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Rafe quails at this, at the idea of just...just leaving. Of not even looking for her.

“We’re getting you out of here,” Roger snaps, pulling Rafe forward, and striding for Jackson. “And I need your help with him. He needs medical attention.”

Confused, Rafe follows Roger with stumbling steps as he strides for Jackson, even as gunfire continues to explode on either side of them. Medical attention? Jackson doesn’t need –

But then Rafe’s eyes fall to Jackson’s hand, which is blistered with burns.

Burns from where he held Ariel’s hand, passed her his power, even when her power roared so powerfully that she nearly burned herself out. Rafe’s stomach turns at the sight of Jackson’s ruined palm.

But the agony on his face...

As they step closer, Rafe’s devastation grows. Because Jackson just continues to roar, his unharmed hand sunk deep in his hair as he continues to spin, wide-eyed, looking everywhere for Ariel.

But of course, she’s not there.

“Jackson!” Roger shouts, reaching for the younger man.

But Jackson just spins, his good hand lashing out, his knuckles catching Roger backwards across the cheek and sending him stumbling back. “Don’t touch me!” Jackson snarls around his canines, his eyes wide and furious.

“Jacks,” Rafe cries, shaking his head, reaching for him to. “Roger’s right – she’s –”

“We’re getting her back!” Jackson shouts.

“We will!” Rafe calls, nodding fervently. “But – you need help – we have to get off this field

“I’m not leaving her!”

“She’s already gone!”

Jackson stills at the words, staring at Rafe with such horror and grief in his eyes that Rafe moans, holding his hand out further. "Please, Jacks," Rafe says, his voice breaking on the words. "She's gone – they took her, she's gone – we can't get her back by standing here – we need to go back to the base, make a plan -"

"I can't leave her," Jackson cries, his shoulders slumping in grief. "I – I have to stay -"

But he goes suddenly rigid as a hand wraps around his chest from behind. Rafe gasps in a sharp breath, horrified –

But the horror shifts to mere confusion when Roger peers over Jackson's shoulder a moment later. And then Rafe's eyes shift to the needle in Roger's hand, the other side of which is deep in Jackson's neck. Jackson's eyes roll back and he slumps hard to the ground, almost taking Roger with him.

"Let's go," Roger barks, looking anxiously around at the battle. "It's getting bad here. And I need...your help with this guy." He looks down and grimaces at the huge form laying unconscious on the ground, clearly wondering how they're going to lift him.

"Roger," Rafe says, stepping close and kneeling down as his uncle does, already getting a hand beneath Jackson's limp form. ' He's right how...how can we leave her?"

Roger stills for a moment, sighing and looking down. "Part of being a good soldier, Rafe, is knowing when to retreat. Their forces took severe damage but they won this battle when they took her. And – I mean, can you go into that other world? Where she vanished to?"

Slowly, Rafe shakes his head, grief filling his heart. His wolf howls, devastated at his complete ineptness. God, what kind of commander or prince is he – what kind of brother – if he can't even protect his little sister?

"Come on," Roger snaps, holding his nephew's gaze. "You think you're the only one who lost someone today? For fuck's sake, Rafe, I love you – but pull it together. We have work to do, and Ariel's never going to forgive you if you leave her mate unconscious on a battlefield when he needs Ella."

Something in Roger's tough love makes Rafe clench his jaw. He nods once, hefting hard at Jackson's body, getting him up far enough that Roger can slip his shoulder beneath Jackson's armpit and then stand.

"God," Roger growls as Rafe slips under Jackson's other shoulder. "What are you feeding this one?"

as the battle continues behind them.

But Rafe can't laugh, as they drag Jackson back towards the transport, glancing back at the battle that continues behind them. Because Roger's attempt at humor, even in the worst of situations, it reminds Rafe too much of Jesse. And Rafe – he just can't go to that space in his mind right now. Not if he wants to avoid going to pieces.

So Rafe just puts his head down, and stares at the ground, and hauls his sister's mate away to safety.

Leaving his sister, wherever she is now, behind.

I'm screaming as my feet hit the ground in that strange other world, as I rip my elbow back in the way that Blaze taught me, catching my mate- my fucking mate – hard in the ribs.

But he just laughs and lets me push him away. I stumble forward, hardly able to catch myself as I look frantically around at this horrible, dark world. My eyes flash up to the three moons above me for just an instant before I whirl, my canines extended, to snarl at my captor.

Immediately, I try to throw myself back to my home world, to leave this horrible place. I beg, in my soul, for the world to turn again, to send me back as it did before.

But nothing happens. My wolf howls, frantic, spinning, looking for an escape. But nothing.

“Take me back,” I growl, spinning back towards my mate, my lips peeled back. “Now.”

“You really are very pretty when you're fierce,” he says, smiling at me like he's perversely proud of the way I'm responding.

My snarl only grows as I drop my hands to my side in fists, calling on my magic, intent on setting him on fire immediately – make him just burst into flames –

But nothing happens.

A smirk grows on his mouth and I drop my eyes down to my hands, suddenly realizing that my body is cool again – any threat of burnout gone because – because my magic isn't working at all.

My eyes go wide when I see the two cuffs of light around my wrists, lightly encircling them like bracelets. “What the hell is this,” I growl.

“Oh, just a little present,” my mate replies. I raise my eyes to see him sauntering forward. “A pretty girl like you should have the finest jewelry. And you didn't expect me to let you

burn me to bits the moment I had you alone, did you?” He reaches out a hand, possessive, clasping my chin between his fingers.

I snarl and rip my chin from his fingertips but – quick as a snake – he his hand snaps out, his palm slapping me right across the cheek. I go completely still as I whip my face back to stare at him, my jaw falling open in surprise.

I mean, it didn’t even really hurt – barely stung – but I have never, ever been slapped in my entire life. And I find that I do not, at all, enjoy the experience.

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“Learn your place, mate,” he says, perfectly calm, again taking my chin between his fingers and looking coolly down into my eyes. “A Luna obeys her Alpha.”

“I am not your Luna.” I work again to rip my chin from his hand, but he snarls, stepping close and wrapping his other hand around my neck, holding my head still.

“You are my Luna, and I will teach you your place,” he growls, shaking me, again taking me by surprise. I just stare at him, completely shocked.

The smile returns to his lips as I fail to make any further move. “Yes,” he murmurs, moving his hand up and pulling my cap from my head, tossing it aside like it can’t possibly matter and I’ll never need it again. “Yes, once we get you dressed up and behaving properly as a woman, you’ll make a very lovely Princess of Atalaxia. Won’t you, Luna?”

Prin...Princess? Of Atalaxia?

Who on earth is this man?

I just stare at my mate, my mouth hanging open and my eyes going wide as I suddenly realize why his features were so familiar.

because...

Suddenly, his familiar face makes sense. My mind flashes to the meeting at Midwinter, when the Atalaxians declared war – to Ben’s mate, and the flare of connection between us

–

Because I mean, this isn’t him – but his face...

They're nearly identical. Which means...this man...a Prince of Atalaxia...

"Yes," he murmurs, smirking as he sees my recognition before turning away from me now and keeping a hand tight on the back of my neck like a wayward pup. "You'll be quite the prize, Princess."

