

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 501

She laughs, delighted, and does as he says.

Jesse watches Midnight, a little smile on his face as he watches her sort the flimsy little cards and then deal them out. Because even if the majority of the week has been horrible – just hard labor doing the basics to stay alive, and terrible food, and an incredible amount of boredom and anxiety worrying about everyone at home – getting to know Midnight has been...

Well, it's been lovely.

As she peeks at the two cards she dealt herself, Jesse thinks again on his initial hatred of this girl. And even if he realizes that it was justified in this moment – he was scared for himself, after all, and for Daphne – he knows now that it was too harsh. Because she really is just...a sweet girl in a horrible situation.

Over the past week Midnight has proved herself to be hard working, and clever, and optimistic, and funny. Funny as hell – sometimes not even intending to be funny but leaving Jesse in stitches. And the conversation has just been great – Midnight listening with wide wonderful eyes as Jesse tells of the realities of his world, and then her eagerly stumbling over her words as she tells him of her own life.

Yes, in the past week, Jesse has come to sort of...get it. Why the Goddess picked someone like Midnight for him. Because were she to have grown up in Moon Valley she'd have been spunky, and vivid, and fierce and sweet.

But, of course, she grew up here. And her poor little corrupted wolf...

Jesse sighs, picking up his cards and studying them, forcing himself away from the thought. Because Midnight hates it when he pities her, and any conversations about that wolf go again and again to why he won't accept the bond, and why he won't love her, and why they can't immediately have eighteen pups.

"And here's the flop..." Midnight murmurs, setting out the first three cards on the floor of the yurt. Jesse smirks, loving how fast Midnight has picked up the lingo from his world, how much she delights in these simple things.

But even if so much about hanging out with Midnight has been great...she certainly has been a lock box regarding any information about this world.

Inwardly Jesse's wolf gives him a nudge, urging him forward. And he decides to put a little more on the table with this game than just a bundle of sticks.

"I'll raise you two sticks," Jesse murmurs, putting the required amount forward.

Midnight keeps her face perfectly still as she glances at her cards and then up into Jesse's face, studying his expression. His smirk deepens and she shakes her head at him.

"You're very bad at this, Jesse," she says with a sigh, putting forward her own two sticks to match his. "You say you can tell when I am lying but I know when you are bluffing."

"Maybe you do maybe you don't," Jesse murmurs as Midnight turns over the next card for the turn. "But I do know that you're lying about that Fancy House you told me about before. With your friends in it. Where you ate meat and cake."

Midnight goes still, frowning as she looks up into his face. "I wasn't lying about that."

Jesse shrugs, pretending to consider his cards, even though honestly he's not really paying attention to the game. "All right, but even if you're not lying, it's clear that they don't exist. I mean, you spend a lot of time alone, Midnight, I guess you just made them up."

"I did not," she says, straightening her spine and looking at him aghast. "They exist!"

"Imaginary friends are great," Jesse says, lowering his cards a bit and looking at her with a bit of false pity. "You shouldn't be ashamed, Mids."

Midnight rankles at this, her eyes flying wide, and Jesse's wolf turns in an eager circle. Because honestly he does think that they exist, he just wants to know more. A great deal more.

This week Midnight has staunchly refused to take him to spy on the Atalaxians, but she has accidentally dropped some information about a dark palace on the other side of the world that she calls the Fancy House. And a Prince who lives there. And the cakes she gets to eat there once a year on the Day of Darkness, when she is allowed to go and mingle with everyone else.

"I'm not ashamed, Jesse," Midnight says, her voice low and dangerous as she stares at him, unblinking. Jesse fights his smile, because Midnight is very adorable when she gets all serious like this. "The people in the Fancy House are real."

"If you say so, Mids," Jesse sighs, putting forward a few more sticks.

But Midnight ignores the sticks. "You'd better believe me, Jesse Sinclair," she snaps.

"I do believe you," he murmurs, gentle and condescending, the voice he uses when Seraphina tells him that there's a monster under her bed. And like Seraphina, the tone just pisses Midnight off more.

"They exist," she hisses, shadows starting to leak from her, her eyes going dark.

But Jesse has dealt with Midnight's flares of temper enough this week to know to ignore it. He, too, has learned when she's bluffing. "Yeah well, I'll believe it when I see it."

"Fine," Midnight snaps, reaching out and grabbing his arm.

Jesse's eyes fly wide because...what? This is new.

"Let's go. Right now."

"What!?"

"You want to see that they're real? Let's go."

Darkness suddenly consumes the pair and Jesse gasps in fear, staring around him, searching desperately for the world – the yurt – the damn reality –

But suddenly the world snaps back into place around them even though the yurt is...gone.

Jesse pants, staring around at the dark scene – at the beautiful lake spread out in front of him, at the dark figures gathered in a beautiful little pavilion – all laughing together. But is...one of them blue?

"See?" Midnight says. Jesse snaps his head back to her, his mouth falling open. She smirks at him, all trace of shadows gone. Told you they were real."

I sigh, shifting my weight to my other foot, turning my face away from my reflection in the mirror. I'm sick of staring at it, even if this gown that they've created for the mating ceremony is incredible, all flowing blue silk embroidered with silver, flowing about ten feet behind me in an elaborate train.

"I'm sorry," Pippa murmurs, looking up at me with two pins pressed between her lips as she works steadfastly at the hem at the front of my dress, getting it to just the perfect length. She takes the pins out of her mouth and hastily makes two more folds. "I know you've been standing there for hours, Ariel, but this really is the last bit."

I smile down at her and shake my head, because it's not her fault. "Honestly it's much harder on you, Pip," I say, reaching down to pat her head, which makes her laugh. "Trying to crouch down for hours while pregnant like that. Honestly, you should win a medal for balancing on the balls of your feet."

Pippa laughs a little and shakes her head. "Won't be long now anyway – Little Girl is getting uncomfortable. I'm sure she'll make her presence known soon."

"Do you have names picked out?"

“Oh, it will be Margaret, for Elias’s mother,” Pippa says with a bit of a sigh. “Not really any choice in that.”

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“Really?” I ask, unable to help the bit of displeasure that comes into my voice.

