’s arms as I am. Jackson moves forward with me, understanding the gesture. “I’ll do whatever you need.” Mom raises her hand to dad’s shoulder, her whole heart in her eyes as she looks up into her mate’s face.

“We’re running low on resources, Ari,” dad murmurs, dropping his hand and looking me in the eyes. “It’s – it’s dire. Moon Valley has incredible technology but...we’re just so much smaller than Atalaxia. They just have more – more weapons, more people. You may be the only thing left in our arsenal that can tilt this battle – this war – in our favor. Especially if they decide to throw everything they have at us.”

I nod, swallowing as I do, understanding.

“You know I’d never ask,” dad says, shaking his head at me, his throat tightening and strangling his voice in a way I’ve never heard before. “I know what you’ve been through these past weeks – and I know you’re still hurt, and healing – but Ariel – ”

“Dad,” I say softly, shaking my head, breaking from Jackson’s arms as I step forward towards him and place a hand on his arm. “You don’t have to ask, okay? I’m here. I want to be here.” I nod, looking up at him, my whole heart in my own eyes now. “This is my nation too, right? My people as much as yours. I’m ready. Or at least – I’ll do whatever I can.”

Tears well in dad’s eyes as he reaches for me, pulling me into his chest and wrapping me in a tight hug. “I don’t know what this world did to deserve you, Ariel,” he murmurs, pressing a kiss to my hair. “But I’m so incredibly grateful that I get to be your dad.”

I tuck my face close against his chest, fighting tears – tears of love for him, and fear about what’s to come, and worry about... about whether or not I can do this. Whether or not what magic I have with my bond to Luca broken will be enough.

“Dominic,” Roger barks, he and Cora stepping close.

Dad loosens his grip on me, looking over at my uncle.

“It’s bad,” Roger says, nodding around at all of us. “It’s what we feared – the full assault. We have to move.”

Silence reigns as everyone in the circle turns their eyes to me.

I loose a long breath and stepping away from my father, stepping back until I feel Jackson's warm chest behind me. His hands rest light on my hips as he senses that I want him near but don't want to be held right now. That I need to stand on my own two feet.

"Okay," I say, lifting my chin and looking at mom and Cora. "Let's do this. Is there somewhere we can go? I need to...figure out what's up with my magic."

Mom swallows hard and then nods to me, taking Rafe's hand, clearly wanting him along. "Yes," she says, quiet and worried. "Come on, out back. We'll see what you can do."

I slowly exhale as I concentrate on the little stack of wood at the center of the empty space between the tents that my mother lead us to. A little anxious, I glance around at all of the very flammable canvas fabric around us.

"Steady," Jacks murmurs, smirking down at me from his place at my side, sensing the direction of my thoughts. "You control it. You won't set the camp ablaze unless you want to."

I huff a laugh and shake my head, hoping that he's right. Then I glance to my other side, where mom, Cora, and Rafe are waiting, watching me carefully, impatient though they're trying to hide it. Jackson takes my hand and I feel the power start to flow between us. Just a trickle right now, but more at the ready whenever I want to pull on it.

"I mean, we're not going to have the darkness," I say, my voice small, my eyes moving to Cora's. She swallows hard as she nods to me, raising her chin. My mom steps closer to her sister, taking her hand. "Or...the wind."

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 475

"Flame is still great, Ari," Rafe murmurs, his green eyes wide and full of support. "It's kind of the important part. Let's just... see what you can do."

"Okay," I whisper, squeezing Jackson's hand. And then I exhale again and turn back towards the stack of wood, concentrating on it.

Instantly, it bursts into flames, bringing a little smile to my mouth. Because despite all of the horrible things that have happened, I do love the magic. It's warm and peaceful and right. I pull on Jackson's power then, letting the fire roar happily as it grows in size, far bigger than it should be with such a little pile of wood to feed it.

I take a minute to let the joy and the magic fill me, taking a deep and peaceful breath. And then I begin to experiment, making the flame go bigger and smaller, seeing what I can do.

“It’s still very effective,” Rafe murmurs, glancing at our mom. “Even without the wind. The fact that she can just look at something and make it burst into flames – I mean, as long as her visuals aren’t interrupted...”

Rafe and mom continue, discussing military applications, but I sigh and little and turn back to my happy little fire. Or, happy gigantic inferno, more accurately.

But even if Rafe is right that my magic is still a very destructive force, I miss the wind. Being able to turn it into that wide and flaming gyre...

Man, but that had been cool. And it had felt good and right, singing through my body. After all, that’s how I had been able to move it around.

A little wind ripples through the little square clearing now as I remember what it had been like when the fire danced along with me, moving as I moved. The wind moves towards the fire, which seems to reach for it, eager for the fresh oxygen that it brings. I smile when the wind plays with the tendrils of fire, letting them grow a little, pulling it towards the sky.