He shoves, then, hard and I go stumbling forward towards -

Towards a little electric cart or something that's right in front of me. I blink at it, wondering how of all absurd things...that got here. And what -

But then I gasp, realizing that he's taking me away. That I'm being taken somewhere else. And that if I want to go home -

I groan, closing my eyes, again calling on that dark power, demanding to return to the battlefield, to my true mate and my brother and my uncle -

But nothing happens. Of course it doesn't. The cuffs on my wrist hum with power.

The man laughs, grabbing my arm and hauling me towards the vehicle.

"Don't be an idiot, Ariel," he murmurs, shoving me hard towards the seat. I stumble forward, my hands hitting the side of the cart hard, my knees barking as they hit the lower edge. "Stop trying that. It doesn't work."

My mate moves behind me, grabbing me below the arms and lifting me, shoving hard to get me into the cart.

"No!" I shout, spinning, glaring up at him. "I'm not going anywhere with you! I'm -"

But suddenly, fast, a vial is in his hands. He pops it open, leaning towards me, aiming for my mouth, a frustrated sneer on his lips.

I scream and shove him away -

"Drink, Luna," he snarls, leaning close, using his body to pin me to the bottom of the vehicle and tilting the vial against my lips. "God damn it, drink, or I'll beat you, and make you drink!"

To illustrate his point he cuffs me, hard, across the head. I gasp in pain, which flares across my skull, and as I do he takes advantage, tilting the potion into my mouth.

I cough against it, trying to spit it out.

But it's heady, strong stuff.

My vision immediately begins to fade as I look up into my mate's beautiful face.

Because as much as I hate him, and still wish to make him burst into flames and reduce him to ash...

God, heavens, but he's beautiful.

"That's my girl," my mate murmurs, patting me hard against the cheek as my body goes limp.

As my consciousness fades, the last thing I remember is being lifted into the vehicle and slumped over the seat.

And then I'm gone, completely lost to this world too. This new world, wherever that may be.

"Midnight!" Jesse calls out to the girl trotting eagerly before him. Jesse, in turn, is exhausted, trudging up yet another tall hill.

She doesn't respond.

He groans, loud and frustrated, before he stops and putting his hands on his hips. "Mids!"

Midnight turns, frowning at him. "What?"

"You said that your house was 'just over the that hill' like, eight hours ago," he says, shaking his head at her, exhausted and thirsty and hungry. "Do you like...have a different conception of what 'just' means? Or 'that'? Or 'hill'?"

Midnight grins at him. "Oh Jesse, you're so funny," she sighs, turning back around and continuing to hike. "Seriously, it's just over this hill."

"Oh my god," Jesse mumbles, scraping his hand down his face. "Does that mean...eight more hours? Over a mountain? Beneath a mountain?"

"No!" Midnight laughs, turning to beam at him, ridiculously energetic after such a long trek. "Seriously, Jesse, just one more hill I promise."

"You promised that four hours ago," he mutters, sighing and beginning to walk after her again, shaking his head and knowing that he has no other choice. Again, what else would he do? Just...sit down here and rot?

He considers it for a quiet second, wondering if a peaceful death staring into the darkness of this world might be better... But no. Midnight would never leave him alone. She'd probably...drag him or something. Bother him back to life.

Jesse sighs, indulging in some good old fashioned self pity, his mind wandering to Daphne, the beautiful girl he left all alone and bleeding. Will her face scar, after Midnight swiped her claws across it? But no – Rafe won't let that happen. Surely,

he'll get her to Ella, who will patch her up and to his m

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But in the darkness beneath the moons...shit, but he can't see far.

Midnight crests the hill at his side, panting a little, and he glances down to see her glaring up at him. "What, so you've got energy now? For this hill? You've been dragging all day! Honestly, Jesse, you're not very impressive __"

"What was that noise?" Jesse asks, again peering out into the darkness. Is that...are those tire tracks? There in the dirt and the dust?

"It was nothing," Midnight says, petulant.

Jesse turns to her, frowning down at the girl who has her arms crossed over her chest, determinedly not looking at him.

"You know I have five siblings, right?" he asks.

She turns her head to look up at him again, still frowning.

"And four cousins?"

Her face turns to confusion now. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"It means that I know when you're lying," he says, smiling a little, leaning down close to grin into her face.

"You don't!"

"I do!"

"That's impossible!" She lashes out a hand and hits him on the arm. "Only I know when I'm lying! They're my lies!"

Something about this logic makes Jesse burst into a grin. "No," he sighs. "I have magic. I can tell. Now seriously what the hell was that noise?" He stands straight and gestures out to the tracks.

“I’m not telling you,” she snaps, her lips all tight in anger.

“See? Told you I knew you were lying.”

Midnight gasps a little, her eyes going wide when she realizes what she admitted. Jesse laughs – he can’t help it. This poor girl has spent way too much time alone, and he has spent way too much time messing with his cousins and his siblings.

“Mids,” Jesse sighs, crossing his own arms and shaking his head at her. “Come on, just tell me.”

“No!”

“I’m your mate, you have to.”

She gasps a little with delight, looking up at him. “Does that mean you know it’s true? That you accept our bond?” “Midnight,” Jesse sighs, turning his head a little and looking down at her. “Come on. It’s...complicated, all right? But yeah, of course I know you’re my mate, my wolf knows it. Of course he does. I’m not denying that anymore.”

The smile that leaps onto her face – it’s so sunny and lovely that his heart breaks for her again and he has to look away.

“What are the tracks, Midnight? What was that noise?”

“I don’t know,” she groans, frustrated and not wanting to answer. She grabs at his sleeve and tries hard to tug him away from the sight of the tracks, from the questions he’s asking. Jesse pulls his arm away from her, not wanting the touch – still not sure about the corruption that has seized her wolf and how it spreads. “Can you just come with me? My house -”

“Just across that last hill, right,” he says, dry. But then he takes a page from Seraphina’s book and sits down hard on his butt, leaning back on his hands.

“What are you doing?” Midnight asks, spinning to look at him, her frown returned.

“I’m not going to your house until you tell me what those tracks are from,” Jesse says, the corners of his lips turning up. “Jesse!” The name bursts from her lips as she turns red with frustration. “Just go!”

“No way!”

Midnight growls and grabs for him, but Jesse just hooks his foot behind her ankle and pulls, knocking her off balance and sending her to the ground too. She snarls, pushing back her riot of curls and glaring at him from beneath it.

Jesse can't help smiling – the girl is weird but...very earnest. And funny.

“I'm not leaving here,” he says, slowly shaking his head, “until you tell me what that noise was and what left those tracks.” “But you'll die if you stay out here all alone!”

“Then I'll be dead!” he shoots back. “And it will be your fault and your weird Papa will be all pissed off!”

Midnight gasps, horrified at the idea, and then stares at him. “Don't call Papa weird,” she says, shaking her head vehemently and setting her curls bouncing. “He will smite you.”

Jesse looks right back at her, not giving an inch, thinking that it is...a little too easy to manipulate this poor girl. But he's also secretly glad for that, because she did kidnap him from his girlfriend's bed and he needs some leverage in this world where she and the God of Darkness clearly have all the power.