Pippa tugs at the finished hem of my gown, checking its final length before looking up at me. “If a daughter comes before a son, she’s always named after the paternal grandmother in Atalaxia,” Pippa says, as if it’s just a perfectly normal thing everyone knows. “As an apology to her for not producing a boy for her son. I’m guessing it’s...not the same in Moon Valley?” “No,” I say softly, shaking my head at her. “I could name my first daughter Fizzgig Wellybottom if I wanted to.”

Pippa stares at me with wide, shocked eyes for a second and then bursts into laughter when she figures out that I’m kidding. She pulls herself to her feet with a little groan and waves to me to step forward off the little tailor’s step riser I had been standing on. I begin to walk back and forth so she can see how the dress moves.

“Really, Pippa,” I say quietly as she curls a finger around her chin and observes me. “Do you wish the bay was a boy?”

“No,” she murmurs quietly, shaking her head, her concentration on me. “Because then he’d be a prince and all wrapped up in the politics of this world. A daughter – she will be all mine, at least until she’s married. Elias feels the same.” Pippa’s eyes flash up to me then, her hand falling anxiously to her side. “But...please keep that between us. It is a Prince’s consort’s duty to provide baby Princes for the court. It would be a great honor.”

I nod to my friend, a bit sadly, letting her know that the secret is safe with me. But overall I understand – honestly, it doesn’t seem like a great deal to be born a boy or a girl royal in Atalaxia. The fate seems equally dark for both.

I groan a little myself, pressing a hand to my lower back as a tell-tale cramp starts there – a monthly little hint from the Moon Goddess that I’d better prepare myself.

“Are you okay?” Pippa asks, turning her head towards me, curious.

“Yes,” I sigh, nodding to her. “Nothing new. But...” I look towards the bathroom. “Am I stocked in there? With...monthly products?” Somehow I know that calling them “period products” is going to make Pippa blush.

Pippa's silence makes me turn back to her, and I go still when I see that she's gaping at me, her complexion pale.

"Pippa, are you all right?" I ask, all in a rush, stepping towards her.

She shakes herself a little, coming out of her shock. "I'm fine. But you're...your bleeding has begun?"

"No?" I say, turning my head to consider her, wondering at this reaction that feels bizarre to me. "But I can feel my cramps starting it's on its way."

"Oh no," Pippa murmurs, shaking her head fervently and raising her fingers to her lips. "Oh, no no no. Oh, no, Ariel – the doctors guessed wrong – you weren't supposed to cycle until next week –"

"T-the doctors?" I stumble out with, frowning at her. "Pippa, what are you?"

But a loud knock comes at the door – the impatient pounding letting me know that it's very likely my horrible mate. I take a deep breath, preparing to shift to the other world, but Pippa gasps and puts a hand out on my arm.

"Oh please don't, Ariel, not in that dress –"

I groan a bit as the pounding continues.

"Everything you bring there just gets so filthy," she whispers, her anxiety increasing as she steps towards the door, "please, it's so beautiful, and it will be such work to get clean –"

I sigh and nod to her, letting her know that I'll stay. And with her in the room, Gabriel isn't likely to attack me. At least, I hope. When Pippa pulls open the door, I let out a sigh of relief to see that Elias is with him too, which means I'm safe.

Elias – he has been my protector this past week. The only one who can truly keep Gabriel in check.

"Mate," Gabriel snarls, waving his hand at me the moment he comes into his room, the blue magical manacles immediately encircling my wrists. "Don't even think about going anywhere."

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. "Of course, mate," I say in reply, putting on my Princess Cupcake persona. "I have no desire to leave your esteemed company anyway."

Gabriel just glares at me as Elias follows him into the room and shuts the door, because all four of us know it's a lie. I go to the Land of Darkness whenever I can rather than spend time with him. Unfortunately, Gabriel has learned my trick and gotten quite fast at

slapping these magic-canceling cuffs on me the moment he walks into a room so that I can't use my Dark magic as well as my Goddess gifts.

Fortunately for me, he has to be in the room to make his magic work. So the moment he's gone, I usually shift away to go hang out in my little encaged nest of blankets and pillows in the Land of Darkness until he comes and shouts at me to come back to Atalaxia.

"Oh Elias," Pippa murmurs, going immediately to her Alpha and wrapping her hands around his arm, looking up into his eyes. "It's all gone wrong -"

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"What's gone wrong?" He asks, frowning down into her face as Gabriel storms over to me.

"Ariel must begin her confinement – there's no way we'll be able to do a wedding tomorrow

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"What?" I burst out, entirely shocked as I put the pieces together. I need to be confined? Because I'm about to start my period? Rage sweeps through me at the rules of this ridiculous place.

But there's no time for that as my mate storms over to me.

"Not like it matters," he growls, snarling down into my face. "Considering that her people have interrupted everything anyway. What part did you have in this!?" He grabs my arm, yanking me closer to him.

I resist, hard, the urge to snarl back, canines elongated, and pull my hand from his arm. Instead, I force myself to be meek, to stumble and cry out, pretending that he hurt me.

"Gabriel!" Elias barks out, storming over to us. "For heaven's sake, you ass, do I have to repeat our mother's lessons about keeping our hands to ourselves!?" He smacks hard at Gabriel's arm. Gabriel snarls but drops his hand, freeing me.

I make a little display of giving a mewling little gasp and rubbing my arm where he gripped me, which makes Pippa squeak with concern and Gabriel narrow his eyes. He knows he didn't hurt me.

But that doesn't mean I can't rub it in.

"I didn't do anything," I murmur, looking down at my arm, sniffing a little for effect. "I was just trying to get ready for my wedding, like a good Atalaxian Luna -"

“Oh cut it, Ariel,” Gabriel snarls, taking a step towards me. “You only stopped wallowing in the dirt this morning because I threatened to kick you if you didn’t come back and let Pippa fit the gown for the mating ceremony.”

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“Yes,” I say, whipping my head up to glare at him, “and maybe if you’d stop threatening to kick me so often then maybe I’d be comfortable coming to stay in this world!”

