

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 491

“I told you to sleep on the mat with me, where you belong,” Midnight says, smug. “Then you wouldn’t be so achy.” Jesse sighs and opens his eyes, turning towards where his strange little mate is crouched at the center of the yurt, stirring a pot over a small fire, the steam and smoke rising to disappear from a hole right at the center of the roof.

“But I just met you, Mids,” Jesse murmurs, laying flat on his back and smacking his hands dejectedly on his belly. “What would my mother say, if she heard I spent the night in your bed on the same day we met?”

“She would be happy,” Midnight replies, quite cheerful as she stirs. “Because then we would give her a grandpup, which would be the light of her life -”

Jesse laughs, he can’t help it, and shakes his head. “Mom doesn’t want grandkids right now, Midnight. My youngest sister is four. It would be too confusing for little Fifs, to have a niece who was so close to her age.”

Midnight lifts her head and wrinkles her nose at him. “What kind of name is Fifs for a little girl?”

“Are you seriously asking me this?” Jesse asks, dry. “Midnight?”

She stares at him like he’s speaking gibberish and then shrugs, moving on and turning her attention back to the pot. “Are you hungry, mate-boy?”

Jesse sighs and sits up, staring at the pot like he’s worried about the consequences of his answer. “I am. What’re you cooking?” “Galushka!” she says, waving a hand over the pot like it’s a magic cauldron.

“What the hell is that?” Jesse asks, dubious. Honestly, he’s not sure he wants to know, because the answer isn’t going to be anything good. When Midnight had brought him to the tent – the yurt, really – last night, he’d been horrified to see that this is her home. The entire thing is so worn, and bare, and patched – it’s like she’s utterly homeless here, and not even with the resources of someone who can seek some sort of assistance or beg for spare change.

But the way she’d ushered him inside and showed him her home...he’d hadn’t had the heart to do anything but tell her how comfortable and lovely the place was. But it was a lie, blatant and boldfaced. The entire yurt contains one small sleeping mat, her “kitchen” – which is just a couple of baskets filled with the bare necessities of cooking supplies and

several small, grey potatoes – and the saddest little collection of children’s books that he’s ever seen, alongside a single half-burned candle and a pack of matches.

“Galushka,” Midnight says, spooning some out onto a tin plate and setting it aside at her “table” – a worn red rug spread across a plank of wood next to the fire – before patting the floor, a clear invitation to come sit. “Is my own recipe. It’s shadow cabbage all cooked down until it’s nice and burney. The burning gives it the flavor.”

“What’s shadow cabbage?” Jesse murmurs, crawling across the floor and taking his place at the table, feeling of all things like he’s at one of his siblings’ imaginary tea parties.

“I don’t know,” Midnight murmurs, giving him a little glare. “It’s...that,” she says, nodding her head towards his plate as she dishes out her own. “It’s a vegetable. It grows here. That’s what it’s called.”

Jesse nods and picks up his plate, grimacing inwardly at the sad grey vegetable on his plate and picking up his fork, digging in. His wolf snarls and scratches at his soul. You’d better pretend that’s the most delicious cabbage you ever ate, his wolf orders. You’d better be nice to that poor girl. Jesse nods and sighs again, silently agreeing to it. Quite cheerful, Midnight settles down across from him and begins to dig into her breakfast.

“So, Mids,” Jesse says, forcing himself to forget about the tasteless lump of vegetable in his mouth as he chews. “What’s your favorite food?”

She goes still with her fork halfway to her mouth. “What are you talking about?”

He grins, looking at her, not understanding why this is a difficult question. “Of all the things you eat,” he says, quietly trying to figure out how to be clear about this, “which one do you like the most? Or look forward to?”

She stays still for a moment, staring at him as she considers the question, before she shrugs. “It all pretty much tastes the same.”

Inwardly Jesse groans because...well, because he’s a Sinclair. He loves food and was basically raised on take-out and his aunt Ella’s rather indulgent tendency to pack all the kids in the family full with whatever sweets they like. “It’s all the same?”

“It’s all...potatoes and cabbage. And like, shadow carrots,” Midnight says with a shrug, continuing to eat with gusto. “So, there’s no favorites. It’s just all...that.”

“So...you’ve never had meat?” Jesse asks, his stomach grumbling at the thought of a nice juicy steak. Or, god, all of the bacon they have at the Academy for breakfast – just mountains of it.

His wolf nips him. Eat your galushka.

Easy for you to say, Jesse grumbles to his wolf. Considering you're incorporeal at the moment.

But Jesse does as he's told, continuing to clear his plate.

"Of course I've had meat," Midnight says, rolling her eyes elaborately at him, like it's the stupidest thing to ask.

Jesse grins. "Okay, well, if everything is carrots and cabbage, how did you have meat?"

"I had it at the Fancy House," Midnight murmurs, eating her last forkful of cabbage and the scraping the plate with the fork, trying to get all the bits and juices.

"Fancy House," Jesse says, sitting up a bit. "What's that?"

Midnight goes still and doesn't look at him. "I don't know. I didn't say that."

Jesse smiles, shaking his head. "Yes, you did."

"No, I didn't. You imagined it. The wind came in and whispered lies in your ear."

Jesse frowns for a moment at that strange idea but then moves on from Midnight's very poor job of lying. He leans forward a bit, ducking his head low, trying to look her in the eye. "You're not in trouble, Mids," he says softly, shaking his head. "I'm not...I'm not trying to pin you down or anything. I'm just trying to learn about your life."

"You are?" she asks, lifting her head, her eyes wide as she stares up into her mate's face. "Why?"

"Because," he says, giving a little shrug. "You're my mate. And you're interesting and I like you. I...want to learn how to be your friend. Friends talk about each other's lives."

Midnight stares at Jesse for a long second. And then her face slowly spreads in the loveliest, happiest smile – so bright and excited that Jesse can't help but smile back.

"Really?" Midnight whispers, eager. "You...you want to get to know me?"

"Of course I want to know get to know you, Midnight," Jesse says, smiling at the girl, meaning it even if his heart and mind are still consumed with thoughts of Daphne and incredibly confused about what on earth is happening between the three of them. "My grandmother picked us for each other, after all. It makes sense that I'm interested."

"Yes," Midnight says, putting her plate down and her slapping hands on her thighs, leaning forward towards him. "Yes, first we can get to know each other, and then we will have the pups, and then -"

Jesse laughs, shaking his head at her as he holds a hand out, palm flat. “Midnight, you’ve got to drop the whole pups things. It’s not happening.”

She squeaks in dismay, sitting up rigidly, staring at him. “Why not!?”

“Why do you want pups so bad?” he asks, utterly confused.

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“Because we’re supposed to,” she says, huffy, a bite of a whine in her voice. “It’s the whole point!”

“Who told you that?” Jesse asks, frowning at her.

“Darkness,” she says, pouting at him. “As many pups as we can get, and all dedicated to him. They will be so good at the shadow magic because they will get it from both of us!”

“Well, that’s a double no, then,” Jesse says, frowning at his little mate. “I’m not dedicating any pups to Darkness.”