“Fine,” Midnight snarls, leaning forward, picking up on the game. “But if I tell you, you'll come?”

“Yes,” Jesse says, nodding once. “I promise.”

Midnight sighs and leans forward, glancing anxiously towards the tracks, and begins.

“I mean,” Midnight says, rolling her eyes, “I don't really know exactly who it was – they never fill me in on anything good. But it was probably those stupid Atalaxians. They're always messing around here, driving their stupid carts around, building things.”

“What Atalaxians?” Jesse asks, leaning forward, fascinated. They can come here? They're...building things?

“I don't know,” she grumbles, peevish, meeting his eyes with her own dark brown ones. “Not all of them can come through – just the King and his son and the other one – the tall one with the pretty eyes. And then only sometimes. Not like me.” She sits up straight, quite proud. “I can go back and forth anytime I want because I am Papa's favorite.”

Jesse presses his lips into a thin line, kind of doubting that. “Do they come a lot? And bring stuff?”

“No,” Midnight answers with a shrug. “Anyone else who comes here and any supplies those three have to bring through. But they're fancy and busy so...” she shrugs. “They don't come a lot. Not now that they're finished.”

“Finished what.”

She goes silent, staring at him, realizing that she's said too much.

“Midnight,” Jesse says, watching her carefully. “Have you been...spying on the Atalaxians?”

She gasps, her eyes going wide. “No!”

Jesse’s face bursts into a grin. “Another lie,” he says, closing one eye and pointing a finger right at her face.

She gasps again, a bit in wonder at how he knew, but then she looks around frantically, her full lips turning down into a desperate frown. “Please,” she begs, looking all over like someone could be listening, like they could be anywhere. “Please don’t tell, Jesse – please – he’d be furious if he knew I spied – I was just curious – and I’m so bored all the time – there’s nothing to do -”

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She gets to her knees, leaning towards Jesse, her breath coming in quick pants as she shakes her head, desperate for him not to tell.

“Midnight!” Jesse says, his eyes going wide as he catches her shoulders, giving her a small steadying shake. She whips her eyes up to him and he holds her gaze, quite serious. “I’m not going to tell anyone, all right?”

She stares at him, horrified, like she can’t believe she told him in the first place. Like she can’t trust him.

“I’m on your side, okay?” Jesse whispers, surprised to find that he means it – really means it, from the bottom of his heart. “I’m not on Darkness’s side, all right? Or the Atalaxians, which means...you and me are still at odds on some things. But I am on your side, okay?”

Midnight closes her trembling mouth, her breath coming a little easier now. “Okay.” The word is squeaky, scared.

“I’m not going to tell anyone you told me,” Jesse says, quiet, assured.

“Okay,” she whispers again, nodding.

Midnight sits back and Jesse drops his hands from her shoulders. Anxiety rushes through him as he quickly does a check on himself, reaching for his wolf. But his wolf presses himself warm against Jesse’s mental palms, assuring him that he’s fine – that the

corruption didn't come through just because he touched the girl. Jesse exhales a shaky breath.

"What else do you know about the Atalaxians?" he asks, his equanimity slowly coming back.

Midnight scowls at him and he smiles. "I'm not telling you. I'm sure I'm not supposed to. You're on stupid Moon Valley's side, and they are bad."

"Moon Valley is great," Jesse says, dismissive and moving on immediately. "But no, you have to tell me."

"What?" Her eyebrows go up.

"We're mates," he says, cool and easy. "You have to tell me everything. Those are the rules."

Her eyes flare as she stares at him, clearly buying into it, and Jesse's wolf sighs, glaring at him for lying to this girl, manipulating her with logic that would work on a five-year-old. Hey, Jesse says internally, giving his wolf a little shove. We're at war, and this girl has information.

His wolf just grumbles his discontent as Midnight again crosses her arms over her chest.

"Fine," she says, raising her chin. "But then you have to tell me stuff too."

"I'll tell you whatever you want," Jesse says, giving a shrug, knowing he means it quite earnestly except in terms of state secrets or something. But he doesn't have many of those anyway.

"Fine," she sighs, standing up. "But let's go to my house and talk there. Where there are snacks."

Jesse perks up at the news of food, his stomach growling. But even as he stands, he watches her warily. "Seriously, Mids, where is this house? Is it honestly very far?"

"No!" she says, huffing a frustrated little laugh. "It's really just there! See? You can see the top of it." She casts out a hand and Jesse leans forward, peering in the darkness.

And to his surprise, there actually is something there – just a little bit of canvas peaking out over a hill. Jesse stills and then turns to Midnight with a groan. "Midnight...is your house...is it just a tent?"

"Yeah!" she says, excited, almost skipping forward. "Isn't it great?" She clasps her hands excitedly under her chin.

Jesse groans, his head falling back on his neck. But he slips his hands into his pockets and follows his strange, tiny mate to her bizarre little home.

Its difficult to wake up, to pull myself from the fog of sleep. I groan, rolling over in my blankets, burying my head in the pillow and fighting against the headache that pounds in the back of my head. I stretch my hand out, looking for Jacks, wondering why on earth he's not beneath me like he always is but –

I lift my head when my hand just stretches out across cool sheets, finding no one there.

And then I gasp, sitting up straight, spinning and staring around the strange and luxurious room. Because I have...absolutely no idea where I am.

I begin to pant as my memories come back to me all in a rush. The battlefield – and sending flames everywhere – and being thrown aside, Jackson running for me, and that man grabbing me, pulling me into another world –

I groan again, putting my hands over my face and sinking back into the pillows, because it's not just some man – it's my mate. A mate – another mate. And god, a fucking Atalaxian royal at that.

What on earth was my grandmother thinking?

“Hello?”

I go quite still at the sound of the soft voice, keeping my hands over my face, too shocked to move.

“Ariel?” Footsteps come into the room and I sit bolt upright as my instincts send me on the defense, my canines elongating, ready to fight.

A very small woman with shiny chestnut hair jumps when she sees me, flinching back, her eyes going wide as she lifts her hands close to her face. “I'm sorry!” she gasps, stumbling back over her feet. “I'm so sorry! I – I didn't mean to scare you!”

My hand immediately flashes to my mouth, covering my fangs, because this woman – she's tiny, and demure, and beautifully dressed, and very, very pregnant. Clearly, she is not my kidnapper, and very likely not someone who means me any harm. “I'm sorry,” I say too, forcing my fangs back. “Um – you startled me.”

“Oh, you poor dear,” the girl says, rushing forward towards me, her eyes wide. “You must have had such a shock.” She reaches for me, warm and motherly even though she's so young – god, is she more than sixteen? Her hands are soft and warm as they smooth over my hair and press my cheeks.

I just stare at her because...

Honestly, she is being very, very sweet. And after last night, this is not at all what I expected.

“This isn’t what you expected, my dear, is it?” She tilts her head as she stares at me, clicking her tongue in concern.

I go even more rigid when the woman repeats my words. Is she...a mind reader? Or just very, very empathetic?