Gabriel opens his mouth to shout something else at me, but Elias steps between us. “Enough,” he says, exhausted, shaking his head. “None of it matters anymore. And Pippa, honestly, the timing for Ariel’s confinement actually works out well, because the Ceremony is being postponed.”

I turn to Gabriel in shock because...wait, what!?

“The mating ceremony is...postponed?” Pippa gasps, looking up at her Alpha with wide eyes.

“Yes,” Gabriel drawls, crossing his arms and continuing to glare at me, looking me up and down like I planned this all even though I have no idea what’s going on. “Apparently Ariel’s people have sent a delegation. And that fool we call a King has accepted them into the palace for negotiation, completely ignoring my suggestion for how they should be treated.”

“W-what was your suggestion?” I ask, my heart in my throat. Because I think I already know his answer. Gabriel just smirks back at me.

Elias sighs, rubbing a tired hand over his forehead. “My esteemed brother ordered that they all be beheaded at the door. Which, fortunately didn’t happen.”

Cold sweeps through my blood as I stare at this horrible man to whom I’m mated.

“Does...does that mean they’re here?” I force myself to ask it, my throat tight. “The delegation – they’re inside the palace?” “Not yet,” Elias says, drawing my gaze to him. “But they will be. Quite soon.”

“Out out out,” Pippa says, waving her hands at the brothers. “Ariel must be confined. No men can come in until her time passes.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Gabriel growls, baring his teeth at his sister-in-law.

“No,” I gasp, desperate for once for them to stay, even as Pippa herds Gabriel and Elias towards the door. “I need to know -”

Elias sends me a sad look over his shoulder as Pippa almost physically shoves them out the door. Honestly I am shocked that she was able to do it – because she’s a very small person who certainly couldn’t best either of them in terms of strength. But I suppose that Atalaxian ideals regarding women’s rules run deep.

A delegation, I say to my wolf as I sit down hard on the side of the bed, rubbing my wrists where the manacles were, even though they don’t hurt me. My wolf howls with excitement even as she turns in a tight, anxious circle. Because...what could that mean? A delegation? A postponement?

Dad sent it, my wolf says, panting a little with her excitement. He must have. He must have sent them to get us back. We can go home soon. We can –

But I put a hand on her fur, willing her to calm. Because as much as I hope that that’s true – I mean...it can’t be that easy, right?

Still, it is my best hope for contact with home. But – who came? Is anyone from my family here?

Is...

But I press my eyes shut against the hope. Because to have him here, in the palace...it would be so good, but so, so dangerous. Jackson has to stay safe, my wolf says, pressing tenderly up against my heart. We want him safe more than we want him here.

I know, I whisper back to her, my fingers knotting in her hair.

And if he comes here, she says. They’ll kill him for being your mate. So, he has to go away.

I nod, agreeing to it.

“Oh, darling,” Pippa says, sighing as she comes to my side and puts her hands on my shoulders. “You look so troubled. I’m so sorry, my dear. Let’s get you out of this dress and into the bath.”

“A bath?” I ask, looking up at her like she’s a little crazy.

“Yes,” she murmurs, her hands lifting at my arms a little, urging me to stand up. “The purifying bath, to begin the ceremony of confinement. Come on.”

“Oh, Pips,” I sigh, giving her a dubious look as I stand and start to follow her to the bathroom. “You know that’s ridiculous, right?”

“Ridiculous or not,” she says with a little shrug that lets me know that...yeah. She kind of does know that it’s stupid. “It is tradition. And above all things in Atalaxia, traditions must be followed.”

I sigh and walk with my friend into the bathroom, thinking that Atalaxia could use a great deal less tradition in its daily practice.

Jackson’s stomach grumbles as he stares at the castle fortress that stretches before him, perhaps a mile away, built high on a hill. But he ignores his body. Biological signals haven’t been as pressing to him since he was a little boy and discovered that his magic kind of negates bodily demands. He hasn’t eaten in days but...whatever. He doesn’t need to.

Instead, all of his focus is on that fucking place.

That castle where they’re keeping her – where they’re keeping all of the Atalaxian royals. Or at least, where he thinks they’re keeping her. They could, of course, have moved her by now but...

Why? Why do that, when this is the most protected place they have? It’s...impenetrable. Even from here Jackson can feel the magic radiating off the place, though of course he can’t see it. It is utterly protected, utterly controlled.

Making it...utterly impossible to fulfill his mission. To go in there, and get his girl, and kill as many of them as necessary to get her back home where she’ll be safe. To ensure they’ll never come for her, ever again.

Jackson sighs and hangs his head as he sinks to the ground in despair, wondering if he chose to sit down or if his knees just gave out. His butt hits hard, his long arms wrapping around his knees. Because he can intend to barge in there and grab her all he wants but...

God, he doesn’t have any notion at all of how to do it. Now that he’s finally here, staring at the fortress, his blood burning with the desire to tear it apart stone by stone to get in and grab Ariel and steal her back?

He just...he has nothing.

Jackson hangs his head, dread running through him, wondering if this entire week of travel getting here has been a waste. Riding in the car with the guard to the border between Moon Valley and Atalaxia, where an ATV was waiting. And then climbing onto that ATV with only a backpack of supplies, setting out into the desert with nothing but determination to power him along the way. Barely sleeping, just riding, determined to get to her, to get here.

But now that he’s here? Was it all a waste?

Probably. As much of a waste as he is.

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God, he's so pathetic. He can't do anything to protect her – the one thing in the world that matters to him. At every turn, Jackson knows that he's failed her. He wasn't there when Gibson, of all pathetic people, very nearly cut her throat. And when Luca had marked her and left her trembling and bleeding, where had he been then?

And on the battlefield? When that creep had just appeared out of nowhere? What, Jackson couldn't get there fast enough? He's failed her. Failed her, every time. Failed her. A failure.

Jackson's wolf howls softly, trotting an anxious circle around his heart, trying desperately to get him to see it another way. Not your fault, his wolf huffs. You tried – you're trying –

But Jackson just roughly shakes his head, looking down at the Atalaxian soil, knowing that it's not true. That he can't protect her, and doesn't deserve her.

If only he could...get in. And try.

Jackson sighs, raising his head to glare at the castle, determination welling in him again. Because there has...there just has to be a way that he can do something. Anything.