“What is the point of this yurt!?” Midnight asks, casting her hands dramatically out to encompass the entire yurt. “If not to fill it with children!?”

“Really?” Jesse says, his face screwing up in confusion. “You see a yurt and your first instinct is...to put have infant in it? Or eighteen of them?”

Midnight narrows her eyes at Jesse before looking away to the door, anger and confusion all over her face. “I don’t know why you won’t love me,” she says, shaking her head. “They told me you would. That you had to.”

“Hey Midnight?” Jesse says, seeing that he’s honestly worried her. She gives a little grunt of confirmation, inviting him to go on, even if she doesn’t look at him. “Can we just...slow down?”

She turns back to him now.

“Look, we barely know each other,” he says quietly. “And neither of us really know what’s going on. Can we just...chill out? Put all the pup and the love talk on extreme hold? Just...spend some time getting to know one another on a much more basic level?”

A small smile comes to her lips and Jesse honestly thinks she's a little relieved. "Okay," Midnight says, nodding lightly. "Um, what do we do?"

"We hang out," he says, shrugging. "Talk. Go for...walks. Play cards."

"What are cards?" she asks, turning her head to the side.

"All right," he says, laughing a little. "We'll...make cards. And I'll teach you how to play. But in the meantime maybe we just... ask each other questions."

Midnight considers this for a second and then shrugs like she can't think of anything else. "Okay. You go first."

"I already asked you what your favorite food was."

Her shoulders slump. "But I don't know any questions."

"All right," Jesse says, laughing a little and starting to gather their plates up, wondering where on earth she washes these." I'll go again, then. What's the Fancy House?"

She shakes her head, vehement. "Nope," she says. "Not allowed. Ask something else."

"All right," he says, slow, trying to hide his smile. "Where do you go when you spy on the Atalaxians?"

"Jesse!" she groans, slumping to the side. "That's not fair! You know I'm not supposed to tell you that stuff!"

He laughs and stands, holding out a hand to her. "All right, then, come on. Show me where to wash these plates and while we go there, tell me which of those books over there is your favorite."

Midnight perks up, taking his hand and getting to her feet, beginning to chatter eagerly about each of the books and what she likes about them as she leads Jesse out the door and to a surprisingly clear little stream not far away.

As Midnight chatters and Jesse cleans the plates, he only half listens, his mind wandering to the big important questions of his life at the moment. How to get home. How to get to Daphne again, to see how she is, to try to figure out what the hell is going on. How to find a way to explain to her that he has a mate, but that it doesn't change a single thing about how he feels towards her.

But even as he thinks of Daphne, his wolf turns towards Midnight too. We have to protect her, he says, standing on straight and stalwart legs, ready to leap into action. She's just a poor, abused little girl who has had nothing – probably for her whole life. And she's ours.

Solidly, Jesse agrees, as determined on that point as his wolf. Because even as he tried to keep his distance from her

emotionally, Midnight – she’s grown on him. She’s bizarre and strange, but sweet and earnest and so eager to do what’s right. He wonders, passively, what she’d have been like if she had been raised in his world. Bright and passionate, surely, and clever, and funny.

But here? She’s just...so alone. Just a little girl, even if she is physically grown, her emotional growth stunted by neglect. A beautiful girl, but –

Hey! His wolf snaps, biting him hard and giving him a hearty scratch in his soul. Don’t you dare even think about her beauty. No funny business with this poor girl – that would take advantage of her –

Oh, would you lay off, Jesse growls, swatting his wolf away. Obviously, I would never.

“Hey, are you listening to me?” Midnight snaps. Jesse whips his head up to see her with her hands on her hips, glaring down at him. He smiles, laughing a bit.

“I’m sorry, Midnight, will you start again? I got lost in my thoughts.”

She frowns for a minute but then slowly her expression turns into a smile. “I like it when you apologize,” she says, quiet. “It’s nice.”

“Then I’ll keep doing it,” Jesse says, smiling back. “But please, continue.”

She does, and Jesse does his best to truly listen. But just before he gives Midnight his full attention, Jesse reaffirms to himself and his wolf the very real truth in his mind: that even if she is his mate, Midnight is off limits, physically and romantically. To cross that line with someone so damaged would be a sincere violation. And he would never do that – not to her, not to anyone. And so Jesse determines, instead, to be Midnight’s best friend – her protector and her buddy, by her side whenever she needs him.

Because mate or not, everyone deserves someone like that. And Midnight’s never had it.

So, Jesse steps up to the task, determined to keep Midnight by his side even as he tries to get back home to his family and the people he loves.

At the meeting, Jackson just stares at the floor, clenching and unclenching his fist – the one that held Ariel’s hand. The one she was ripped from. The one that failed her.

He knows that he’s supposed to be paying attention but...god damn it, he doesn’t want to fucking be here. He doesn’t understand why he’s here – just standing at Rafe’s side – listening to people debate what the hell they’re going to do.

Why – why isn’t anyone taking any action!? Why isn’t he racing from the room –

“Hey,” Rafe murmurs, lightly knocking his shoulder into Jackson’s. “Are you okay, man?” Jackson looks over at his friend, his mate’s brother, with a solemn frown. Ben, on Rafe’s other side, looks at Jackson with worry too.

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Unwilling to answer that question, because he knows they want a yes and he’s not going to bother to lie, Jackson just tersely turns his gaze on the King and the Duke at the front of the room. Dominic and Roger listen closely to advisors who tell them vital information about the state of Atalaxia’s military and anything they know at all about Jesse or Juniper or Ariel.

But after the good news about the fact that Ariel basically obliterated Atalaxia’s entire air force in one go – stupid of them to send them all out at once – the rest of this meeting has been useless gibberish. The kind of bureaucratic hemming and hawing that makes Jackson want to tear his hair out.

Despite himself, Jackson lets his eyes drop again to the floor, lost in his thoughts.

This morning, he’d woken up in his old bedroom at the Palace with Ella in a chair at his bedside. She’d looked worn and exhausted as she explained that she had healed his palm, on which Ariel had left third-degree burns. And then Ella had held Jackson as he sobbed after she told him what happened – that Roger injected him with something to knock him out, and that they took him from the battlefield, and that Ariel is gone.

Gone, completely gone – snatched right out of his hands by someone that intelligence had identified as a fucking Atalaxian prince. Where...where the hell had he taken her? Jackson understands completely why they’d want her – and why they’d want her off that battlefield. She had been absolutely obliterating them and was about to burn herself out letting loose more hell on their armies.

But...where? Where the fuck is she now?

The question gnaws at him. Because despite Moon Valley’s apparently extensive resources, no one seems to fucking know.

“All right,” Dominic Sinclair says, snapping Jackson’s head back up. “So that’s the plan for now. We marshal our intelligence units, we send queries and ambassadors, and we...hope. Hope that we get some information soon.”

Jackson turns away from the room the moment the meeting breaks up, disgust filling him. Rafe calls after him, grabbing for his arm, but Jacks...he doesn't want to hurt his friend, but god, he's just got to get out of here. He's got to make a plan, he's got to –

The moment he steps out of the door, though, someone grabs him by the hand, startling and nearly knocking him off balance. Jackson growls, whipping his head to whoever, his teeth bared –

But he gasps and reels it all in the moment he realizes that it's the Queen.