“Listen,” she says, sitting on the edge of the bed and letting her hands drop to my shoulders, giving me a steadying squeeze. ” It’s just you and me for now – those are the rules. The boys can’t come into the room until we say that they can, all right? I know it’s different in Moon Valley where men just invade your space whenever they wish -”

I frown at her because...what? But she moves blissfully on.

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“But here,” she gives me a happy grin that crinkles her pretty brown eyes. “We have rules to protect our women! And you’re quite safe. All right?”

“All...all right,” I say, my words breathy. Because even if I don’t understand it, honestly it does give me peace to think that my mate won’t be bursting through the door at any moment.

“And how are you doing, darling?” The girl asks, taking her hands from my shoulders and folding them neatly in her lap, still looking at me with concern. “Are you hungry? The bathroom’s just there if you want to get cleaned up,” she points over to the right. “Or! I can just sit with you? And we can talk, until you feel calm?”

I just...stare at her, wondering at how fast my life has changed and how easily I’ve fallen into this woman’s world. I look around the room again in a bit of wonder, noting the incredibly lush furnishings – far fancier and more expensive than even anything in our personal chambers in the palace. Then I look down at myself, noting that I’m in a very elaborate white nightgown. My eyes go wide at this and I wonder who...who on earth changed me.

Terror races through me at the idea.

“That was me, darling,” the girl says, seeing me look down at my white nightgown and again seeming to read my mind. She reaches out a hand to softly pat mine. “Don’t worry,

dear – like I said, we have rules here. As soon as Gabriel brought you to the palace I took you in hand.” She grins at me like it was a great pleasure to her to keep me safe. “I got you changed and cleaned up and put to bed. Don’t worry, love.”

I exhale slowly, absurdly believing her even though I should be much, much more wary now. But something about those sweet brown eyes – god, it’s impossible to think that she might be lying. My wolf yips confirmation in my soul, still wary of everything else but believing her.

“And who are you?” I whisper, shaking my head, still not believing it. That I’m here, that I was stolen away from my life.

“I’m Pippa,” she says, giving me a happy smile.

“All right,” I whisper.

Then I jump nearly a mile in the air as soon as a soft knock comes at the door.

“Oh, don’t worry, Ariel,” Pippa says, turning towards it. “That’s just my Alpha, bringing you some food. Do you...” she looks at me, hesitant. “Do you...mind? If he comes in?”

“Um,” I say, hesitating, looking towards the door – completely unsure about what I want.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Pippa whispers, leaning close like a conspirator. “He’s really nice – the sweetest man you’ll ever meet. Not ..” she hesitates, looking around like someone might be listening and not like her words. When she looks back at me and speaks again, she lowers her voice. “He’s not nearly as...challenging. As Gabriel.”

Gabriel. Is that his name? My mate?

I just stare at Pippa and the knock comes softly again. She grimaces and looks towards it.

“All right,” I whisper, nodding to her. “Um, sure. I guess he can come in?”

“You’re a peach,” she says, standing and dropping a kiss to my cheek. I turn towards the door with absolutely no idea what to expect as she dashes towards it. When she gets there, though, she hesitates and nods towards the bathroom. “Would you like to...go put on a dressing gown, Princess? To...be more comfortable around a man?”

The lovely, encouraging smile she gives me lets me know that...I should probably go do that.

“Uh, sure,” I say, hesitating but then pulling myself out of bed. I wince a little at the bruises and stiffness that radiates through my body but then move towards the bathroom that she indicates. I give Pippa a small smile as I pull the door shut behind me. As soon as

I'm through I press my ear to the wood and hear the outside door creak open and then soft voices as Pippa greets her Alpha, welcoming him to the room.

I exhale slowly and quickly move about the bathroom, first taking the opportunity to relieve myself and then moving to the mirror to wash my hands. I peer closely at my reflection, noting that I look pale but...fine. And that the slap my damned mate gave me yesterday didn't leave any mark behind, probably as he intended.

Then, squeezing some toothpaste onto a toothbrush I find by the side of the sink, I begin to brush my teeth as I turn and look around the bathroom which is...honestly probably the fanciest one I've ever been in in my life. And, considering that I'm a princess who is not a newcomer to luxury, that is...saying something. Gold leaf and ornament covers nearly every available surface and every corner is stuffed either with some comfortable chair or shelving with bath products.

I mean, it's all very nice but it is...a lot.

Suddenly, I wish with all of my heart for the stupid Academy bathroom that I share with three Alpha boys. I groan, slumping back against the marble counter, my eyes pressing shut and my toothbrush stilling as I hang my head, wishing for Jacks, and for Rafe, and for Jesse.

God, they must all be so worried about me.

What...what on earth am I going to do? If only I could get out of here.

My eyes flash open and I spin towards the sink, spitting out my toothpaste as I look down at my wrists. Because those manacles – the ones made of blue light – they're certainly gone. I press my eyes shut, willing myself to that other world.

And then I gasp as it...as it works.

My eyes fly wide as my feet hit the dirt, my toothbrush still grasped in my hand. But then I spin, horrified, as I realize that...

That I'm in some kind of insane cage. I turn in a full circle, looking around baffled at the iron that surrounds me. I move hesitantly towards it, reaching out first with the tip of my finger and giving it a prod. It's cold but...very real. Then I grasp it in my hand, still looking around in every direction, and pull as hard as I can.

But the iron stays firm. I peer out between the patchwork bars, realizing that this isn't even the only cage – that there are dozens of them, cages within cages. For...miles.

What...what on earth?

Freaked out, I head back to the spot where I originally landed and beg to be sent back, wanting the calm familiarity of a bathroom while I put the pieces of that all together.

Why the hell...

A little knock comes at the door.

“Ariel, sweetheart?” It’s Pippa. “Are you okay?”

“Yes!” I call, my voice tight. “Um, just a minute.”

Panting, I turn back to the mirror and spit out the toothpaste, scowling when I realize that I’m still a prisoner, even if my magic somehow bizarrely works here. But, is that the only magic that works?

I take a deep breath, shifting my eyes to a towel rack against the wall and calling upon my gift of heat, willing them to burst into flames. I also pull on my mark, my connection to Luca, hoping desperately for any stir of wind, but...

I huff in disappointment, my shoulders drooping, because even if I can shift into the Dark world and the bizarre cages there, I can’t pull on my fire magic.

What the hell is going on here?

Slowly, I turn back to my mirror, my mind racing as I try to decide what to do. My wolf paces in my soul, anxious and worried, plans flitting through her own mind – all of them aiming in one direction: to get us home, to get back to Jackson.

om, who will make her comfortable...

Jesse’s wolf howls to think again over what she must have done in the moments after he was taken from her room. How scared she must have been, must still be. Do they even know where he is? How could they –

His head snaps to the left, hearing the soft sputter of an engine of some kind.

Jesse pauses in his steps, frowning, peering. And then he turns, quickening his pace, heading after it.

He ignores Midnight’s frustrated call, his eyes focused on the top of another rounded hill that promises a better view. Jesse breaks into a tired jog, determined to follow the sound – the first new thing he’s heard in this world in hours.

Midnight calls after him again but he doesn't pay attention, instead cresting the hill and frowning as he peers far, far into the distance.