Battling his frustration and guilt, Jackson pushes himself to his feet, falling back on his lifelong training as a soldier when he has nothing else left. Quiet and precise, he goes through all of the supplies he packed with Ella, taking inventory. And then he sets up camp, putting up his little pup tent behind a hill where it can't be seen from anyone scrying from the castle's towers. He stashes away the little bag of food and supplies that Ella sent for Ariel once he gets her, and begins to roll out the tiny, compact sleeping bag that he'll use tonight when –

Jackson gasps, his head spinning as he falls backwards out of the tent and scrambles to his feet. He's up in an instant, sprinting towards the top of the hill, desperate to see –

Because the magic he's felt radiating protection and invulnerability – it's – it's suddenly gone –

And he he can feel her – she's here, she's close, she's in that fucking castle. He knows it.

Ariel! Jackson screams out in his mind, his heart pounding in his chest as his fingers stumble for the binoculars around his neck. I'm here! I'm coming! I'm going to help you – I'm going to get you out of there –

Even as he shouts the words out in his mind, desperate for them to reach her, he raises the binoculars to his eyes, focusing on the front of the castle where –

His eyes go wide to see men in Moon Valley colors moving forward towards the door.

What...what the hell is going on? He scans their faces, desperate to see if he knows any of them, but...they're too far, it's too hard to tell.

Ariel! He shouts again in his mind. Tiny, I'm –

But his thoughts go blank the moment her voice forms in his mind.

J-jacks? Ariel's voice whispers, desperate and unbelieving. Are you real? Am I imagining you?

A sob breaks from Jackson's throat as he falls to his knees. Ari, he says to her, his mental voice shaking, I'm coming-

Baby, she says, the word short and scared. Sweetheart, don't – they'll kill you –

I'll fucking kill them! He shouts back.

Ridiculously – absurdly – wonderfully – she laughs. Jackson groans when he hears it, even just in his mind, his hand shaking as he raises it to cover his eyes.

Don't, Ari says again. Please – baby, I love you so much – just...stay close, okay? It's too dangerous right now. I don't know what's happening and we need a plan. We need –

But suddenly her words cut off. Jackson groans as he feels the protective magic slamming down over the castle, knowing that it's gone.

And he – he didn't even tell her that he loved her – which he does, of course he does, so much –

But she knows, right?

She knows, his wolf murmurs, pressing himself against Jackson's heart.

Shaking, Jackson raises the binoculars again, looking at the door.

But all the Moon Valley people have disappeared inside the castle.

“So that’s it,” he murmurs, hardly able to think for the emotion pounding through him – the wonder at being able to reach her in his mind, the horror at having her taken away again, the fear of what she’s suffering in there if she’s saying that it’s too dangerous. But he forces himself to focus, to be useful. “So, they have to drop the magical wards to let anyone in or out...”

Jackson hums consideringly at this new knowledge, turning it over in his mind, wondering how he can use it to his advantage. While in his soul, his wolf raises his snout to the air, letting out a long and desperate howl for his mate.

Calling to Ariel, to her wolf.

Begging her to come home.

“This suuuucks,” Mark murmurs, sprawled out over his father’s favorite arm chair in the living room, idly playing with the gold chain that his mom made him start wearing – forbade him from ever taking off. Necklaces provided by the Goddess’s Priestesses, apparently, to keep them from getting kidnapped away to the Underworld like Juniper was.

All of the Sinclair kids have them now.

Rafe flicks his eyes up at Mark, a frown on his mouth. “Are you seriously complaining about being bored when your sisters have been kidnapped and their lives are at stake?”

Guilt races through Mark even as he lifts his head and frowns back at his brother. “Can’t I be both?”

Rafe bares his teeth at his little brother, not in the mood for jokes.

Mark sighs, letting his head hang back. “Ariel would get it. She would laugh.”

“Because Ariel is overindulgent with you,” Rafe murmurs. “She loves everything her little pet puppy does.”

“Yeah,” Mark sighs, staring at the ceiling. “I miss her.”

And it’s true. Even if he is bored, needing an outlet for his boundless energy even if his parents have put him on house arrest alongside all of his cousins, he does miss Ariel and he is worried for Juniper.

Well, maybe a little less for Juniper. He’s a little more worried for anyone who has to deal with her in the Underworld, if he’s being honest. Junie, when she’s pissed off? Scary.

Mark and Rafe both start and turn to the door when it bangs open, his parents coming through – Dominic with long strides, Ella trotting determinedly to keep up with him.

“Don’t you take that tone with me, Dominic Sinclair,” Ella snaps, frowning up at her gigantic mate. Rafe and Mark both grimace when they realize that it’s a fight – another one. “We’ve been over this. I did what I thought was right.”

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“Yes, Ella,” Dominic says, casting a glare down at his little rose-gold mate. “You’ve made it quite clear that you acted with your whole heart when you made one of my most promising soldiers desert his position and go rogue -”

“Oh, you ass,” Ella snaps, shaking her head as they reach the desk positioned before the sunny window. “You’ll change your tune when Jackson brings our daughter home. Then you’ll be ‘oh, Ella, so wise,’ and ‘thank you, Ella!’”

“Thank you, Ella,” Dominic says, dry, turning his shoulder to her a bit as he picks up some documents from the table and pulls his phone from his pocket, beginning to start a call. “Now please go away so I can marshal the rest of my resources. Unless you want to send these to Atalaxia too. What does your heart say?”

Ella just rolls her eyes at Dominic and moves away from her mate, stepping over towards her sons with a scowl on her face.

“Don’t get a divorce,” Mark mumbles, covering his eyes with his hand, miserable. “Dad will want to keep us for Midwinter and he’ll be crap at presents. And the food.”

“Oh, he’s not getting rid of me that easily,” Ella mumbles, bending over to press a kiss to Mark’s head and then moving to sit with Rafe on the couch, ruffling her favorite’s hair as she does. And in her heart Ella knows that it’s true – that she and Dominic are slightly at odds at the moment because she took control out of his hands, and he hates that. But their commitment to each other is far too deep to be truly disturbed by something like a disagreement about the placement of one soldier.