"I'm sorry," Jackson stumbles out, shaking his head, horrified. "I'm so sorry, Ella –"

"It doesn't matter," Ella snaps, her hand still tight on his, looking up into his face. "Jackson, you have to go to get her. You know that, right? This is – this is all taking too long."

Jackson's vicious snarl is all the confirmation Ella needs.

"Good," Ella says, giving him a steady nod. "Then I'll help you. Let's go."

Side by side, the two start off down the hall.

I groan, my hands locked firm on the wooden bed post, as Pippa tugs hard on the strings of my corset. "Pippa," I pant, trying hard to look at her over my shoulder, "are you sure this is necessary? I've already got a pretty small waist..."

"I'm so sorry, Ariel," Pippa says, the strings so tight in her hands that her fingers are laced red and white. "Gabriel's orders. He said he wants you turned out in the height of fashion and..." she shrugs, looking down at my elaborate undergarment, implying that this is indeed necessary.

I sigh and nod, knowing it's not her fault, and turn around, letting Pippa continue.

When she finally ties off the strings and I stand straight, running my hands down over the corset, I'm kind of...appalled at the bizarre new shape my body has been morphed into. My waist is so small, and there's all sorts of ridiculous padding sewn in over my breasts and my booty. God, I look like...some weird fantasy of a woman all covered in fabric. Not a real girl at all.

Which, I suppose, is the point.

"Ready?" Pippa asks, panting a little herself as she hefts yards and yards of grey-blue silk over towards me.

"All of that?" I ask, pointing at it with wide eyes. "Is one dress!?"

She laughs a little, grinning at me, and nods.

“Oh goodness,” I mutter, ducking obligingly and letting Pippa lift the entire assortment over my head to drape over my body. Then she gets to work with all the buttons and zippers and ties and ribbons, getting me all prettied up.

I look at myself in the mirror as she does, wondering at myself, the change my life has taken. I’ve been dressing as a boy for months now, Ari becoming part of my identity. And neither Jackson nor Luca had complained once to see me without makeup, and in slacks, my hair messily tucked up beneath a black cap all day.

I mean, they’d liked me equally dressed as a girl too. But I got the impression with both that...it just never really mattered what I looked like.

But with Gabriel? Clearly...he cares.

“How are you, love?” Pippa asks, her voice soft. “I know you were in bed all day. Are you...okay? Do you have any questions I can answer, maybe to make things better?” I turn my head to look into her face, not really surprised to see true concern there. Whatever his motives, I don’t think that Elias truly lied about Pippa being the essence of goodness. She seems at all times to be genuinely kind.

I sigh, shrugging a bit, hesitating. But then I let myself ask, truly curious and needing information. “Is he always like that?” I whisper.

Pippa instantly intuits who I’m talking about. “He didn’t used to be,” she whispers with a grimace, as if she’s aware that that news doesn’t do anything to soften the meaning implicit in her words: that yes, he’s like that all the time.

I sigh, settling myself into the knowledge that my newset mate is kind of a nightmare.

“Well,” I ask, my face screwing up in confusion. “When did he...start being like that? And why?”

“It all started four or five years ago,” Pippa murmurs, working hard at the line of buttons that trail down my back. I watch her in the mirror, paying close attention to her expression. “When he...”

She sighs, though, and shakes her head, as if deciding that’s not the right place to start.

“When we were children,” Pippa says, beginning again, “the three of us were very close. Our mothers were best friends, which explains the rather uncommon instance of a younger girl being so often in the company of two older boys.”

“How much younger are you?” I murmur, curious.

“About three years younger than Elias,” she says, almost passive as she concentrates on my dress.

I blink in surprise when I realize that that makes Pippa just about Juniper’s age. God, Juniper, pregnant...but she’s just a baby. It’s a ridiculous thought.

“I’m about five years younger than Gabriel,” Pippa continues. “But it didn’t seem to matter that I was a girl and a baby – the three of us just got along so well. Gabriel – he was always so funny. He was full of pranks and energy. Elias and I are more restrained and...bookish, I guess is the right word. But Gabriel – he really got us to go on adventures, brought such spirit to our lives.”

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Pippa looks up at me with a great deal of sadness in her eyes, her hands falling from my dress as she finishes the last button. I turn towards her, concerned and sad for her sake.

“I’m really sorry,” she whispers, shaking your head. “That you didn’t get to meet that Gabriel. That you have this one instead. I think...” she bites her lip and shrugs. “I think you would have liked him.”

I frown, desperate to know more and concerned. “What happened?” I ask, stepping close, intuiting that it’s some sort of secret. “What...changed him?”

Pippa glances towards the door, anxious, clearly weighing the consequences. “Look, Ariel,” she whispers, “no one knows this, so please don’t tell, but if you’re to be his Luna you should know, and...you’re going to figure it out sooner or later.”

I nod eagerly, my wolf standing up straight, her whole body still as she waits.

“Gabriel...about five years ago he pledged himself to the God of Darkness,” Pippa whispers, looking into my eyes, her own shining. “In exchange for the power to protect this palace, and all the people in it, from the weapons and the magic of Moon Valley.”

My mouth falls open a little, my eyes going wide. “What does that mean?”

“He mentioned it today,” Pippa says, lifting a cupped hand and making a little side to side motion with it over her other hand, like she’s forming a snowball. “It’s like...a dome? A magical dome of protection? When Gabriel is here in the palace, none of your Goddess magic can work inside the dome. And none of your country’s weapons – any country’s

weapons – can penetrate it. No matter how powerful. No one can get in and no one can get out without Gabriel opening the barrier for them.”

I gape at her, shocked. But suddenly it makes so much sense – why the Atalaxians famously gather all of their nobles together in one place. Why Moon Valley has never just...exploded the entire thing. I mean, beyond the ethical concern of murdering thousands of innocent people – women and children included – it...would end the war.

Still, I shudder at the idea, knowing that my father would never do it. That even if I’m angry now, I wouldn’t want him to.

“Wait, so,” I say, frowning and turning my attention back to the woman who is supposed to become my sister-in-law in a week. “And that dedication to Darkness...it made Gabriel different? Changed his personality?”

Pippa glances again at the door, anxious. “It corrupted him,” she whispers, leaning close to me. “He told us once, early on – he sobbed and cried – and said that he could feel his wolf being enclosed in the darkness, that he was losing himself to it -”

Horror fills me as I remember, suddenly, the glimpse of his wolf that my wolf saw. Of the horrible wolf in his soul, with glowing eyes, and panting breath, his legs sunk low in darkness like oil, like tar. I gape at Pippa, who nods to me.

“Did you see it?” she asks, her hand reaching out to clasp my arm. “Did you...did you see his wolf? I know that sometimes mates can...”

Slowly I nod. “Pippa,” I breathe. “It was...horrible.”

Tears fill her eyes – tears for a friend she’s lost, one she can’t help. A man who has...disappeared from her life, replaced by a terrible stranger.

A knock comes at the door, making us both jump.

“Oh no,” Pippa whispers, straightening up, wiping hastily at her cheeks. “Am I okay?”