Then I smile, turning my head to Cora. “Is that you?” I ask, curious, nodding towards it. “Bringing in the wind?”

But she just stares at me and slowly shakes her head. “I’m not doing anything, Ariel.”

I frown, glancing back towards the fire as the wind dies down. “You didn’t?” I whisper. Because, I mean...we’re entirely surrounded by tents and it’s a calm day. If Cora didn’t do it...

My mom gasps and I turn to see her grasping Cora’s hand, looking at me with wide eyes.

“What?” I ask, feeling wary, taking a step closer to Jackson, who is ready for me – as he always is. Jackson steps behind me, keeping hold of my hand with his, letting me lean against his broad chest.

“Sweetheart,” mom whispers, glancing back at the fire. “Baby...try it again, okay? Can you...can you pull on the wind? Like you did before when...Luca was here too?”

I frown at her and shake my head. “Mom, it needs physical contact,” I say. “That’s how it’s always been. And he’s...not here.”

She looks at me, her expression pleading, and she glances once at Jackson like she’s worried for him. “But he is with you, baby,” mom whispers, raising her own hand to wrap around her neck, high up and close to her jaw.

I gasp a little, realizing that she's touching her neck precisely where Luca marked mine. My own hand flies up to the mark – the indelible piece of Luca that I'll always carry –

And then I snap my head back to the fire that still burns in the middle of the clearing, and I pull hard on the wind, just as I would if Luca were here holding my hand.

The wind soars through the clearing, ragged and uneven. I pulls it in shaky bursts, not the smooth torrent it was before – but it's there – and it's so clearly responding to my call –

I moan a little, in relief as much as grief, as the wind mixes with the fire, lifting it high into the air. We all watch, breathless, as the fire climbs into the sky. And I shake my head because it's not the same. The whirlwind sputters and starts, climbing and then falling and then climbing again, rough and uneven.

But it's there.

I let it fall, letting the fire collapse to the ground, and groan as I turn into Jackson, burying my face in his chest, my shoulders shaking as I try to put the pieces of this together. He wraps one arm around my back, his other hand softly cupping the back of my head as he stands steady and holds me tight. I take a few deep breaths, trying – trying hard to understand it – to put the pieces of it together.

And as I do, the Goddess's words come back to me. That I need my mate's marks, that it's important to my magic. That this, maybe, was what she was talking about the whole time. That getting the marks wasn't even about my romantic relationships – that it was always about the magic. About giving me a piece of them as part of me so that I'd be able to do...this.

Whatever this is.

Even when they're far away.

"Baby," mom murmurs after a long moment, coming close. "Sugar, are you all right?"

I take a few deep breaths, trying hard to pull myself together, and then I turn my face to my mother, my cheeks damp. "How is it possible?" I breathe.

"Ariel," mom says, stepping close and again glancing up at Jackson with that worried expression. "Luca...your bond with him isn't fully broken, all right?"

My eyes go wide as mom quickly explains, Rafe and Cora coming to stand close behind her listening. She tells me everything – about dad saying the physical effects of the rejection should have been so much worse, and checking on the bonds, and finding that my bond with Luca is still...there. Ragged and thin but there.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I whisper, shaking my head, wrapping my arms as far around Jackson as they’ll go, wanting to keep him close.

“You were already in so much pain, baby,” mom whispers, shaking her head at me. “We never meant to keep it from you forever. But we wanted to give you space, to let you heal piece by piece. I’m sorry if that was wrong.”

I nod, looking down at the ground, considering it. But ultimately deciding that...I get it. That she was just trying to protect me and let me heal.

Then I look up at Jacks, incredibly anxious about how he’s going to react to the news.

“It’s okay,” he says, quite soft, looking down at me like we’re the only two people standing in this clearing. He lifts his hand to my face, softly stroking my cheek with his thumb.

“Doesn’t change anything for me. I’m still not letting that jackass anywhere near you – but if you still have part of a bond?” he shrugs. “At least we know some weird other mate isn’t going to come and mess up our lives. Yeah?”

“Yeah,” I say, giving him a tremulous smile, nodding.

“It’s fine, tiny,” he murmurs, dipping his head to press a kiss to my forehead. “It’s precisely fine. Don’t worry about me.”

I close my eyes for a moment, turning my head and pressing my cheek to his chest, again wondering how I got so lucky as to have this calm, patient man as my mate. He holds me tighter, letting me feel his support.

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 476

“Ariel,” Rafe says after a moment, quiet, making me open my eyes and focus on him. “How does it feel, the magic now? It looked...different.”