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I look down at my chest, relieved at this, because honestly half of me was worried that she'd want me to pursue things with this new mate. After all, when I first came in contact with Jackson and Luca – even walked into the same room as them – she'd gone absolutely mad, encouraging me to find them, to get naked, to crawl into their beds.

No, my wolf says, shaking out her fur and baring her teeth. This one – he is our mate. But he is wrong – his wolf is off. Wrong, like that Prince we saw at Midwinter, at the meeting. The one standing next to Ben's mate. He was wrong – incorrect – unnatural –

I exhale slowly, nodding, knowing that she's right. That Gabriel – we knew, instantly, that he was right when he claimed to be our mate. It is...undeniable, as true as it was when I saw Jacks and Luca at that spring the first night and knew that they were mine.

But my wolf is also right that the Prince is...wrong. Something is strange about him, and we have to find out what.

I lift my head, dread coiling within my belly, and look closely at myself in the mirror. At my pale face, my worried eyes. "What the hell am I going to do?"

My wolf howls, anxious and completely without answer.

My lips draw to a thin line as I consider my options. Obviously, my best and most powerful tool – the magic – is not available to me. So? What else do I have?

I can't...I can't fight my way out. Not against Atalaxia, not with all these Alphas running around. My mate – Gabriel – made that perfectly clear last night. That I'm just not a physical match for them. Quietly I curse that my parents didn't get me fighting lessons as a girl and that I didn't have enough time with Blaze at the academy. Even as my mind turns to more important things, some part of me makes a mental note to get all of my little girl cousins immediately enrolled in some form of fighting art the moment I get out of this, the moment I get home.

Because one thing is for sure. I am not giving up.

I am going home – home to my mate, and my family, as soon as I can.

But...how do I do that?

I twist my mouth to my side, again going through my arsenal of tools. Obviously, if I had a rifle things would be different but... yes, an unlikely plan. Or, access to any poisons? I look around the bathroom but, come on, they're not going to stock anything beyond the mildly toxic in here. I mean, Newman taught me enough that I can mix something up if I can find the right supplies – and I'll keep my eyes peeled for those – but still...

It's not much of a direct path to getting out of here, is it?

I focus again on my reflection in the mirror, one single resource left to me

What, I ask myself quietly, would Faiza tell me to do?

The answer comes immediately to me, as if she lives in my mind.

Survive.

She would tell me to survive. To do whatever it takes to persist in this world, to keep myself intact, to look for every opportunity to escape and to make a plan to get myself out. To survive as long as necessary in order to find that escape path. To...to make my enemies trust me enough to drop their guard. To convince them that I'm not a threat. Even if in my heart I want to rip every single one of their hearts from their bodies and set them all ablaze.

Well. Maybe not Pippa's. But my horrible mate's – his for sure.

Slowly I inhale, knowing precisely what Faiza would tell me to do.

Play dead, Cream Puff, she'd say, giving me that patented wink, her feet propped up on her desk. Let think you're as stupid and vapid as they want you to be. And then when the time comes?

"I'll cut their fucking throats." I toss the toothbrush into the sink and turn towards the door, not bothering to clean up.

Steady and bold, I walk back to the bathroom door, slipping an elaborate blue brocade robe off of a hook and slipping it over my arms. As I tie the belt around my waist, I let myself slip into that Cream Puff Princess attitude that Faiza and I spent hours practicing.

Dumb as a rock, I say to myself, emptying my mind of anger and violence and pain. Pretty as a picture. No thoughts, just a desire to please.

I paste my best Princess smile on my mouth, but then alter it slightly, reminding myself that I'm not supposed to be deranged. That I'm also scared, and new to this world, even if I'm going to pretend to be happy to be here.

“You saved me,” I whisper to myself, practicing my lines as they come to me. “Thank god, you saved me and took me away from that horrible world.”

And then exhaling deeply, I push open the bathroom door and step into the room.

Of course, all of my plans to play Princess Cupcake are immediately wiped from my mind the moment I step into the room and see the couple standing before me.

“Ariel!” Pippa says, turning to me and clasping her hands sweetly under her chin, giving me a bright smile. “Oh, that color looks lovely on you – I thought it might. Do you – would you like some coffee?” She asks, eager, gesturing towards the little table they’ve set up with a nice spread of breakfast supplies.

But her smile begins to waver when I don’t say anything, just staring slack-mouthed at the man she said was her Alpha.

Because I recognize him.

Of course I do I’d recognize him anywhere, both by his face and by the way my wolf perks up, sniffing the air between us, even as that same shudder passes through me as it did that day, so close to Midwinter, when he’d stood in my palace across the room from me. Next to that horrible one with the crown.

But this one – I know instantly that it’s him. Elias. The cute one.

It’s...it’s Ben’s mate.

And...he really, really is cute.

But I turn my head as I stare at him because...am I mistaken? And why did I never notice it before? That this man – Ben’s mate – the cute one...does he...does he suddenly look a great deal like Tony? I mean, Elias’s eyes are a bright and shining blue – Tony’s were grey – but that lanky frame and that dark hair...

Elias shakes me out of my reverie when he gives me a warm smile and steps close to Pippa, slipping an arm around her waist. “Hello, Ariel,” he says, his eyes crinkling a little at the corners with what looks like real pleasure to see me, the same way Tony’s did. “I’m so sorry you’re here on such terrible terms but...it really is wonderful to meet you.”

My mouth continues to hang open as I just stare at this man, at my friend’s mate. And then I shift my gaze to Pippa, who looks at me anxiously now.

And then down to her very pregnant belly.

And then back to her Alpha who...I mean, who obviously did the job.

Right?

Slowly, the smile fades from Elias's face as he realizes that I know everything. Absolutely everything. That whatever ruse he's got going on with Pippa here? I know that it's fake.

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That I've spoken to Ben and know precisely who he is.

Elias's face goes pale as my wolf nips me inside and I realize that in my first trial as a spy, I've made a terrible mistake and shown my cards.

As quick as I can, I wipe my face of any surprise and replace my shock with my best Princess smile, stepping forward with my hand out. "I'm so sorry, I'm being so rude," I say, laughing at myself a little and shaking my head like I can't believe I was such an idiot. "I'm Ariel - it's very nice to meet you!"

Elias looks down at my hand, his own smile returning to his face, but he makes no move to take it.

"Oh," Pippa says, reaching out and taking my hand in her own, giving it a little squeeze that makes me turn to her in surprise. Softly, she shakes her head at me. "In Atalaxia, dear, women don't shake hands with men - it's just not done. But of course you don't know that! I know things are different in Moon Valley. I hope you don't mind."

"Oh!" I say, turning to Elias in surprise and forcing a blush to my cheeks, even as I smile. "Oh, I'm so sorry, I hope you're not insulted -"

"Far from it, Princess," he murmurs, giving me a little bow and then gesturing again to the little breakfast table. "Would you eat with us? You must be starving. Again, we're so sorry for such an abrupt introduction to our nation. I promise, it will all be better from here."

"Oh, that's all right," I say, taking my seat with a pretty little laugh. "A good breakfast wipes away almost all woes." To my surprise, my stomach grumbles as I look around the little table, which is packed with food that all looks absolutely delicious.