I smile softly at this poor girl who doesn’t want anyone to see her cry. “You’re stunning,” I murmur, reaching up and wiping a stray tear that she missed from beneath her eye. Pippa laughs a little and gives me a lovely smile before she turns for the door, dashing towards it.

I watch her go, scowling a little because...damn it. I really like her. As determined as I am to not like or trust any of these Atalaxians...Pippa seems to somehow be immune.

She pulls open the door a little, peeking out, and then pulls it open all the way. “Oh, hello!” she says, half excited, half wary. I peer beyond her and instantly see the reason why.

Two brothers stand in the door, one a lovely man who I suspect is lying to his Luna. The other, terribly corrupted by the god of Darkness in exchange for the immense power to protect his people. Both of their gazes move immediately to me.

I set my shoulders back, putting on my Princess Cupcake persona a little more than I did when I was alone with Pippa, and call on my years of Princess lessons as I slowly dip into a deep, formal, old-fashioned curtsy.

“Well?” I ask, my head bowed low. “Elias, Gabriel? Will I do?”

“You’re beautiful, Ariel,” Elias says, crossing the room with his brother as I raise myself back up. Eliasi gives me a soft smile before he dips into a low, low bow – the kind I know from my lessons is only used in Atalaxia for members of the royal house.

“Yes,” Gabriel says, studying me, his hands slipped deep in his pockets. “I suppose you will do, now that you’re dressed correctly, and not as a man. Or a slut.”

I go a little still at that accusation, only my lessons with Faiza stopping me from either laughing boldly in his face or slapping him hard across the cheek. Or both. Probably both.

“Pippa?” Gabriel calls, turning his head to look for her. “Isn’t there a crown that goes with this? And jewels?”

“Yes!” She scurries away to fetch it.

“Our grandmother’s crown,” Gabriel says, turning his eyes back to me, narrowing them a bit. “A great Princess of Atalaxia. I hope that you will endeavor to live up to the honor bestowed on you by wearing it.”

“I will try,” I say, quite soft and gentle, going to my knees before this Prince as Pippa comes back and reverently hands him the crown. I demurely lower my chin so that he can place the object on my head. It’s heavy, and when I turn to look in the mirror I see that it’s a gorgeous, elaborate crown, studded with diamonds and sapphires.

But even as I admire it, my heart sinks. Because I miss my simple rose-gold crown, the one that marks me as a Princess of Moon Valley. The one my mom picked out. The one that Jackson once told me he thought was pretty.

“And the necklace,” Gabriel says next.

I raise myself up, my eyes going wide when I see the diamond choker in Pippa’s hands not only because it’s absolutely dripping in diamonds but because –

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“Yes,” Gabriel snaps as Pippa steps forward and lifts it to my throat. “The necklace will cover your shame until I can cover it with my own mark.”

I do my best to contain my horror as Pippa works at the clasp, loosing a slow breath, my hand gripped tight on my wolf’s fur as she snarls at the thought.

When Pippa steps away, Gabriel offers a hand. “Come, Luna,” he says, his voice low and serious. “It’s time for you to be presented to your King and court.”

There is a loud murmur of conversation as we approach the ballroom, my hand held neatly high in Gabriel’s as he escorts me, Elias and Pippa following close behind.

I glance over at Gabriel as we walk, my wolf anxiously walking back and forth in my soul, a low whine in her throat. Because on a physical level...I mean. I get it. I understand what my grandmother the Goddess was thinking.

A great ball of self-hatred forms in my stomach as I take in Gabriel’s broad shoulders, his trim waist, the way he carries himself with utter confidence. My wolf gives a smug little huff as I consider that Jackson is taller – but then again, someone being taller than Jackson would be....absurd.

Still, I can’t deny it, especially as I look up into Gabriel’s regal, fine-featured face with those cheekbones so high and sharp they could cut glass, those shining blue eyes...damn it, but he’s hot. Less pretty than Luca, less contained-ferocity than Jacks, but...gorgeous.

Gabriel flicks his eyes over to me, a smirk on his lips almost like he can tell what I’m thinking. I snap my head back to the front, clenching my jaw, because that’s impossible at this point, right? I haven’t accepted our bond, so there’s no way that he could be beginning to sense my thoughts, my feelings.

But....my grandmother did order me to get all of my mate’s marks so that my magic could fully develop...

Still. The idea of carrying Gabriel’s mark on my flesh? Maybe this one...I’ll reject and see replaced.

She had a reason, my wolf murmurs, walking back and forth in my soul. She picked him for a reason...

I know, I whisper back, running a hand over my wolf’s soft fur, trying to calm her. We’ll think on it later. Now we concentrate, yes?

My wolf sighs as two servants begin to open the doors before us, sitting down primly on her haunches and preparing to play her role as the sweetest, stupidest, weakest and prettiest wolf in history. She grumbles as she lays down, but I murmur to her that she's a good girl, and she gives my mental hand a little lick of support.

Golden light floods into the hall from the fabulous ballroom ahead and I take a deep breath, concentrating as we step into the room. The chatter fades, every single person turning towards us to stare.

I hold my chin high and walk proud but demure at Gabriel's side, well aware that this is precisely how he wants me to be. A spoil of war, his tamed princess, made utterly Atalaxian under his command. A role I'm quite capable of playing. For now.

We sweep to the center of the room, our footsteps echoing. Gabriel looks around, smug, but he doesn't say a word. He doesn't need to. When we get to the center of the room music begins – classical strings singing out from some hidden alcove. He turns to me, slipping one hand around my waist, and then begins to move into the steps of a slow, formal waltz.

I blink for a moment in surprise but then begin to move with him, my feet remembering the steps from years of dance classes in a thousand styles. I look up into his face and he smirks down at me. I let a little smile find my lips.

"A risk, my Prince," I murmur, my voice light and pleased like he's the cleverest person I've ever met. "What if we'd gotten to the center of the room and you'd discovered I couldn't dance?"

"Oh, I know you can dance, Ariel," Gabriel murmurs, glancing around the room. "I've known since I was a child that you were my mate. I was careful to take notes on my future Luna."

My eyes go wide. And this time, I'm not faking it. "Wha – how...how did you know?"

"My father, fool that he is," Gabriel sighs, glaring off somewhere into the crowd that watches us, "had me dedicated to the Goddess soon after I was born. Something about your mother giving him the idea that Darkness was not the right God to guide my life. But it did reveal that one very useful fact."

I go a bit cold at this, because my own baptism vision didn't include any information about Gabriel – only Luca and Jacks. Why ...why would my Grandmother do that? And are there...others? Lurking out there? Other mates?

A cold rush of horror runs through me at the thought.

Gabriel and I continue the dance in perfect silence, each of our steps perfectly in tune with each other, with the music. When it comes to an end he steps away and gives me an

elaborate bow. The entire room politely applauds and I turn towards them all, pressing a hand to my chest and giving another deep curtsy, demonstrating to them all that I am at their mercy and glad to be here.

Secretly, though, my knee aches a bit from so much obeisance. Honestly, I prefer my own family's court, where mom greets pretty much everyone with a hug and asks if they're hungry. It's much kinder on the knees. Plus, you get a snack.