“Yeah,” I sigh, standing up straighter and pulling away from Jackson for a moment. “It...feels different than when Luca was standing right here with me. It’s...unsteady. Harder. Do you...” I bite my lip, looking towards my mom. “Do you think he can feel it, mom? I don’t...I don’t want to be taking the magic from Luca, not if he were unwilling to give it.”

“He gave you the mark willingly, baby,” mom says, stepping forward and cupping my neck with her palm, looking me sadly in the eyes. “I think he gave you the magic along with it, even if he didn’t mean to. I think it’s okay. I don’t think it’s a violation.”

I nod, exhaling a long breath, choosing to believe her even if I still have questions.

“So it’s...it’s harder to call now?” Rafe asks, anxious and getting us back to the problem at hand. “But not...too hard?” He exhales sharply, running a hand through his hair, glancing towards the tent where dad and Roger are working to plan the counter-assault. Explosions still echo in the air, though further away now. “It’s just – Ariel, it’s a big deal if you can still use Luca’s wind- or, your wind now, if that’s what it is -”

“Yeah, I can do it, I think,” I say, nodding a little. “Just, um...” I look at mom and Cora, anxious. “Can we stay out here for a little bit? Experiment, see what I can and can’t do?”

“Sure, trouble,” mom murmurs, patting my shoulder and glancing at Cora, who nods. “We can take a little time.”

“I’ll go update dad,” Rafe says, giving me a steady nod and then striding for the door.

I exhale and turn away from Jackson, reaching again for his hand.

“Let ‘er rip, tiny,” Jacks murmurs, pressing a kiss to my hair, ever-supportive and lovely as he always is. “Let’s see what you can do.”

With a last glance toward mom and Cora, my heart breaking for these two women whose children were kidnapped today and who are still finding the strength to help me, to help their nation, I turn back towards the fire. And, determined to do whatever I can to help, I exhale and begin to experiment with the fire and the wind, seeing how high and steadily I can raise it.

It is so, so short a time later when I’m in the back of a transport, racing to the front line of the battle with Jackson and Rafe and Roger by my side. My hands tremble a little as I watch Roger fasten on the earpiece that my father gave him, so that he can use to communicate back to the base.

Because dad’s not here – he wanted to come, but sending the King to the front along side the heir and the spare? It just...we decided against it.

Dad – he held me for so, so long before he lifted me onto the transport truck. He didn’t say anything – I don’t think he could, not at that moment. But the way he and mom looked as Roger climbed in behind me – their faces pale and serious, their eyes locked on me and my brother.

I knew, in my very soul, how much they love us. How they would never, ever send us off to the front like this unless they had

to.

I clenched my jaw now as I remember it, determined not to cry again. Jackson just gathers me closer into his lap, resting his chin gently on my head, cradling me against him. He doesn't say anything or send any emotions down the bond – he just holds me and lets me have a little private moment to vent my exhausted heart. But he's there – always there – just in case I need him.

God, I love him so much.

I look up at him now, steady next to me, and nod, letting him know that I'm all right.

"We can do this," Jackson murmurs, running a hand over my cap, my hair. "No one can do it but us, right? So we're going to do it."

"Yeah," I whisper, giving a tremulous smile, believing him as I secure the earpiece and let my hands fall to my lap on a shaky exhale of breath. "We're gonna do it."

"And then," he murmurs, dropping his head low to speak into my ear, our own private moment. "I'm taking you away from all of this for a few days, and we're going to get you all marked up."

I burst out in a shaky little laugh – because honestly, I haven't thought of anything in the future. Anything beyond getting to this front, and unleashing my power, and sending these Atalaxian forces straight to hell for everything they've taken from me. For Tony, and Juniper, and Jesse...

If, even, that's who took them.

God, I just... I don't even know.

But I let Jackson's promise root me because a few days away from everything and alone with him sounds just right. The transport slows to a stop and I take a shaky breath, looking over at Rafe and Roger, who are already hopping out of the truck. Jackson helps me to my feet and I follow, my hands shaking as I lift myself down to the ground.

My breath stills in my lungs as I look around. The Moon Valley forces stretching out on either side of us in a long, steady line, but it isn't the sight that stuns me. The noise is...incredible.

All the guns, and the shouted orders, and the sounds of heavy machinery as my people work hard to hold back the Atalaxian forces. Slowly I turn towards the Atalaxian front, freezing and sucking in a great deal of air when I see the extent of the enemy stretched out before us.

There are just...so many of them. Lines and lines of soldiers, and tanks, and guns, and planes and helicopters. God, how have we held them back for so long?

How have we –

“Hey,” Roger snaps, making me turn hastily to look up into his serious face. All signs of the mourning father whose son is missing are gone as he presses a gun holster into my hands. No, he’s all General now. “You don’t worry about them, okay? You leave the worrying to me. You just do your little magic show, baby trouble. We’ll handle the rest.”