But, then again, I've always had a good appetite.

"Coffee?" Elias asks, reaching for a pot. "Or tea?"

“Coffee, please,” I murmur, demure, allowing Pippa to fill my plate as it seems to please her to do so. She murmurs the names of all the little pastries and tarts, telling me a little about them as she goes, and quietly I wonder if she made them herself.

“Princess,” Elias says with a sad little sigh. “I’m sure there are a great many questions that you -“

But a clatter interrupts Elias’s words and he jumps a little as the little carafe of cream goes soaring to the ground.

“Oh, Ellie,” Pippa says, giving him a half-hearted little glare along with a laugh. “You’re impossible.” She drops a kiss to his cheek even as she goes to her knees with a napkin, quickly wiping up the spilled cream.

“Pip, please let me,” Elias murmurs, starting out of his chair.

But she just waves a hand at him, murmuring that he should entertain their guest, and continues her work.

“She’s right,” Elias says with a sigh, returning his eyes to me, his face serious. “I really am impossible. I’d be a complete disaster without Pippa to keep me in order.”

I nod cheerfully even as I watch his face, kind of...baffled. Because these two – it actually is impossible, right? If he’s mated to Ben then he’s...he’s gay, or at least queer or bisexual, yes? Which I know, here, is illegal at best and more accurately a death sentence. But his relationship with Pippa...it just seems so...real.

“Pips, love, would you mind?” Elias says, turning to her as she stands up with the empty carafe and putting a hand on her shoulder. “Poor Ariel didn’t even get a drop of cream before I destroyed everything. Would you go and get some more?”

Pippa starts to say a quick yes but then hesitates, looking at me. I intuit her thoughts – that she doesn’t want to leave me alone with a man who is a stranger, either because of tradition or law or even merely because it would make me uncomfortable.

“It’s okay, Pippa,” I say, nodding to her and giving her a happy smile as I nod to her Alpha. “You’ve got one of the nice ones, haven’t you? I don’t mind at all.”

Her face bursts into a wide and happy grin. “Well, I suppose it’s okay,” she says, folding the tiny carafe into her hands. “You’ll be family within the week, after all. I won’t be five minutes on this!”

She waves happily over her shoulder as she scurries for the door. Elias waves goodbye to her, even for a short trip, and then turns to me with a sigh.

“Pippa,” he says, shaking his head, meeting my eyes as Pippa closes the door behind her. I watch carefully, observing that there is a great deal of sadness in his expression that wasn’t there before. “She really is the best of us.”

“Family?” I ask, my voice a little tremulous. “I’ll be family?”

“Yes,” he says on another sigh, looking down into his black cup of coffee before taking a sip. “You have the dubious honor of being mated to my horrible brother, Gabriel.”

My eyebrows shoot up at this, as the pieces begin to click into place. Gabriel – Elias’s brother. Which means he is the son of Prince Calvin, my mother’s friend, and...

“Prince...Prince Gabriel of Atalaxia?” I whisper, suddenly shocked to my core as the family tree comes flying back to my memory. “Second in line to the throne?”

“First in line, if his ambitions have anything to do with it,” Elias murmurs, lifting his blue eyes to meet mine again and giving a sorry shake of his head. “Which means that you, Ariel Sinclair, will be his Queen along with his prize. And his weapon, if he can find a way to control you.”

I just stare at Elias, shocked. And then I set my shoulders and remember my role, murmuring something about always wanting to be a queen –

But Elias waves a hand, dismissing it all, looking at me quite solemnly. “It’s all right, Ariel,” he says, shaking his head. “You can drop the act. I know that you’re more fire goddess than you are simpering princess. We can speak plainly here, at least...” he glances towards the door, “at least while Pippa is gone.”

My eyes flick to the door and then back to his face as I try to keep my expression as plain as possible, trying to decide whether or not to believe him. And even though my wolf yips and urges me to, Faiza’s teachings ring in my head. Trust no one. They, too, are trying to lull you into security. Hold your cards tight – always.

“You’re too kind, Elias,” I say with a pretty smile, tilting my head to the side like he’s given me a great compliment that can’t possibly be true. “But honestly, anything you’ve heard about my magical abilities must be much exaggerated.”

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“Fair,” he says with a shrug, his eyes returning to his cup of coffee. But then he clears his throat, dropping his voice low. “Please,” he begs, not looking at me, his words hardly more than breath. “Is...is he okay? Is he all right?”

“Who?” I ask, lowering my voice as well as I lean forward.

Elias’s eyes dart up to mine. “I don’t know his name, Ariel. But I know you know who I mean. Please, just tell me...” he sighs, shaking his head, his hand tight on the handle of his cup. “Is he okay?”

I allow a tiny smile to find my lips as my eyes move over Elias’s tense face. He holds my gaze, determined and afraid, and I decide suddenly that he’s...either an excellent actor or very, very earnest.

“He’s fine,” I whisper, nodding quietly to this Atalaxian prince. Immediately, the tension goes out of his shoulders and he exhales a long breath. “He’s fine, Elias. Totally fine.”

He nods, sharp, and looks down at the table as color flushes in his cheeks. “Please. How do you know he’s fine?”

“Because I saw him yesterday,” I say quietly, still studying him. “His name is Ben. He’s one of my best friends.”

A shudder passes through Elias’s shoulders and he raises a hand to his face, covering his eyes. As Elias takes a moment to compose himself I try to think like Faiza, try to understand the stakes here. Because on one hand, Elias could be a man who just shoved a pitcher of cream off the table so his Luna would leave the room, so he could ask me the burning questions he’s had about his mate for...months.

On the other hand, if the Atlaxians are clever – and they are clever, no matter how much I despise the men who control this nation – then couldn’t they put this man here? With this very sad story, just to gain my trust? To play the role of the unhappily married man whose mate is in Moon Valley, just to tug on my heart strings, to see him as my ally? I tilt my head, considering this, considering Elias, wondering – really – what is his stake in this conversation?

Still, my wolf nudges me inside. Except, she urges, we know that Ben is his mate. He can’t fake that. You know how you feel about your mates – the connection...it trumps all else.

But allegiance to a nation? Would it...would it trump that? Would my allegiance to Jackson be stronger than my dedication to Moon Valley?

My wolf whines, uneasy and unsure.

I sigh briefly through my nose, confused. But there’s hardly any time to think on it as Elias again raises his head. “Thank you, Ariel,” he says, quite soft, meeting my eyes. “I am

eternally grateful to you for telling me that. It has been...a strain on my heart. You didn't have to tell me anything at all - especially considering the horrible way that Gabriel snatched you away from everyone you love - and yet you're kind enough to assure me that my mate is well. You're a kind person."

I blink passively at Elias, determined to continue playing dumb and pretty, pretending most of that went over my head. But still, I need information, and Elias - he seems like he knows a great deal about what's going on here.

"Why...why did they take me away from my family?" I ask quietly, shaking my head at him. "I mean, I am grateful to meet my mate -"

Elias smirks, either seeing through the lie or quietly suggesting that I patently should not be.

"- but surely there were other ways to do it? Especially if...he is determined to make me his Luna?" Softly, I shake my head. "My father isn't going to respond lightly on a man who did not ask for his permission."