"Come," Gabriel says as the room breaks into more relaxed chatter and the crowd begins to move and mingle. I exhale a deep breath, glad that that part is over. "Time to meet my uncle, the King."

I bury my scowl at the prospect of meeting my enemy and nod to Gabriel, letting my face break into a pretty smile like I'm excited about it. Gabriel stares at me for a moment, I think surprised, and then breaks into a dark laugh, shaking his head as he leads me away. "You can drop the front around me, Ariel," he murmurs, wrapping my arm tight in his so that I walk close at his side. "Though it is good around everyone else. Yes, let the court believe you docile and sweet."

"There is no front, highness," I say, quite light, smiling and nodding to those around us who take a moment to nod to me. "I'm very pleased to be here. You've saved me from the tyranny of my home land."

He huffs a laugh and glances down at me again. "Lies. I know you for the patriot you are, Ariel."

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"Patriot I might be," I say, raising my eyes to his. "But it doesn't mean I can't believe that some things are done better here in Atalaxia. We could benefit from your influence, especially in terms of our social structure and family lives."

Gabriel studies my face, I think honestly considering whether or not I mean that. And inwardly I shout my thanks to Faiza, because every inch of it was a wretched lie.

There's no time to talk on it further, though, as we arrive at the throne.

"Behave yourself," Gabriel snaps, his voice a harsh whisper, his arm tightening harshly on mine. "If you do anything to embarrass yourself, Juniper will pay."

I take a deep breath and nod, letting him know that I consent. For Juniper and Jesse – just in case he does have them – but also for myself. Because this plays into my plans as well.

I focus on the man in front of me, taking in the richly-adorned King, an old man – much older than my father – who sits straight in his throne. He frowns, suspicious and disapproving, as his eyes sweep over my form. And even though I don't dare look at anything else, I don't miss – in the corner of my vision – that a photographer steps forward and begins taking pictures.

Good, I think. Good. Let this all go to the press.

Behind the King stands a young man whose familial relationship to Gabriel and Elias could not be clearer. I recognize him instantly, of course – the Crown Prince. The crowned young man I last saw in my own Palace before Midwinter.

And, as it was then, his wolf is wrong. Wrong, wrong. I can smell it on him, sense it. Even if I cannot see his wolf in the same way that I see Gabriel's, I know that it's the same. Wrong, corrupted.

And so, I realize as I focus my eyes on the monarch, is the King's.

For he, too, is corrupted.

Gabriel stops a few feet away from the King but loosens his grip on my arm, continuing to hand me forward so that I step to the King alone.

"Uncle," he says, his voice low. "May I present to you my mate, the Princess Ariel Sinclair."

The King says nothing, still frowning at me, waiting for me to show my cards.

So I act, my Princess training coming in quite handy now as I step forward, bowing my head and dropping to my knees before my enemy. "Your highness," I say, my voice low and reverent. "Thank you for this welcome to your court."

"The welcome is all at Gabriel's insistence, Princess," the King murmurs formally, offering one hand to me. "I suggested that you be thrown in the dungeons with the rest of the dogs we captured from your nation, but my sentimental nephew is convinced he can train you up into a proper Atalaxian lady."

I nod, reverent, my head still bowed. "I will endeavor in all ways to follow my Alpha's lead," I murmur.

"Then you may begin," the King says, offering his hand, his emerald ring shining, "by denouncing your allegiance to your homeland. And vowing allegiance to me."

Instantly I take his hand, like it's some gift offered to me that I've always wanted and never thought I could have. "I vow it," I say, raising my eyes to him, willing earnest truth into my eyes. "I disavow any ties to my old life, the land that raised me, my family there. I belong to my Alpha now and swear to honor his will, and through it, yours."

And then I bow my head, and press my lips to the King's ring as if it's my lover.

And when I raise my eyes again I see a small smile on this monarch's lips. And even as hatred and a very deep, very real desire to burn this entire room to the ground races through my heart, a little pleasure swells there as well.

Because in lowering myself before him, and disavowing everything I've ever known, I've played into every concept that the Atalaxian's have regarding womankind: that we're wayward, and stupid, and that all we need is a strong Alpha's guiding hand to show us the way.

In thus debasing myself, I think – I hope – I have made my first step towards fooling this man into thinking that I, too, am just a foolish little woman.

Even though I have every intention of ripping out his throat and walking all the way home with his blood dripping from my fangs.

It's hours before Gabriel escorts me back to my room. Hours of laughing at horrible jokes about how lucky I am to be saved from the homeland I treasure. Hours of smiling at old men who ogle me in my ridiculous corset and openly compliment Gabriel on what a catch he stole from that heathen land, what beautiful sons I will produce for him. Hours of simpering women who congratulate me over and over on the luck I've had to be mated to this...monster.

As we walk back to the room, my head pounds – absolutely pounds because the entire time I endured the courtiers, did my best to hold my mask up as they actively insulted my father, called my mother a peasant whore, laughed at my aunt for calling herself a doctor – the entire time... Gabriel's wolf pushed. Pushed towards mine, sought to get to her, sought to bully her into accepting the bond and building the bridge between our souls. He snarled at her, and threatened her, and howled to her.

My head aches now with the hangover of the effort between negotiating my inner and outer worlds, both of which were an assault.

Gabriel doesn't say a word as we approach my door, instead simply grasping the handle and pushing it open. But the moment I step into the darkness of the room he moves, shoving me hard towards the bed and slamming the door shut behind him.

"Go," he growls as I spin and trip over my feet in my shock, trying to push him away as he moves with me, shoving me onto the mattress and climbing over me as I fall onto my back. "Submit, Luna."

“Get off of me!” I scream, shocked and terrified, any thought of my sweet Princess persona ripped from me.

“No,” he snarls, lowering himself so that his body is pressed along the length of mine. “You will submit to me, and I will mark you now so that you know who your master is, and-”

But my wolf snarls, ripping away my shock, and I remember my lessons with Blaze. I snarl too as I wrap my hands in Gabriel’s shirt and throw my whole weight into my left shoulder, rolling Gabriel over onto his own back in the same moment that I shift into my wolf. He looks up at me, shocked, when he realizes what happened, but my teeth are already at his throat.

I only have the advantage for a moment, though, before Gabriel roars and hits me, hard, with the side of his arm, sending me flying away. Not before my teeth graze his neck – but enough that my tiny wolf body goes flying across the bed, bounces once, and then careens to the floor where I hit, hard.

I yelp, my paws scrabbling for purchase, desperate to get up and see where he is –

But suddenly the lights turn on and I scurry around the side of the bed, desperate to know who’s here – who has come to my rescue. My eyes lock on Pippa, at the door, staring horrified with her hands over her mouth as Elias roars and storms forward, grabbing Gabriel by the back of his shirt as he lurches for me, hauling my mate back and away from me.

“Gabriel!” Elias barks, shaking his brother roughly, making him turn.