Even if Jackson was probably the most powerful soldier Dominic had.

But some instinct rings true in Ella’s heart – she knows, is absolutely sure, that it was right to send Jackson on a solo mission and that Dominic would have fought her on it. She explained all of this and begged Dominic to trust her demi-goddess intuition, but that had just pissed him off more. So, here they are, a week later, still pissy with each other for the time being.

“Any updates?” Rafe asks, sitting up to look into his mother’s face.

She nods, curling her legs up beneath her and pulling a pillow into her lap to hug to her chest. “We heard from the delegation that they’d arrived at the Atalaxian castle and made a successful plea for entrance. Roger had very cleverly put a few tiny cameras on a couple of the ambassadors so we could see what’s going on within the palace, but as soon as they got in?” She shrugs. “The feeds went dead.”

“Damn Atalaxians,” Rafe growls, shaking his head. “They must have some kind of magic up.”

Ella nods in agreement as Mark comes to sit by her side on the floor, wanting the closeness and affection. Ella gives it immediately, running a hand over his hair, petting her youngest son. “You’re getting to big for this, Markie. Soon I’ll have to stand on a stool to pet you.”

“No,” he murmurs, closing his eyes and leaning wolfishly into her hand. “I’m very tiny. Just small.”

She laughs, continuing to stroke his dark hair, grinning as she runs her eyes over Mark’s handsome face and tall body, which is growing large enough to give Rafe and Dominic and Jackson a run for their money.

“And Ben?” Rafe asks, glaring a little at Mark for continuing to joke around and not take this seriously. God, but he’s been too much indulged, allowed to remain immature while even Juniper grew up. “Any word from him?”

“Nothing in particular,” Ella says, turning her eyes back to Rafe. “He’s just one of the ambassadors, baby. We didn’t send him in with any new technology or orders.”

Rafe nods, looking down, because he knows that’s true. Ben begged to be one of the party going to Atalaxia. Rafe had argued against it, knowing that Ben is still young and inexperienced and that the trip is going to be very dangerous. There was one hell of a chance that all of the ambassadors would be executed on sight. But Dominic had agreed, knowing that Ben knows Ariel better than the other ambassadors, that he might have some particular instinct about where she is or what she needs.

In the end, Rafe had lost the fight. And, potentially, another friend. He presses his eyes shut, worry stacking up in his soul like bricks. One more person to worry about whether or not they’re alive or dead...

Dominic snaps his phone shut and crosses the room to join his family. “It was a miracle they were let in in the first place,” he murmurs, looking distractedly out the window. “I thought it was a longshot.”

Mark opens his eyes and looks up at his dad. “Then why do you think they let them in?”

Dominic shrugs. "Either they've got something up their sleeve, or..."

The family waits while Dominic just frowns, trying to find his words.

Rafe sighs, frustrated and tired of waiting for his father to finish his sentence. "Or," he says, continuing where his dad left off, "Ariel did some serious damage to their forces in that battle before they took her, and Atalaxia is forced to treat with our ambassadors because they're no match for us in war. Or, they're buying time to rally their forces again."

Dominic turns his head to look at his son with pride, pleased that Rafe put that all together.

"Did Ariel really do that?" Mark asks, his eyes going wide.

"Yes," Ella murmurs, a bit of pride in her voice as she continues to pet Mark's hair. "Big Sis destroyed their entire air force and damaged a large portion of their ground troops and supplies."

"It's the reason why the physical battle has come to a grinding halt," Dominic says. "Ariel is...incredibly powerful, especially with Jackson at her side. If they hadn't managed to take her when they did, it's likely that she would have ended the war that night. Which is...insane."

Mark shakes his head in disbelief even as Rafe nods, assured, guilt rolling through him. Because he should have protected her – both because she's his sister, and the best weapon they have to protect their people.

"So," Mark says, tilting his head back to look up at his father. "The war isn't going forward?"

"Not right now," Dominic says with a shrug. "We're in the rare position of having the tables turned for the moment, where our military has all the power. For now, they won't attack, because they now we'll take them out."

"So, why don't we just...go shoot all of them?" Mark asks, his face twisted with confusion.

"Because they have my baby," Ella says, her voice soft. "And if we do, they might hurt her."

"Yeah, it's one hell of a stalemate," Dominic murmurs, running an anxious hand through his dark hair.

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“It’s not a stalemate for long, though.” Rafe murmurs, angry. His family turns to him with surprise. Rafe frowns around at all of them, not really understanding why they’ve let a week pass with Ariel in Atalaxian clutches. “Don’t you guys get it? They’re not just going to keep Ariel in a cage somewhere they know what she can do.”

“What are you saying, Rafe?” Mark asks.

“I’m saying,” Rafe says, his teeth clenched, “that us biding our time like this just gives them more time to figure out how to control Ariel, how to use her as a weapon against us.”

“But Ariel would never,” Ella whispers, pressing a hand to her chest.

“No, Rafe is right,” Dominic murmurs, shaking his head and looking down at his feet. “The Atalaxians have strong magic, just as we do. We have no idea what kinds of things they could turn Ariel towards.”

“Or,” Rafe snarls, angry. “How long it will take them to do it.”

“This way, please,” the young Atalaxian man – a boy, really – says, bowing deeply to the delegation from Moon Valley. “It will be great pleasure to show you to your chambers.”

Ben starts forward but Haversham, an old and experienced negotiator who is also their lead on this mission, casts a hand to the side, blocking anyone from Moon Valley from stepping forward.

“I don’t think so, young man,” Haversham says, his voice deep and serious. “We will not be going anywhere without first speaking to someone of authority to begin our negotiation and set a schedule for future conversations.”

“Oh, I am so sorry,” the boy says, bowing low again, his voice squeaky both with puberty and apology. “But I’ve only been given clearance to take you to your rooms.”

Ben inhales a deep breath through his nose, considering this move on the Atalaxian part. They’ve been let inside the castle but have been greeted not by force or authority, but instead a single boy?

“Then we will stand here,” Haversham says, crossing his arms. “And wait for someone with authority to appear.”