I nod to him, glancing down at holster with the single handgun already loaded inside. I mean, it’s a nice gun, but... “Can’t I have a bigger one?”

Roger bursts out laughing as he shakes his head at me, as Jackson smirks and kneels down to strap it onto my waist.

“Think of it as your little emotional support gun,” Rafe says with a happy sigh, strapping a whole arsenal of weapons to his own broad body. “I told dad you’d want it.”

“Unfair,” I mutter, drifting a hand passively over Jackson’s cheek as he stands up. “I’m a better shot than all of you and I just get the little one.”

“Because you are the weapon, trouble,” Rafe murmurs, looking over at Jackson as my mate, too, begins to load himself up. ‘You ready?’

“Yup,” Jackson says, nodding steadily to my brother and my uncle as he drapes weapons all over his body. Rather a nice sight, if you ask me. Jacks senses my thought and sends me a fond glance. “We’re good. Let’s go.”

Roger nods once and the four of us fall into a line, moving out towards the front to join the fight.

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 477

“Here’s the deal,” Roger murmurs, glancing down at me from my right. “Cora’s got a storm coming in from behind the Atalaxian front that should do a great deal of work towards distracting them. Plus, they won’t be able to get many aircraft off the ground with what she’s got brewing.”

“Oh,” I say, my eyebrows going up as I consider that that is, indeed, going to be help. I think the stars again that I have a powerful weather goddess as an aunt.

“What we need from you,” Roger continues, shifting his eyes to the wide front of Atalaxian forces before us. “Is to take out as much of this as you can. We’ve managed to enter after the battle has already started, so hopefully no one has taken note of one transport truck delivering four soldiers.”

“But considering that they always seem to have eyes on us,” Rafe murmurs, also glancing at me, “who knows. So, we need to move fast.”

Roger nods as he taps his own earpiece. “I’ve got your dad right here, Ariel, to direct the battle. But mostly we just need you to ...take ‘em out, in whatever way works for you. We’re here for guidance and for cover. But...whenever you’re ready, kid.”

“Oh,” I say, my eyes going wide. Because... I just...go? I think I was expecting more preamble than that. I glance up at Jackson, anxious, and he takes my hand, looking steadily down into my eyes.

The power begins to flow between us, itself a powerful encouragement, making me feel full of energy and ready to blaze. “You ready, baby?” I whisper.

His face bursts into a smile at the pet name – the first I ever called him, the one I think he likes the most, though he’d hate it if others knew it.

“Ready when you are, tiny,” he murmurs in reply. And I watch as he physically restrains himself from leaning down to kiss

me.

Because we’re at war. And there’s no time for that.

But still, the impulse makes me grin, and I exhale a long breath. “Okay. Let’s go.”

I step forward and join the battle.

I press all the thoughts and worries from my mind – all of my sadness about Tony, and my worries about Juniper, and my horror for both Jesse and Daphne. I tuck it all away, as Roger has done, and instead just look for something to burn.

Because a girl’s got to start somewhere.

My eyes catch on a plane soaring high above the Atalaxian forces, heading right for our troops, probably to drop some bombs and steal away even more Moon Valley lives.

“You good if I start there?” I murmur to my uncle.

His eyes move upwards. “The plane? Um. Sure.”

“Cool.” My mouth turns down into a frown as I concentrate, pulling on Jackson’s power. It’s only a moment before the plane bursts into flames above the Atalaxian lines. I smirk, imagining the way that surprise must have made them all flinch.

But my joy is short-lived as I begin to I concentrate, pulling on Luca’s sputtering wind and Jackson’s raw power to grow the fire in the air even as the debris of the plane falls to the ground.

Slowly, the flaming whirlwind forms in the sky above the Atalaxian troops. Even as I miss Jesse and his shadows, there is something so...so magnificent about the bright flame against the dark sky that thrills within me. I take a moment, not destroying anything else, just...letting the conflagration hang in the air, a clear message to the enemy that reflects all of the rage and pain in my heart.

That I’m here now. And their time is short, because the fire is coming and I’m going to burn them all to ash.

But there’s only so much time I can dedicate to a message. And so I begin.

The inferno lengthens, reaching to touch the ground for the first time, and then begins to move. I allow it to tear through the forces closest to it, moving westward in my vision and destroying everything in its path. I squeeze Jackson’s hand as I concentrate, wanting his comfort as well as his strength, because...the magic is wilder than it was before. I’m just not used to the way the wind moves now. It’s not a dance anymore, but a furious rampage.

I lose a shaky breath, working to manage the flames even as the destruction continues forward.

Jackson squeezes my hand right back and his confidence fills me. A perverse joy sings through my veins as I direct the fire to move, consuming everything it touches and fueling the fire of my rage, my pain, my desire to destroy this horrible army that seeks to take everything from the people I love.