“Get your damn hands off me, Elias!” Gabriel roars, turning his head to snarl at his brother, his fangs long and ready to pierce. “She’s my fucking Luna -”

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Elias, to my shock, drops Gabriel’s shirt and winds his hand back, delivering a heady slap across his brother’s face. Gabriel gasps and stumbles to the side, his hand going to his face.

“Whether or not she is your mate,” Elias growls, advancing again on his brother, “gives you no right to assault her. Even by Atalaxian standards you go too far.”

“When she is my Luna,” Gabriel snarls, standing and glaring hard at his brother, “I have a right to her body – ”

“And she is not your Luna!” Elias shouts, taking a single solid step towards his brother and grabbing the front of his shirt, shaking him again. “You weakling, is this seriously how you would have your mate!?” He casts a hand out towards me.

Trembling in fear!?”

I take a moment to assess myself, not very surprised to find that Elias is right – I’m trembling in every one of my limbs, my little wolf paws sliding and struggling to find purchase on the marble floor. Pippa snaps her gaze to me as well and gives a little cry of dismay, dashing across the room to me and wrapping me tight into her arms, pulling me half into her lap. I give a little wolf cry of dismay as my mind comes back to me, as I begin to realize how horrible and terribly close that was.

And that there’s nothing to stop him from doing again.

“You disgust me,” Elias snarls, hauling Gabriel with him towards the door. “I’m taking you out of here and you will not return until Ariel invites you. If she ever does.” I watch in shock, because Elias is both the younger and the smaller brother. How... how does he have this kind of authority? Why is Gabriel listening to him?

Elias glances once at Pippa, who gives him a steady nod, but then Elias and Gabriel gone, the door closing hard behind them. Pippa holds me for a long few minutes, stroking my fur and telling me that it’s all right. When I finally feel strong enough I shift back into my girl body, tears streaming down my cheeks.

“Oh, Ariel,” Pippa murmurs, taking my face in her hands. “I’m so sorry. That was so horrible.”

“Why – why did he do that?” I whisper, shaking my head, still terrified. I glance at the door, scared he’ll come back. Because even if Blaze did teach me some things, I know I can’t win against Gabriel, not really. He – like most Alphas – is just so much bigger than me.

“I don’t know why he did it,” Pippa whispers, softly stroking my cheek. “But it won’t happen again, darling. The doors – they have locks – all of our maiden chambers do. None of them can be opened except from the inside if you will it. I promise.”

A little tension goes out of me at this and I nod to her, hoping that’s true.

“And I’ll stay with you,” she murmurs, nodding seriously. “I’ll stay all night, and Elias will stay with Gabriel and talk some sense into him -”

“Why...” I say, my voice still shaking, “why does Gabriel listen to Elias? He’s...he’s bigger? And older?”

Pippa twists her lips a bit to the side as she drops her hands from my face, giving a shrug. “Gabriel...when he took the oath to the God of Darkness, he also...lost some concept of right and wrong. He’s a creature of impulse now, pursuing what he wants, giving into strong emotions like rage and lust and insecurity. Elias – for all that he sees Gabriel’s faults – he loves him.” She sighs, almost apologetic. “Some part of Gabriel trusts him still, knows that he will not steer him wrong.”

I stare at Pippa, not quite getting it.

And Pippa smiles. “Do you not have a big tough older brother?” she says, whispering a little and leaning forward towards me. “Who you have a bit tied around your finger as well?”

Something about the truth in this makes me burst out with a shaky little laugh as I raise my hand to wipe at my tears. “Okay, yeah. That part...maybe that makes sense.”

She nods. “Do you want a shower, love? Or, we can just get you out of this silly corset and straight to bed -”

“Just the corset, please,” I murmur, turning slightly so that she can start on the buttons. “And then...Pippa...if it really is safe here. Could I sleep alone? I think...” I sigh. “I want to be alone to gather my thoughts.”

“Of course, my dear,” she whispers. “There’s a bell pull in the corner that’s attached to a bell in my and Elias’s room, which is just two down. If you ever feel unsafe, even for a moment, you tug on that, okay? We will come running.”

“Thank you,” I murmur. And then I sit very quietly and let my friend do her work.

Once Pippa leaves I feel...empty. Just sort of dead and alone. I try to gather myself together and chuff myself up by telling myself that this is just a trial, and that I’ll get through it, but...

But for some reason, I can’t stop crying.

I look around my dark room and I just...I hate it here. So, so much. I want to be home, in the nook, or in my little childhood bed in the palace, and I want Jacks there with me, with my cheek warm against his chest...

Even as I think of it, though, I just cry harder.

Still, I gather as many blankets and pillows into my arms as I can and call upon that dark magic within me, tossing myself backwards into that world. When I land there – a bit

hard – on my ass, I’m gratified to see that the supplies I had gathered in my arms came with me.

I sigh, a bit, to see the blankets and the pillow get very dusty in a matter of moments as I lay them out in the dirt of the Land of Darkness, but I push the thought of that aside as I curl up, my head on a soft down pillow, my eyes focused on the dark of a night sky I’ve never seen before. And even if the ground is hard, and the wind chilly, and the bars of the cage around me gleam in the moonlight of another world...

Still, I know that it’s better, sleeping here.

That anything is better than a night in that horrible palace, with my mate probably prowling the halls, seeking to make me submit to him whether I want to or not.

Jackson looks around Ella’s closet...kind of in wonder. His wolf growls in his soul, telling him to pay attention to the mission but...god, it’s hard. This closet is...gigantic, and packed with stuff. More than just clothes and jewelry. Is that – is that a mini bar in that corner? And a coffee alcove in the back?

“Okay,” Ella sighs, coming through a door to...god, Jackson has no idea where. It does not lead to the Royal Bedroom, or to the bathroom so....it must go somewhere else. Another...wing of the closet? Where she keeps more stuff? In her hand Ella carries a heavy backpack that she hoists up with both hands. “I think you should be all set.”

Jackson takes the backpack from her and easily swings it over one shoulder. “Thank you, Ella,” he says, looking her quite seriously in the eyes. “I think this is right. It’s the only thing I can think to do.”

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“I think so too,” Ella says with a satisfied sigh, looking over the dark fatigues she stole from Dominic’s military wardrobe, a uniform which she was not surprised at all to find fit Jackson to near perfection. “The bag has all the supplies you need and... some stuff for Ari. Once you get her back.”

Jackson nods once, eager to go.

“When you find her,” Ella says, looking up at him with eyes that again shine with tears, “will you – ”

A loud shout comes from the bedroom, or perhaps the living room beyond, making them both snap their heads towards the door.

“Come on,” Ella says, all authority now as she strides for the bedroom door. “Leave the bag.”

Jackson does as he’s told, dropping the backpack and working hard to not outstrip Ella as he strides for the door. But she hurries and soon they’re both across the bedroom and bursting into the living room, where the family gathers and everyone is suddenly exclaiming as they look at their phones.

“What!?” Ella cries, dashing immediately to Dominic’s side. “What is it?”

Jackson follows close behind her, desperate to know.