Elias sighs and shakes his head. "You can ask more blandly than you are, Ariel," he says, looking seriously into my eyes. "This naïve Princess act - it will be good for the rest of the court, but I promise - you don't need to do it with me. I'm well aware of who you are - and Gabriel is too. Your cousin's mate made sure of that."

"My cousin's mate?" I snap out, leaning forward, narrowing my eyes. "Do you - do you know something..."

Elias shakes his head, reading the panic in my words. "If something happened to Jesse, I don't know what it is. What I meant is ...well, I don't know if you know this, but his mate is a creature of Darkness. She's a very proficient shadow mage who has been using her skills to spy on all of you for weeks. Whatever she knows, Gabriel knows too. Which is how we know that those flames in this battle and the last were yours, and no one else's."

Inwardly I scowl, but outwardly I keep my face plain, giving nothing away.

Elias smirks at me. "You'll be glad to know," he says quietly, taking another sip of his coffee, "that you've really pissed off my uncle and my cousin - the King, and his heir. You completely wiped out our air force with that final blaze - so well done on that. They're scrambling, now, to figure out how to continue the assault on Moon Valley without one."

I can't help but huff a little laugh and shake my head. "Why are you telling me this, Elias?" I wonder, passively, if it's a lie. But ...why tell me lies? It's not like I'm going to be able to go home and report on them. Simply to further my trust in him? "Whose side are you on?"

“I,” Elias says, quietly putting his coffee back down on the table, “am on whatever side gets me the hell out of this place, Ariel. Although I should more properly say ‘us,’ because I’m not leaving without Pippa or our child.”

My eyes widen in surprise as Elias looks over at the door.

“Pippa is the only good thing in this entire damned place,” he says, quite soft, almost as if watching for her. “She is purely good, in every sense of the term, but I can’t stand to see – every day – how this world crushes down her spirit, obliges her to be smaller to serve the needs of the men in her life. Me included. And our child,” he sighs, turning back to me and locking his eyes with mine. “Is a girl.”

Instantly, I understand. Because I’m not a mother – and honestly, I’ve never given a lot of thought about whether or not I want to be. But the idea of raising a little girl in this horrible world? Where she can’t even shake hands with a man and will be bought and sold through marriage?

No. Absolutely not.

But even as I understand everything Elias has said, I keep my face smooth and calm, blinking at him like a very simple deer who only understands every fourth word that he said.

Elias smirks at me. “I hope you’ll learn to trust me at some point,” he murmurs, tracing the edge of his coffee cup with the tip of his finger. “But I understand now why you don’t. But I promise, you, Ariel – I’m on your side. I’ve done a great deal of work to ensure that Gabriel trusts me, but the moment I get a chance to run? I’m leaving. And...I hope you’ll help me with that. For Pippa, if not for me. She’s my best friend – has been since we were little children.”

I stay very still, my heart aching for this poor man who I hope very much is telling the truth. I want more than anything to lean forward and take his hand, to promise him that I’ll do everything I can to help.

But even as my wolf howls, I just...don’t have enough information yet. I don’t know if I can trust him.

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The door’s handle clicks and Pippa saves me, slipping back into the room with another little jug of cream neatly balanced on her hand. “Back!” she says, smiling cheerfully at

both of us and slipping the pitcher onto the table. "I hope I wasn't too long. Did you get on okay?"

"Yes," I say, smiling up at her, which is easy. "Elias was just telling me that you met as children."

"Oh," she says, glancing at me and blushing a little before straightening up and smoothing a hand over her baby bump. "Yes, and now we've got one of our own on the way. Such an exciting time."

She smiles prettily at me and takes her seat next to Elias, leaning happily against him. And as I look between the two I wonder ...well, I wonder actually how much of it is a façade between them. Is the love between them quite real? Is it a friendship, a marriage of convenience? Or has Elias been lying to Pippa the whole time, ruthlessly using her as his beard in a world where he desperately needs one to survive?

My wolf nips me internally, almost making me jump. Not Ben's mate, she says, her teeth flashing a bit. Someone mated to our Benny couldn't possibly be that cruel.

But as the door creaks open again and my eyes dart towards it, finding a very cruel man indeed standing there, leaning against the door frame, leering at me like he can't wait to tear me to shreds...

I wonder if that can be true.

Because here's a man that I'm mated to - unequivocally. And he is...absolutely horrible.

Does this mean that...some part of me his horrible too?

Or is something else going on?

"Get out of here, Elias," Gabriel snaps, keeping his eyes on me. "I need a moment alone with my Luna."

I go stiff and so does Pippa, both of us staring at the cruel, blue-eyed prince leaning against the door. My eyes flash between him and Elias, noting their remarkable similarities, though Gabriel is...broader, a bit, and more muscled. And with none of the mobile kindness of a face used to smiling.

"Sorry," Elias says, light, ignoring his brother's command. "I'm not finished my breakfast." Casually, he reaches for a bread roll.

"Out," Gabriel snarls, taking three steps forward and kicking Elias's chair.

“Highness,” Pippa says, her voice softer and more tentative than it was before. She hangs her head slightly, not meeting Gabriel’s eyes. “It’s not appropriate for you to be alone with the Princess -”

“Oh, shut up, Pippa,” Gabriel snaps, vicious. “No one asked you.” Pippa’s face colors and her head dips more.

“Watch yourself,” Elias snaps, spinning to his brother, a very real threat in his voice. “Don’t you ever speak to her like that. Besides, she’s right, as usual.”

“Sanctimonious frauds, both of you,” Gabriel says, rolling his eyes before turning them back to me and giving me a lurid little smile. “Besides, I’m just trying to play things on Moon Valley’s terms. Where women are alone with men they’re not married to all the time. To do...whatever they wish.”

His eyes snap with precise deliberation immediately to Luca’s mark on my neck. I flush but fight, hard, the urge to cover the mark with my hand. I don’t say a word, just staring up at my mate, wondering how the hell I’m supposed to manage this.

Because I believe Elias when he said that Gabriel knows things about me – from Jesse’s mate turned spy, apparently. So, playing dumb isn’t going to help me here, is it?

But perhaps playing afraid...

I immediately give into the impulse, my wolf huffing her agreement, and cringe away from Gabriel in my chair, looking up at him with wide and vulnerable eyes.

A slow smile grows on Gabriel’s face and I wonder, again, just how this horrible man can be my mate. What the hell did my grandmother see in him?

“I won’t ask you again, Elias,” Gabriel says, not looking at his brother. “Take your little pet pigeon and get out of here.”

“Good thing you’re done asking,” Elias murmurs, beginning to pour a cup of coffee and adding cream and sugar, pushing it my way across the table. “Because I’m finished telling you that I’m not going anywhere. If you want to have breakfast with us, take a seat. If not, continue lurking in the doorway like some ridiculous vampire who hasn’t been invited in yet.”

My eyes dart to Pippa when I see her shoulders twitch with a laugh, see her flick her eyes to Elias, who gives her a calm wink. And to my surprise, Elias’s quiet composure...works.

Gabriel scowls but he moves into the room and shuts the door behind him. And then he moves to take the little chair next to me, effectively joining our party.