“Holy fuck,” Roger murmurs beneath his breath.

“I told you,” Rafe says back, sighing in a satisfied way.

But I barely hear them, concentrating as I am on the fiery path that I’m blazing through the Atalaxian foe.

I glance to the left even as my fire sweeps through the enemy line, consuming everything in sight, realizing that even though I’m raining destruction on our foe there’s still...so, so much more work to be done. There are just so much of the Atalaxians. And they’re starting to respond, to turn on my whirlwind of flames, to fight back.

I watch, curious, as the enemy begins by trying martial force, shooting at my flames with shells and bullets. But that does nothing but make me smirk as I continue to destroy everything before me, the flames reaching out to snag tanks and trucks off the ground, reducing them to ash. And it's not just what's on the ground, either. I see the flash of Cora's lightening in the distance, but some helicopters manage to get into the air, heading for the flame. Eager, the blaze reaches for them with what looks like demonic hands, snagging them out of the sky and smashing them to the ground in flaming arcs that look like meteors falling from the sky.

I breathe deeply as I work, joy humming through me, satisfied, finally, to feel like I'm doing something when I have felt so... so helpless in the past weeks and months. And even as joy pulses through me I feel myself shaking too because it's not nearly as effortless as it was, even if I am hungry for it.

"Steady, girl," Jackson murmurs, squeezing my hand, pressing himself close to my side.

I nod and lose a shaky breath, pushing forward.

Eventually the Atalaxians get clever and begin to spray my fires with water, which actually does affect them. My magic is mystical, after all, but the flames are very real – they react as any other flames would. I flinch at the first spray from some kind of emergency fire truck, feeling the spray almost as if against my own skin. And I frowning, wondering what to do. "Start again," Jacks murmurs with a shrug, glancing down at me. I glance back up at him and nod, realizing that he's right. So I simply drop the whirlwind, giving up on it. I can barely hear it as a great cheer goes up from the Atalaxian forces, who think they've won.

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 478

That is, until I just make their firetruck explode and use it as fuel to build a second whirlwind, which rises higher and stronger than the first.

"Does she get tired?" Roger asks, his voice low.

"I don't know," Rafe murmurs back, worried.

"She's fine," Jackson snaps, glancing over at them.

"I'm fine," I murmur, concentrating.

“To the right, Ari,” Jackson says, his focus fully on me and the work we’re doing. “Do you see it?”

I flick my eyes to the right, frowning, seeing the swell of Atalaxian forces marshalling, moving towards my fire in some vain attempt to stop it.

“What do you think?” I murmur to my mate. “Split it, or fresh flame?”

“Whatever you think, fire sprite,” Jackson softly replies, the joy he takes in seeing me work with my magic alight in his voice. I take a moment to shift my gaze to him, loving him a great deal, loving his pride in me.

But there’s only a moment for that before I refocus on the battle, using two tanks as fodder for two new whirlwinds of flame that I set right in the Atalaxian path as they attempt to send aid to those being attacked by my original fires. The two new blazes sputter shakily to life, climbing unsteadily up into the sky before I move them forward.

Jackson frowns, glancing down at me, sending more power down along our bond.

I glance back up at him. “It’s not you,” I murmur, shaking my head. “It’s the stupid...wind. It was easier before, more responsive.”

“Okay,” he says, nodding. “Don’t worry about it now, we can experiment later. Just concentrate on this. You’re doing amazing.”

I do as my mate bids, sending the two new whirlwinds out to wreak destruction on the foe.

“Got it,” Roger snap, nodding once with his hand on his earphone. Then he turns to me. “Ariel, can you...talk while you work?”

“I can,” I say, even though I don’t move my eyes to him. I sigh through my nose, frustrated at how much more difficult this is without Luca at my side. I wonder, again, just how much help I draw from my mates when they’re by my side when they work. I mean, is it just their magic that they lend me? Or something else too? Some kind of...balance.

“Your dad gave me a report,” Roger says, working fast. “The Atalaxians were surprised, which is what we wanted, but they’re responding now, sending everything they’ve got. Are you ready? Can you handle more?”

“Yup,” I say, nodding once. “Bring it on.”

There’s a long pause but then Roger nods. “Okay.” He turns away, murmuring into his ear piece.

“They’re trying to distract attention from you, Ariel,” Rafe says, stepping close and leaning down to speak to me. “Do you see, over there?”

Rafe points to my right, where the Moon Valley forces are swarming, almost as if they’re protecting something at their center. Instantly I realize what they’re doing, drawing enemy fire away from me so that I can work.

It works, too – almost as if they were called, Atalaxian tanks appear in formation and begin to roll right for that spot of swarming forces.