The boy raises from his bow, looking at Haversham with wide eyes. "Then I'm afraid you'll be waiting forever, sir," he says, shaking his head, worried. "This is as the King wills it. If you wish you may stay as long as you like in this chamber, but he will not meet you here."

Haversham and the boy stay silent, locked in a stalemate. Unlike Haversham, though, the boy fidgets and looks anxiously over his shoulder. "Please, sir," the boy says, true terror coming into his voice now. "I'll get in so much trouble if you don't let me take you to your rooms. It's my first day -"

Ben smirks a bit, finally seeing the plan now. That the Atalaxians have forced them into a situation where their choices are to do as they're told or play bully to a little boy. It's clever. Ben shifts his eyes to Haversham, curious about the choice he'll make.

"Fine," Haversham says, waving towards the boy and staring forward. Ben's smirk deepens because he knows Haversham by now, and knows that he didn't merely give in for the pity of some child. That he's simply consenting to play according to Atalaxia's rules a little longer. Their goal, after all, is to get in and have the conversation.

And so they must go deeper into the belly of the beast in order to reach those goals.

Ben is only mildly surprised when the little page leads them through the castle to a hallway with a long set of doors, beginning to bow and gesture to each door in turn, insisting that each of the Moon Valley ambassadors enter their individual room alone. But when they pass a few doors and Ben realizes that they're being separated from each other, each kept in individual rooms that probably lock from the outside, it becomes a bit clearer.

They're allowed to be here, but individual conversation is forbidden.

Yes, Ben thinks, running an anxious hand over his wolf's fur inside his soul. These Atalaxians, they are clever, aren't they? Finally, it comes Ben's turn. He gives the page a little bow in turn as he steps through the bedroom door that's clearly for him. The page murmurs that he hopes that Ben will enjoy his stay before closing the door behind him.

The first thing that Ben does is try the handle on the door. As he predicted, it turns, but nothing unlatches.

Yes, he is under Atalaxian control.

Sighing, Ben moves to the bed and awkwardly sits down, glancing around the fine but rather bland room as worry starts to curl in his chest. What...what the hell is he supposed to do if he's just...trapped in this room?

How is he going to find...her? Find...

Ben hangs his head, guilt rushing through him at the secret he's been keeping deep in his heart. That he is here to help Ariel – of course he is – and that's his first priority. But the entire time he was walking through the halls his wolf was rushing back and forth in his soul, sniffing for him, desperately trying to find him.

His mate.

His fucking mate.

Who is here – Ben knows he is – he can smell old, stale sniffs of him everywhere, which indicates that he's been around but perhaps does not frequent this part of the palace very often. Which makes sense considering he's a god damn Atalaxian prince.

But...how on earth is Ben ever going to find him?

Ben falls back on his bed, covering his face with his hands and heaving a heavy sigh. Because he'd thought that this was all going to be a lot easier, a lot clearer once he got to Atalaxia – got into the palace.

But now that he's here, locked in this bedroom, all alone and completely without resources?

God, but Ben feels...just as lost as he has since the moment he heard that Ariel was taken. That she's gone.

Still, even as hopelessness threatens to overwhelm, Ben sets his heart to the task.

We're going to do it, his wolf growls, baring his teeth and prowling forward. We're going to find both of them and get them out of here.

"And take them home," Ben murmurs, nodding once, assured. "Home, where we can all live in peace."

I spend a long, long time in the stupid purifying bath that Pippa drew for me. And I spend most of that time crying.

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At first Pippa had been afraid when I had gasped, my hands slapping across my mouth, and instantly burst into tears. She had dashed to my side, desperate to help, but I had pushed her away – desperate to just concentrate on the voice echoing in my mind.

Because it had been Jackson – Jackson’s voice in my head, echoing there, letting me know that he was near, somehow, by some miracle. And of course he’d wanted to barge right through these palace walls to get to me – but it’s too dangerous. My sweet, powerful mate will be instantly outmatched. Not even he can take on a whole castle, after all.

Just...the barest snatch of the conversation, and then his voice was gone as suddenly as it came. I had cried my little heart out then, sobbing into my hands. Pippa, darling that she is, simply ascribed my sadness to monthly hormonal issues and patted me on my shoulder before leaving the room, letting me have some time alone.

I let her think that I was just experiencing some weird PMS symptom, not wanting to explain. Because even as I’m coming to trust her and consider her a friend, I still think that her allegiances are to Atalaxia. And no one in Atalaxia really needs to know that my other mate is here.

But...where is he? Is Jacks...is he in the palace?

And why could I hear him, only for a moment?

Is he a part of the delegation that Moon Valley sent? I sink lower in my bath now that my tears have dried up. Idly, I blow bubbles in the cooling water, working hard to see all sides of this. But the more I think about it the more I realize that it would be ridiculous to send Jackson with a delegation of ambassadors. To begin with, he’d immediately stick out as a warrior amongst everyone else in the cohort. He’s head and shoulders taller than anyone on ambassador track and he’s built like someone sent to knock Atalaxian heads off their shoulders with a single blow.

And further, the Atalaxians know who he is and what he looks like. God, if they sent him disguised as an ambassador, he would be killed for certain, just as Gabriel promised he would be. Fear rushes through me but...

I mean, I think my family is clever enough to put all of that together...

Right?

God, I hope that they are.

But if not with the ambassadors...how is Jackson here? And why? Are there more troops surrounding the castle? My blood runs cold at the thought – at a mounting battle that could begin at any moment, and me here under Gabriel’s spell unable to use my magic to aid anyone.

I scowl, lifting my pruney finger out of the water and sighing as I look again at Jackson’s lovely mini mark. My little piece of him that I get to carry forever. I smile a little, remembering the day he gave it to me, the feel of his sharp canine against my skin. A little shiver runs through me from head to foot.

God, I miss him so much. My sweetheart mate. All brutal and broody and wonderful. If I ever get out of here, the entire world is going to be hard pressed to pry me from his side for a single damn moment.

I sigh then, forcing my own brooding temper aside and pushing myself up to sit higher in the water. Because the key element in that wonderful plan is to get out of here, and I'd better start thinking seriously about how I'm going to do that. I climb out of the tub, quickly toweling off before wrapping myself in one of the elaborate robes that Pippa keeps stocked in here, tying it in a knot around my waist.