“It’s...fucking Atalaxian press,” Dominic murmurs as he tucks an arm around Ella, pulling her close and showing her the phone. Jackson’s wolf whines in his chest as he looks around, desperate for a phone for the first time in his life, dying to know what on earth is going on. Cora and Roger are here with the rest of their children, and Rafe, and Mark – all distracted – But Rafe soon glances up and realizes that Jackson is out of the loop, striding to his side. “It’s fine,” Rafe says, nodding as he presses the phone into Jackson’s hands. “It’s proof that she’s alive and...well. Ridiculously dressed but...well.”

Jackson’s gaze snaps to the phone as he scans the article, his fingers scrolling fast to the pictures.

His heart wrenches when he sees the pictures of Ariel – his darling girl – his mate –

Dressed in an insane blue dress, wearing an elaborate crown. A growl rises in his throat as Jackson sees that man by her side – the one he saw on the battlefield, the one the Sinclairs identified as the Atalaxian prince. But Jackson barely spares a glance for him, his eyes immediately moving back to her.

Ariel, kneeling before the Atalaxian King. Ariel, kissing his hand like she’s so grateful to have the chance to do it. Ariel rising on the Prince’s hand, beaming at him.

“How did...” Jackson murmurs, frowning at the phone and lifting it closer to his face like it will help him see better. “How did they make her waist so small...”

“Is that seriously what’s bothering you?” Rafe snaps, grabbing the phone back.

“I mean it has to hurt,” Jackson murmurs, frowning at his friend, “she’s not shaped like that. They must have used...duct tape.”

“Jacks,” Rafe growls, rolling his eyes a little, “she’s swearing allegiance to Atalaxia! She’s taking a role as a Princess of their court!”

“Yeah, but they probably made her say all of that,” Jackson says, frowning at Rafe and crossing his arms, not really seeing why Ariel’s actions in the images are a big deal. Like Dominic said, the photographs show she’s alive and healthy. And that’s the only think Jackson cares about.

“I agree,” Dominic says, making everyone in the room turn towards him. “Ariel is staying alive, playing whatever role they ask of her, avoiding torture and imprisonment. I’m proud of her- it’s clever, hard work, and I’m not sure I’d be capable of it.” “Are -” Rafe sputters, looking around the room. “Am I the only one who read the article!? They’re claiming her as a Princess of Atalaxia! They’re saying she’s going to have a ceremony with this Prince Gabriel character, that -”

“Rafe,” Ella says, her voice low in warning, her eyes shifting to Jackson.

“That he’s her mate!” Rafe finishes, throwing his arms wide, outraged.

Jackson goes cold at this. Because...what? Her...her mate?

“We have no confirmation of that,” Dominic snaps, his eyes likewise on Jacks. Jackson starts to breathe hard, panicking at the idea of it. Was this – was this the Goddess reassigning someone after Luca rejected her? Or –

“Really,” Roger says, breaking in with a nod, “they would say that, just to establish Ariel as a member of their court, to have a true claim on her, we can’t know – ”

But Jackson is done listening. He turns hard on his heel, heading back into the bedroom, straight for the closet. Before he’s halfway across the room, he hears the patter of the Queen’s footsteps behind him.

She reaches him, her hands outstretched, as he hauls the bag up on his shoulder. “Jackson,” Ella says, looking up at him with worried eyes. “Don’t -”

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“It doesn’t change anything,” Jackson intones, his voice low and gravelly, looking with perfect seriousness into Ella’s eyes. “Mate or not, I’m going to get her. They’re still the enemy. It’s still a world that seeks to...destroy its women.” He drops his eyes on the words, shaking his head, hating again that she’s there. That some other man even has made a claim on her, when she’s so clearly his.

“Jackson,” Ella says, cool and strict, making him raise his eyes to hers again. “I don’t want you going out there unless you have your head on straight. No heroics. No...suicide missions. All right?”

“I promise,” Jackson says, meaning it. “None of this changes anything for me, Ella. It was...good to see her well.” He swallows hard, thinking of how beautiful she looked, even with her waist pinched so tight. “But all of the other stuff? It...Ella, I just want to go. Please, let me get started.”

“All right,” Ella whispers, looking over her shoulder at the closet door. “Let’s go, darling.” She nods to him once more and the two quickly leave the closet by the third door, which leads down a set of stairs and then into a servant’s hall that Jackson hasn’t seen before.

He follows the Queen through a long set of hallways that lead, to his surprise, out to a set of garages.

“There,” Ella says, gesturing towards a black car that has a man Jackson recognizes driving – one of their trusted bodyguards. “You go with Conner, he’ll take you to the outskirts and then to the badlands, where you can cross to Atalaxia.”

Jackson nods, knowing that it’s a good plan. Fast, secret. They had decided to keep it small, knowing that Dominic would object, that he’d want to keep Jackson there to help the military. But...both Ella and Jackson know, in their hearts, that that’s the wrong choice. That Jackson’s abilities are best used in stealth now, going on an individual mission.

Ella reaches her arms up for Jackson and he bends down, wrapping the Queen in a big hug. “You go get our girl,” she whispers, pressing a kiss to his cheek.

“I will,” he murmurs, closing his eyes and willing himself to the goal. “I promise, I will.”

Ella gives him one more squeeze and then Jackson strides off to get into the car, starting on a long mission that will take days before he even gets anywhere. Before he can even try to make contact with Ariel.

But Ella exhales slowly, watching the car drive away, knowing she’s done the best thing that she can. For Ariel, for Jackson, for herself.

And she has faith – utter faith – that it will work out. She trusts that boy – trusts him with her daughter’s life. And there’s only one other man in this world she can truly say that about.

Ella sighs and turns away, walking quietly back into the palace and winding through long sets of stairs, taking her time getting back to the family rooms. Mostly because she is...not looking forward to telling Dominic that she has deprived him of yet another of his most powerful warriors.

She smirks a little, thinking about how pissed off Dominic is going to be. Because he's very cute when he's all pissed off. But Ella's happiness at that thought doesn't last long, wiped away by worry for her daughters, for her nephew, all of whom are missing. God, what is she going to do –

Ella's head snaps to the right when she hears a clatter and a commotion. She blinking back to awareness and suddenly realizes that she was sort of walking on autopilot and is now at the front of the palace, heading up the formal set of stairs that leads to the family room. There's a flutter of activity at the front entrance – shouting, too.

She frowns, peering towards it, wondering what the hell...

But then Ella goes still, instantly recognizing the voice pleading desperately for entrance.

"Let him in," Ella calls, walking slowly back down the stairs, her arms crossed over her chest.

A series of no less than eight guards turn to her in shock. "Highness," one says, shaking his head at her. "Are you sure? He's – he's very upset – he could do anything –"

"I'm sure," Ella says, giving the guard a steady nod.

The guards hesitate for only a second before they step back, letting the soaking wet boxer stumble into the palace, panting, looking exhausted, his eyes filled with tears.

"Well, Luca," Ella says, looking over the young man who rejected her daughter with a raised eyebrow. "I admit that I'm surprised to see you here."

"Please," Luca begs, shaking his head, desperation all over his face. "I – I know you all must hate me – but please – let me do anything I can to help – I can't believe –"

"Oh, come on," Ella says with a sigh, holding a hand out for Luca. "No need for the hysterics, boy."