I gasp, immediately dismayed – because it’s not like those swarming Moon Valley forces are just drones and empty trucks – it’s people – my people – and we’re using them as bait.

“No,” I say, shaking my head, a little frantic.

“Ari!” Jackson bites out, and I snap my head back to the front ahead of me, realizing that I got distracted – that two of my whirlwinds are faltering.

“Shit shit,” I murmur, more curses rushing through my mind as I force more power into the original whirlwind and set it again on its path. But I don’t start the other two, instead snapping my head back up to the tanks and exploding them into flames, one by one, before they can even reach the bulk of our forces, of my people.

“Fuck, man,” Roger murmurs, awed as he takes in the mess of twisted steel that litters the battlefield, as I collect the fire from each of them into a swirling mass larger than the rest – into a hurricane of fire that now stands between the forces and the Atalaxians coming for them.

Because I’m not letting it happen – I’m not letting my people die –

“Ariel!” Rafe barks out. “You can’t concentrate on defense! That’s not part of the plan!”

“I’m not sacrificing them!” I shout back, pissed off.

He grabs my arm, forcing me to look at him. “Everyone on this battlefield – everyone is as willing to sacrifice themselves as you are, okay!?”

I stare up into my brother’s face, shocked by the rare emotion there.

“You need to concentrate on offense, Ariel!” he shouts down at me, shaking his head vehemently. “We need you to take them out – do you understand me!? Not just protect! They – they’ve got Jesse – we don’t know – ”

I gasp, even as Roger grabs Rafe and hauls him back, scolding him for bringing Jesse into this, for letting his emotions shine through.

“Do they?” I ask, whipping my head to Jackson.

“No,” he bites out, snarling as he looks over at Rafe. “Or, we don’t know, Ariel – I don’t know why Rafe said that – he’s letting his emotions run away with him -”

I frown, looking back towards the battlefield, knowing immediately what I want. If they did take Jesse? If they’re holding him? God, I could kill them all.

I grit my teeth, concentrating on the hurricane of fire, and slowly begin to build it.

“You need to be on the offensive, Ariel!” Rafe barks out, deeply misinterpreting my action.

I ignore him.

“Roger!” I bark out. He snaps his head to me. “Tell Cora to cut the storm. Let them send their air force. If we have any planes in the air, get them out.”

“Wh-what?” Roger sputters.

“Oh fuck,” Jackson whispers, staring down at me.

“Do it!”

There’s a long pause of silence before Roger does as I say, his hand snapping to his ear piece as he sends my orders down the line to my father. It takes a few minutes to go into effect, for the storm to dissipate, for the steady hum of aircraft to build in the distance.

I don’t say a word the entire time, simply building the hurricane, letting it grow. Whatever the Atalaxians send in the meantime I destroy, adding the fuel to the fire even as I pull on Jackson’s incredible well of strength. Building something huge, something unstoppable.

Rafe wants offense? I’ll give him fucking offense.

“Steady, trouble,” Jackson murmurs at my side, watching as the incredible force I’ve conjured turns steadily in the center of the battlefield. “Hold some back,” he urges, steady. “Just in case.”

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 479

“No,” I growl, completely unable to imagine anything that could stop me now. My canines elongate and rage pumps in my heart. My whole body begins to hum with it, warm and steady and true.

“Ariel,” Jackson’s word is anxious. But I ignore him, my eyes snapping to the sky as little dots begin to appear.

“What’s that?” Rafe murmurs, snapping his face towards Roger.

“Shit,” Roger whispers, tilting his head up. “Shit...”

The rumble of aircraft is louder and louder, building until –

I don’t even blink as the armada of fighter jets appear, streaking through the air, heading right for us. God, hell but they’re fast – faster than I thought they’d be. I grit my teeth, my fangs bared, wondering if I’ve overstepped myself – if I’ve gone beyond my means.

But I don’t let the doubt sit long. Because Atalaxia has seized their chance, just as I hoped they would. And they’ve sent every plane that they’ve got.

I begin to tremble as I try to be patient, to let them come, to fly over my hurricane of flame. My breath comes in tiny pants as I try to begin to move the huge fire. But it’s so heavy – so much slower than I thought –

“Pull it back, Ariel!” Jackson barks out. “The big one – collapse it! Go smaller, take them out one by one like you did with the helicopters!”

I take in an unsteady breath, trying to do as he says, snapping my head upwards as I concentrate on the planes that soar above me. I concentrate on them one by one, my magic moving fast, the panes exploding almost as soon as I set eyes on them –

But there’s so many – it’s too much –

God, have I completely miscalculated? Have I doomed us all with my arrogance and my rage?

It’s only a moment before the planes reach our lines of troops.

And then the bombs begin to drop.

The entire ground shakes as the first bomb hits before our line of troops and explodes. It’s far – far away from me – but still, the way the earth trembles beneath my feet makes me moan.