Instead of moving to the vanity pressed against the far wall and beginning to comb my hair, though, I cross my arms over my chest and look around the room, frowning, wondering at the possibilities here.

Because I've spent a great deal of time in the Land of Darkness now, encaged. And I'm starting to wonder...

Idly, I move to the far corner of the wall and press my hands against it, looking up at where walls meet the ceiling.

And then I shift, everything falling backwards in that disorienting way, before my feet hit hard in the dirt in that dark world. I grimace, a little, that I didn't think to put on a set of my slippers. But, whatever – because the results of my experiment intrigue me a great deal more than keeping my feet clean.

What is truly interesting here is that my hands aren't pressed up against the bars of the cage as they were against the walls of the room – they're actually sticking through the bars. I grimace a little, wondering if the bars would like...impale me, if I accidentally shifted from the other realm into this one directly where they are.

Slowly, I draw my arms back, making a mental note to be very careful. But even as I take a step backwards towards the center of the cage, I begin to put together the idea that...however Gabriel made these cages, he wasn't absolutely precise with his measurements. Instead, the cage is just...slightly smaller than the room itself. Quietly, I move around the cage, shifting back and forth between the cage and the bathroom, incredibly careful not to manifest in a weird spot.

Once I mess up and end up actually sitting in the sink instead of standing before it – but at least I didn't appear with the sink halfway through my torso or something.

But once I've made a lap of the room, I'm fairly sure of it – that Gabriel was very good at ensuring that the cage was almost precisely the size of my room – just...a little smaller. And so I shift again, going back to the Land of Darkness and pressing my face to the bars, looking beyond them.

And then I smile, because even though Gabriel was careful to build me a very precise little cage here, it's clear to me that he was sloppy elsewhere.

The more I look I see that there is indeed a wide fence all around the entire area that probably represents the outer expanse of the castle walls, so that try as I might, I can't leave the castle.

But inside all of that? Oh, there are more cages, probably serving a dozen purposes I don't understand. But they are much larger. Which means if I can just get out of this one...

Well, damn it, why not take advantage of the situation while I can? Before Gabriel locks me up even more? Because some of my people are here now, and I need to find them and get some answers.

And there's surely no better time than now.

I grin, shifting back to my world and immediately moving for the door. On my way, I slip my dirty feet into a set of cozy slippers and grab a bottle of liquid floral soap off of a shelf on the wall.

"Pippa?" I call towards the door. "I – I don't feel so good..."

Then, grimacing a little, I pull the top off the soap and pour it into my mouth.

I retch instantly at the taste and dash to the sink to spit it out. It's nothing toxic – I checked all of the ingredients of everything in this room to ensure there was nothing useful to me – but it sure tastes disgusting.

I spit the soap into the sink, gripping the edge, my stomach visibly heaving as Pippa calls my name, opening the door.

Her gasp is very gratifying as she rushes to me, even if the disgusting taste of the soap still coats my tongue. I gag again at the taste of it.

"Oh my god, Ariel!" Pippa gasps, her hands tight on my shoulders. "What's wrong?"

"Pippa," I moan, shaking my head as I turn towards her, probably over-doing the acting a little bit as I do my best to appear incredibly ill. "Please something is wrong -"

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“What is it!?” she gasps, getting herself under my shoulder and helping me hobble towards the main room.

“My stomach,” I moan, shaking my head. “Something’s wrong!”

She begins to turn me towards my bed but I vehemently shake my head, moving us towards the door.

“Oh, Ariel, you should lay down – we’ll get the doctor to come – ”

“No,” I cry, letting my shoulders tremble. “No time – Pippa – you have to take me to the doctor – right now!” I allow myself to stumble dramatically over my own feet.

Pippa cries out in fear but goes with me, her worry for me over-reaching her senses and any orders that Gabriel has given her. Because I have never, ever been allowed to leave the room with anyone but Gabriel at my side.

But my friend hauls the door open and steps out with me, looking up into my face with worry and fear.

As soon as we step into the hall I straighten up, my faux aches and pains immediately gone, even if I do still have a nasty soapy taste in my mouth. And then I step away from her side – not wanting to push her, but definitively needing space.

She stares at me in shock.

“Sorry, Pips,” I say, heaving a little shrug. “I hope I don’t get you in trouble.”

And then I shift to the other world, and the freedom it offers.

A little thrill goes through me as I look around the Land of Darkness and realize that I am, for the first time in weeks, outside of my stupid little cage. I glance back at the little nest of pillows and blankets that I left there – that I usually sleep in at night – and a laugh bubbles out of my throat. Because I’m free – at least for now – and I’m going to get some damn answers.

I turn to my left and stride away along the distance that I think is the hall I’ve walked down a couple of times at Gabriel’s side. I go to where I think the end should be and look left and right, trying to remember the layout of the castle. To the right is the more public parts of the palace – meeting rooms and all that – but to the left...

I take a deep breath and just go for it, knowing that experimentation is my best chance here. I stride forward a little more, reveling at the relative freedom, and then shift back to Atalaxia to see if I’ve made any progress.

A footman carrying a tray about ten feet away from me shrieks and jumps straight in the air when I appear, staring at me like I'm a ghost. I grin at him and looking around, quite pleased to realize that I calculated correctly and am indeed in another hallway – one I haven't been in before – that leads away from the public parts of the castle.

I turn a bit, recognizing the panicked shouts somewhere around where my room should be, and laugh as I turn back to the hall – taking in the relative length – and disappear again.

Then, in the Land of Darkness, I run forward, delighted as I go, desperate to get to the end of the hall. I meet another iron fence but barely notice it, flashing back to Atalaxia, stepping a few feet forward to the point where I'm beyond the iron fence, and then flashing back to Darkness and starting to run again.

I get the hang of it all fairly quickly, negotiating the palace, flashing back every time I need a point of reference for where I am, and starting to move quickly. I grin as I go, knowing this is going to piss Gabriel off a great deal and glad of it.

I get a great deal of pleasure from pissing him off. Because he deserves it.