He stares at Ella for a second and then down at her hand as if he can't believe she's offering it.

"You're lucky," Ella says, a little smirk in her voice. "Jackson just left. So the chances of you getting murdered in the next few minutes just dropped significantly."

Luca clenches his jaw but steps forward, taking her hand, clearly accepting whatever fate awaits him.

"Come on," Ella sighs, squeezing his hand and giving him a little tug towards the stairs. "Let's go see the big guy. See if he has a job for you."

“Thank you,” Luca whispers. And Ella just nods, pressing herself to Luca’s wet side and letting him feel her warmth. Because even if she hates this boy a little bit right now...

Well. She also loves him too.

That’s family, after all.

I gasp awake at the sound of feet hitting packed dirt, my head flying up as I try to make heads and tails of the sudden noise, the shape storming towards me.

“What the hell are you doing here!?”

I reel away in horror when I realize that it’s Gabriel – that Gabriel has found me –

“You scared the hell out of Pippa!” he shouts, casting out a hand. “No one had any idea where you were or how you got out -”

I shout in fear and immediately throw myself backwards out of this realm, instantly transitioning and appearing back in my bed – a much softer landing, I might add, than the one I had in the Land of Darkness.

“Ariel!” Pippa gasps, and I look around in the room in stunned silence as she dashes towards me, because there are like...a lot of people here. Her eyes go wide and she grabs a throw blanket as she dashes to me, quickly throwing it over my body.

I stare at her for a second as she cries and wraps her arms around me next – and then I get it. She covered me up because I’m just sitting here in my bed in my nightgown, and there are strange men in the room.

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“Ariel,” Elias says, his face lax with relief as he crosses to the edge of the bed next, reaching for me but then hesitating and pulling his hand back. “Thank goodness – we thought something terrible had happened -”

“I’m sorry,” I say, holding the crying Pippa to me. “I just...” I shrug. “I didn’t want to be here. So I went...there.”

Elias nods to me, clearly understanding my meaning, and then goes to dismiss all of the people in the room who peer at me curiously, probably wondering how the hell I appeared out of thin air.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper to Pippa, truly meaning the apology to her. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“It’s okay,” she says, sitting up and wiping at her face. “I’m just glad you’re all right. God, Ariel, I’m certainly giving you a picture of myself as a cry baby, aren’t I?”

I laugh a little, my hands on my friend’s shoulders in what I hope is a steadying way as Elias closes the door behind the last of the people and turns back to us with a smile.

“Um,” I say, looking around anxiously. “Where is Gabriel? Why didn’t he...come back?”

“He needs to wait,” Elias says, smirking a little as he crosses to me again. “For the talisman to recharge. Why, how long does it take for yours to regenerate?”

“What?” I ask, peering at him like he’s crazy. “What are you talking about?”

Pippa and Elias both go a bit still and then lock eyes with each other, some communication going between them. I frown because...are they just best friends who have known each other since childhood? Or is there some kind of mate-speak passing between them?

“Ariel,” Elias says, focusing on me and crossing his arms over his chest. “When you go to the Land of Darkness...you can just... go?”

“Yes?” I say, staring between the two of them, curious. “Why, what’s a talisman?”

“She’s been gifted since she was an infant,” Pippa says, nodding eagerly to Elias like she’s figured it out. “Just like the girl. Darkness’s girl.”

“Yes,” Elias murmurs, curling a finger around his chin. “Yes, that does make sense, doesn’t it?”

“What,” I ask, seriously confused, staring between them. “What makes sense?”

But suddenly Gabriel appears in the middle of my room and strides immediately for me. “You are not to go there,” he snarls. “Sleeping there!? In the Darkness!? What were you thinking!?”

I cringe away from him again even as my wolf snarls.

“Gabriel,” Elias says, his voice warning. “Reel it in.”

To my shock, Gabriel does as Elias says, stopping before he reaches the side of the bed and comes within arm's distance of me. Still, he turns his furious face back to mine. "Did you like the pretty cage I built for you, pet?" he growls, leaning forward to stare into my eyes. "So that even if you try to escape me by going to the Land of Darkness, I've still got you trapped."

I realize it all with sudden clarity that rather takes my breath away. That all of those cages in the Land of Darkness – they're for me. Just in case I try to run away using that world – because, somehow, I'm better at it than him. Better at shifting there, better at navigating it, because he only dedicated himself to Darkness five years ago.

But me? I've had this gift since I was born.

I fight, hard, to keep a smile from curling on my lips. But the desire to keep my pleasure hidden is aided by the realization that ...it must have taken ages for them to build all of those cages in the other world – the miles and miles of steel fence to keep me trapped.

Which means that they've been planning to trap me for...a long, long time.

I look up into my mate's seething face and suddenly make a decision that I...do not want to be in his presence any longer. And so I shift again, as easily as breathing, my eyes catching a sly smile on Elias's face as he watches me go.

Suddenly I'm back in my bedding in that dark world, looking up at the moons that still hang in the sky, letting that smile come fully to my lips.

Because Gabriel can follow me here, but I can just shift back. And every time he chases me from one world to the other, his talisman – whatever that is – will weaken. Which means his only real choice is to eventually leave me the hell alone.

I sigh, slightly mollified by this tiny victory, and curl up in my stolen duvet, looking up at the sky, my wolf huffing with sadness as she curls up in my soul.

Because it really is just a tiny victory in a very horrible situation. Honestly, the idea that sitting alone in a cage in a wasteland world is my best refuge...

My wolf gives a little howl and I press my eyes shut, knowing that this is going to be along road. Wondering, honestly, how I'm going to survive here. Because my mating ceremony is in a week! And I can't spend the entirety of that time curled up in this cage.

Even if it's the only place where I can even start to feel like myself.

Jesse groans, pressing the heels of his palms against his closed eyes, laying flat on the ground in the yurt. Because by now, to his best estimate, he's spent a week here with Midnight in this strange world of Darkness, even though it's hard to tell because there's no sun and no clocks and time is...weird here.

But regardless of how much time has passed, he's never, ever been so bored in his entire life.

Midnight, on the other hand, is delighted.

"Do you want to play the cards again!?" she asks, her voice thrilling with anticipation.

Jesse sighs and drops his hands to his chest, turning his head to watch as his funny little mate lays out the scraps of paper in front of her, shuffling them up. In this past week they made a little deck of cards and he taught her to play poker, using little bits of stick as chips.

To his surprise, her agile little mind immediately took to the game and she fleeced him for all that he was worth after about two days. He grins at the memory, laughing a little.

"Come on!" Midnight urges, grinning at him. "I'll loan you some sticks."

"I already owe you ten thousand sticks," Jesse sighs, shaking his head. "I don't need to get into any further debt. I'll end up like my father."

"Oh, come on," she replies, laughing. "I'll go easy on you."

Jesse sighs and pulls himself up to a sitting position, groaning as he does. Because, of course, he refuses to share Midnight's bed and also refuses to let her sleep on the floor instead of him. Which makes him feel quite gallant but is doing one hell of a number on his back.

"All right, Ace," Jesse says, scooting closer to Midnight and rubbing his hands together. "Put me down for fifty stick and deal me in."