Avoiding the very real impulse to shift into my wolf and bite his stupid face, I turn slightly towards this new mate, still shrinking away from him a bit, playing up my fear. Because, after all, I need information above all else right now. And I have a better chance of getting it if he doesn't see me as a snarling threat.

"What, Ariel?" Gabriel says, smirking at me as he lounges back in his chair, crossing his leg casually and resting his ankle on his knee. "Trying to burn me up with your pretty flames? Finding that a little difficult at the moment?"

I force my eyes to go wider, as if the idea is terrible to me. Even though I'd do precisely that if I had access to my powers and any way out of the Atalaxian palace alive.

If, even, that's where I am.

"Where...where has my magic gone?" I ask, my voice tremulous. "I feel so...naked without it."

Pippa blushes at my phrasing but Elias just continues to eat, buttering his bread, staying steadily at the table and letting me work.

Gabriel's dirty little smile grows. "I took it away." He waves a hand around at us. "I'm in complete control here, Ariel. Control of you, of your magic. Of everyone's magic."

"How do you do that?" I speak as if in great wonder, even though I'm a little surprised that he's spilling so much detail so easily. Is it just arrogance? Or a true desire to let me know precisely how captive I am, and him with all the power?

"It is my gift," he says, shrugging. "From Darkness himself." Gabriel flicks his wrist, a glowing blue light sparking there, trembling within his hand like lightning held there, or electricity. My eyes go wide at it because...well. That's very interesting, isn't it?

"Yes," Elias murmurs, dry, dusting crumbs off of his hands and onto his place. "Very convenient for the rest of us, to have any of our own magic negated because Gabe needs to have complete control. Explain to me again how your manic need to control everything in the entire court doesn't amount to a rather insane level of hysterical anxiety, big brother?"

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“It has nothing to do with anxiety,” Gabriel snaps. Inwardly, my wolf exults a bit to see him discomposd by his brother.” My gift is a protectant, a forcefield over this entire court, keeping all other magics that could harm us out -”

“Except those gifted by Darkness,” Elias drawls, lifting his eyes to his brother’s with a smirk. “Convenient for you.” “Yes,” Gabriel returns, his teeth clenched. “It is. So if you’re finished being jealous and demonstrating your uncertain wit the only dubious claim you have to talent at all – perhaps I could return to my discussion with my mate?”

Elias shrugs like that doesn’t bother him at all and then leans towards Pippa, perfectly calm, murmuring a question in her ear about whether or not she’d like one of the sweet pastries. As he does, I watch Elias closely – because even if Gabriel has marked Elias as only dubiously clever, he really has given me a great deal of information here.

My magic – that given by the Goddess – it’s not working because Gabriel is blocking it. And he’s not blocking Darkness’s gifts – or can’t – which is the reason why I can still go to that other realm.

But...why all the cages?

“You will attend to me, Ariel,” Gabriel says, low and slow.

I snap my eyes up to him, realizing that I really was lost in my thoughts. I frown a little, not knowing precisely what he means.

“Your attention will be on me, at all times,” he says, leaning forward towards me, holding my gaze. “Like a proper Atalaxian woman and Luna.”

Even as my wolf rankles in me to be so ordered – what nonsense, that a woman’s attention should always be on a man – I straighten my shoulders and turn towards him, willing fear back into my expression and my voice. “Yes, Alpha,” I say quietly, ducking my head a bit. “As you will it.”

He considers me for a moment and then smirks. “I know that you are faking your obedience, Princess,” he says, leaning forward and capturing my chin again, as he did before. It takes a great deal of effort to not clench my jaw, to keep my canines from elongating. Just...letting him do it. “But that is all right. It will all be real soon enough.”

Slowly, I shake my head. “Truly, I am grateful,” I say quietly, attempting hard to be earnest. “I...I wish to be with my mate, of course.”

“Yes,” he drawls, studying my face. “But which one?” He drops my chin as if done with it, a bit disgusted, and then leans back hard in his chair.

Inwardly I scowl, because I didn’t know he knew about Luca and Jackson. Of course, with the mark on my neck clearly I’ve had interactions with men before, but I wouldn’t be the

only girl in Moon Valley to have been marked by their lover before they met their mate. Still, clearly he knows – but how much? Does he simply know that they exist, or does he know the details of their stories, their identities?

“How...how do you know about him?” I ask, seeking more information, my hand drifting up to cover the mark on my neck.

“Them,” you mean,” he drawls, smirking at me. “Luca Grant and Jackson McClintock? My intel is good, Ariel. My spy the best.” My wolf growls and turns in my soul, worried, wishing I’d had more time to ask Elias about Jesse’s mate, this apparent master spy.

“Luca Grant rejected me,” I say, shrugging and looking down at my plate, willing myself to look sad and contrite about it. ” And Jackson McClintock is nothing. A brute. A commoner. I don’t know why the Goddess saw fit to assign me to him.”

It pains me to even say the words and inwardly I shout that each one is untrue, that Jackson is the best thing in my life, the best man I’ve ever met, and I endeavor to deserve him every day.

Gabriel simply laughs softly and leans towards me, drawing my eyes back up to him. “Your relationships to your past mates are nothing to me, Ariel. Especially considering they’ll both be dead in a month.”

I pale at his words, my eyes flashing, even as I work hard to keep my expression plain.

But Gabriel just laughs and begins to push himself up from the chair. “Prepare yourself, Luna, he snaps out. “Tonight I present you to the court and then our mating ceremony will be in a week.” He leans down towards me, wrapping a possessive hand around the side of my neck, his palm pressed flat to Luca’s mark. “And then I’ll mark you myself, and wipe any memory of those pathetic wolves from your mind.”

His hand on my neck tightens as Gabriel pulls me towards him, slamming his mouth on mine, crude and vulgar, a claiming more than a kiss.

Laughing, he breaks away. “And if you do anything to displease me,” he seethes, glaring hard into my eyes. “I’ll pick either Jesse or Juniper from the dungeons, and bring them to your room, and cut their throat before your eyes. In fact, I’ll make you pick which one dies first.”

Without another word Gabriel strides for the door, yanking it open and stepping out into the hall without even looking back. I watch him in horror, my mind racing even as my wolf howls at the idea. Juniper – Jesse – do they do they really have them both? In the dungeons? Where are those?

“I’m sorry, Ariel,” Elias says a long moment after Gabriel has slammed the door shut. Horrified, I shift my eyes to him. He just shakes his head, sorrow in every line of his face.

“Um,” Pippa says, a bit frantic, looking between us, for some way to make this better.
“Maybe we should -”

“Could I...” I murmur, looking down into my lap, fighting my tears. “Just...have a moment alone? Please?”

“Of course, darling,” Pippa says, standing from her chair and coming close to press a soft kiss to my hair. “Of course. As much time as you like.”

Jesse groans when he wakes up, every single muscle in his body seeming to ache with discomfort. He presses his eyes shut as he turns his face into the scratchy straw mat, a hand going to his lower back to massage the twinge there. God, god does he miss his big fluffy bed in the castle, with its dozens of pillows and mountains of nice soft blankets...