Jackson is there immediately, keeping my hand held tight in his but wrapping his arm around me, using it to press me protectively back into his chest. “We need to get out of here!” he barks, glaring hard at Roger, who nods to him.

“No!” I shout, even as two more bombs hit and shake the world. Because I can hear it – I can hear the screams of my allies, my people. “We’re not going fucking anywhere -”

“Ariel!” Rafe shouts out, frowning at me.

But I ignore him – ignore them all – and instead snap my head up to the hurricane of flame, the gyre before me. Because it is mine, no matter how heavy it is. And I control it.

I open my mouth then in a snarl that turns into a roar as I shoot my hand up, hurling out all of my power, all of my magic and my energy towards the flames, lifting them high into the air and letting them stretch wide and flat. I scream at the weight of it against my soul, the pull on my magic and on Jackson’s. Behind me, I feel him tremble too.

And then I take that fire and push it all upwards with a mighty heave that has me tilting forward against Jackson’s arm, my breath gasping as the fire shoots up towards the skies and the Atalaxian planes flying there.

The sight is...unbelievable. In fact, I wouldn’t believe it would real – would stand gaping in the way that my uncle and my brother are if I didn’t feel it coming from me.

The entire sky turns orange and red and white and blue at the center as the wide flat expanse of fire grows and then continues to roar upwards into the sky, burning everything with it as it goes – hundreds of planes, maybe thousands, all at once. And the fire that they produce as they burn – I capture it all, and hold it together.

And then I turn, my teeth gritted, and focus on the lines before us.

Lines of Atalaxians that move steadily for us now, eating up the ground beneath them as they charge for our lines.

But I’m ready. I’m waiting. And I’m pissed as hell.

The fire spreading across the sky condenses into one line of white-hot fire that comes slamming to the ground before us – far enough away not to scorch any moon valley troops, but not so far that we don’t feel its heat as it hits us as a wave.

“Ariel!” Jackson shouts, holding me tight, looking down at me with worry in his eyes. “It’s too fucking much!”

But I just snarl and push, push again, forcing that fire forward towards Atalaxia in a mighty rolling bonfire that can’t be stopped.

My breath heaves hot in my lungs, because I want them all to burn, to reduce to ash, to –

“She’s overheating!” Jackson barks out, pulling me tight against him. “Rafe, we’ve got to ”

“Ariel!” Rafe shouts. Roger looks at me with wide eyes, speaking quickly into his headset as Rafe reaches for me. But when my brother’s hand touches my skin he gasps and pulls it back.

I feel it then, when my brother stumbles away, how hot my skin is – how my blood feels ready to boil –

And then my magic sputters. Not because I doubt it but because –

Jackson –

He pulls away, dropping my hand.

“Jacks!” I gasp, tripping forward as I spin to look at him, as my line of fire fades just yards in front of the encroaching Atalaxian foe.

“You’re going to burn out, Ariel!” he shouts at me, reaching his hand out, seeking for me to understand. “You’re going to hurt yourself!”

“They’re going to kill everyone!” I moan, sweeping a hand out at the forces that are now beyond the line I was trying to hold. I groan, and try again, my fire sweeping out. The mark on my finger – my connection to Jackson – it pulses –

But it’s not enough –

I cry out in agony, putting my hands in my hair, tears springing to my eyes. “What did you do!?” I moan, watching them come. “I had them – I had them!”

But even as the tears start to streak down my cheeks, they puff away into steam.

“We’ve got to get her cooled down,” Jackson shouts, terrified, turning to Rafe as he realizes that I’m a lost cause. “She’s just a girl – her body is mortal, even if her power is not ”

“Fuck,” Rafe breathes, trembling, reaching for me. “We need – we fucking need Tony – ”

“Cora sent me with the next best thing,” Roger snarls, and from the corner of my eye I see him pull something from a pocket – a syringe.

But I can't concentrate on that – instead, I just wail, watching in horror as the Atalaxian forces fly forward and the Moon Valley troops roll out to meet them.

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 480

Chaos erupts the moment that they touch, exploding all around us.

Roger screams my name, reaching for me as I reach for Jackson, wanting his touch – wanting his power – because I know I can help it – I know I can fix this –

“Ariel!” Rafe screams, reaching for me too.

“Rafe, she'll fucking burn you!” Jackson shouts, stepping away from me for a second – just a second – to shove him away.

But it's all that it takes.

The shell hits. And explodes.

Suddenly I'm flying through the air, screaming in pain and fear as my body is tossed to the side. I hit hard on my back and struggle to draw breath, but it doesn't matter – it can't matter.

I force myself to roll, pressing my palms to the ground, pushing myself up, frantically scanning through the dust and the dirt. And then I drag in a rasping breath that's half gasp and half sob as I see all three of them getting to their knees, looking for each other and for me –

I moan, because they're all right. Rafe, and Jackson, and Roger – they're okay – just thrown apart, like me. I push harder at my hands, taking a mental inventory of my own body. Because I'm hot – god, I'm so hot – but I'm also all here, and relatively unhurt, as far as I can tell.

Good, I think, nodding as I struggle to my knees and sweat pours down my face. Now we can get back to work.

My wolf bares her teeth, nodding, urging me forward – to get back to the fire, to help and do whatever we can –

But just as I push to my feet, a bright flash of blue light flares.

And someone wraps their hand around my bicep, pulling me close.

“No, little girl,” the man murmurs, yanking me to his side. “Not so fast.”

I gasp, eyes going wide, as I look up into the man’s face. His skin is starkly pale, his dark hair combed back from his temples, and he stares at me with the palest, most beautiful pair of blue eyes...

I blink, dazed, recognition instantly flaring in me. Because he looks like...but no, I can’t put it together. I shake myself, panting, not understanding why I recognize this man who I know I’ve never seen before. Because I would have remembered it – remembered that scent – like ozone and salt and jasmine.

That...that incredible scent...

My wolf stands stock still in my soul just...staring at him.

“Ariel!” Jackson shrieks, and I hear his footsteps pounding towards me, see him grab for the weapon strapped to his side. “Finally we meet,” the beautiful man says, his voice a low and sultry hum, ridiculous in this horrible war where shells explode all around us. He pulls me closer to him and my lips peel back in a snarl as I whip my hand up, intending to smack him – hard – across the face. To set him on fire as I strike.

But the man just laughs, catching my wrist in his hand, a circle of that blue light – too blue, electric, like neon – forming around my wrist.

“Enough of that,” he snarls, glaring hard down at me. My wolf howls in my soul, skittering away from him.

Wrong, wrong, she murmurs, shaking, staring hard at his wolf.

His wolf, who stands in a what looks like nothing more than a puddle of oil that clings to his legs. His wolf, that’s dripping in that blackness, his eyes alight with that same blue flame just...staring out into the void of his soul.

His wolf who...who stands on the other side of...

...of a bond...

“That’s right,” the man snaps, leaning close to me. And even as Jackson’s footsteps pound louder, closer, I can’t take my eyes away.

“Ariel!” My mate’s scream is terrified.

“How are you doing this,” I whisper, shaking my head, continuing to try to set him aflame – to get him away from me – but... nothing.

Not a single flare of heat rises beyond my own skin.

“What, did you think that I was unprepared for you?” the man coos, ridiculous and condescending. I stare up into his face.” That I wouldn’t be able to dominate and control you, as a man should his mate?”

The word clangs through me and my mouth drops open in horror.

“That’s right, little mate,” he snarls, leaning forward towards me, leering. “I’ve been waiting a long time for you, Ariel Sinclair. And now that I have you? I’m taking you home, where you belong. And I am not letting you go.”

He whips his head up, grinning again, his eyes focusing on Jackson who is just feet from us now – his weapon raised – his face horrified –

“Say goodbye,” my mate whispers, pressing a lewd kiss to my cheek, his eyes on Jacks as he does it.

“JACKSON!” I scream, reaching for him with my free hand.

But it’s too late.

We tumble backward, the experience perversely familiar now as we fall back into the void, into the darkness.

Into that new world.

Leaving everything I love behind.

Rafe just...stares.

His mouth hangs open and he stands still as he just...looks at the place his sister was standing just – just a fucking moment ago –

Where Jackson is now roaring his rage and pain as he turns, fruitlessly, looking everywhere for his mate like he’s just going to find her sitting on the ground behind him or something. But she’s gone – Ariel is...is fucking gone.

Vanished, like Jesse.

Like Juniper.

Who...who is taking his family, one by one?

“Let’s go,” Roger snarls, grabbing Rafe by his arm and striding forward, the needle still in his hand.

“Roger!” Rafe snaps out, digging his feet in, shaking his head. “We have to – we have to stay – she’s here –”

“She’s not here!” Roger snaps, spinning his head back to glare at his nephew, his canines elongated, his eyes alight with rage and with pain. God, his niece – his perfect niece – gone now too? Like Jesse, his fucking son? And Juniper, who had no god damn part in this war? “We’re getting out of here, Rafe! We need to regroup!”

“No!” Rafe roars, giving a mighty shake of his head. “We’re not leaving without her!”

Roger yanks, hard, pulling the boy to him. “You have a responsibility to this realm, Rafe,” he snarls, shaking his nephew, making him hear it. “You are second in line to this throne. Some mysterious force has just snatched the third in line from right under our eyes. I’m getting you out of here! Now!”