By the time ten minutes has passed, I've made good distance in the castle and have learned a few very interesting things. First, that I actually cannot transition back to Atalaxia at a place where there's a wall – I try to shift, but it just feels like I hit something quite solid and bounce back to Darkness. But all I have to do is step a bit to the side into an empty space and it works just fine.

The second thing that I learn is that I cannot shift to different floors in Atalaxia, though it doesn't make much sense to me why I can't. But once I realize this, I make quite a bit of stir when I dash barefoot and in a dressing gown down a servant's stair. Servants gasp and step eagerly out of my way, staring as I go, though none touch or try to stop me.

The third thing I put together is that I have very little time before the Atalaxian royals figure out that I'm loose and come after me in full force. I don't know if Pippa is simply keeping my secret or hasn't found Gabriel yet, but I'm sure my freedom is limited.

So I exhale quickly and get to work, flashing from world to world, working hard to locate my people.

Finally, I find a long stretch of quiet hallway all with closed doors. It's not the first I've found like this, but the others didn't turn up anything useful.

Still, I have to try. I step up to one door and put my hands against it, flashing into the Land of Darkness and taking three steps forward and then flashing back to Atalaxia.

I find myself immediately in a guest bedroom – this one occupied. The aforementioned guest gasps in shock to find me suddenly standing in his room.

I stare at him for a second as he sits frozen on his bed, papers spread out all around him, just staring at me like I'm a mirage. But then my face breaks into a smile.

"Oh, hi!" I gasp, delighted, stepping forward towards him. "You're one of ours! I know you! Yes, I'm so sorry – I forget your name –"

"Princess," the man breathes, his eyes wide and unblinking. And then he scrambles to his feet, reaching for me. "Oh my god, Princess"

"Hi!" I say again, laughing, reaching for his hands. "Please – I don't think I have a lot of time – is everyone at home okay? Is Jackson here?"

"Your family is fine – J-Jackson? Do you mean Jackson McClintock, Prince Rafe's friend from school?" His face twists in confusion and I realize, of course, that he has no idea that Jacks is much more to me than he is to my brother.

I smile as I nod eagerly. "Yes, is he part of your delegation?"

"No, highness," the man says, clinging to my hand and bowing. "The only one of Rafe's friends who came as part of the delegation was Benjamin Ternicki –"

"Ben?" I breathe, my eyes wide. Then I snap my head around like he's in the room and I've somehow missed him. "Where is he!?"

The man stumbles something out about Ben being somewhere else along this hall and, quite rude in my haste, I immediately slip away to the other world. The next few minutes are hasty as I appear in room after room – usually just flashing to see who is there – but again and again it's not him, until –

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Until I appear in the sixth room, and there he is, sitting at a desk, an Atalaxian cookie on the way to his mouth as he reaches for a cup of coffee.

I just stare at him, shocked and thrilled.

The little cookie falls from Ben's fingertips.

Simultaneously Ben and I cry out, leaping for each other, and a moment later I'm in his arms, laughing even as tears spring to my eyes as Ben pulls me close to his chest.

“God damn it, Ariel, you scared the hell out of me -”

“Benny!”

“You are so weird – how did you appear out of nowhere!? Why are you all wet?”

“Um...blessed by the God of Darkness as a baby or something,” I murmur, taking a deep breath of his lovely, familiar scent.” Also, I just got out of the bath.”

“Oh my god, Ari, you’re so weird!”

“Benny – it’s so good to see you –“

“Ari,” he growls, tucking his head down against mine. “I was so worried about you – we all were – your family is freaking out

I push away a little, looking up into his face. “Jackson’s not with you? One of the delegation?”

He looks at me, a little confused, and then shakes his head. “No, why?”

I sigh, shrugging, not understanding. “Because he’s here, Ben – I heard him, via the mate mindspeak or whatever – just for a moment. But he’s here!”

“It must have been when we came in,” Ben murmurs, looking anxiously towards the door even as he keeps his arms around me. “I think they had to drop whatever these wards are for a second so we could pass.”

I nod eagerly. “That makes sense. That’s all Prince Gabriel – Calvin’s son -”

“Your mate?” Ben asks, turning back to me, a skeptical eyebrow raised.

“Yes,” I groan, falling against him again. “That’s...unfortunately real. Did they splash that all over the press?

“They sure did,” Ben murmurs, stroking my back.

“Did Jackson flip?”

“He was... weirdly cool about it,” Ben sighs. “Or, at least that’s all I saw before your mom snuck him out of the palace on some insane solo mission -”

“What?” I gasp, pulling back again and staring up into his face.

Ben smiles down at me, a great deal of love in his eyes. “Jackson came for you, Ari – all alone. Your mom helped. Whatever he’s doing and however he got here – it’s just...all him. Coming to get you.”

My heart swells at this even as I shake my head, my worry for him increasing.

But...I can’t worry about that now. Now I have to concentrate on Ben.

“Please,” I say, stepping away from Ben and smoothing my hands over my dressing gown. “I don’t have a long time and they certainly can’t find me here. What are you ambassadors doing here? How can I help?”

“We came under the veil of peace talks, or at least a ceasefire,” Ben says, stepping forward towards me. “But Ari...” he glances around, as if worried the room might be bugged. I wave him forward and he steps close, cupping his hand to my ear and whispering quickly that the real plan is to find a way to get me out of here, and to break down whatever forcefield is around the palace, to cripple the Atalaxians in whatever way they can.

“Wow,” I whisper, staying close to Ben and looking up into his face. “Dad is...pissed, isn’t he?”

Ben smiles, laughing a little. “An understatement, Princess.” He continues to keep his voice low. “But he’s also taking advantage of the fact that you crippled the hell out of Atalaxia in that battle. They’ve been hemming and hawing, buying time, to regroup and rebuild. Your dad and Roger want this done now, to strike while the iron is hot. If there’s anything you can do

I nod, wringing my hands anxiously, considering this. Because if the thing in the way of my father’s plans is Gabriel then... then I guess it’s time for me to take out Gabriel.

Something I’ve been turning over in my mind all week but...

Is it even possible? God, if I only had something mildly toxic...

“Do you have a plan?” I whisper, all hushed, whipping my face back up to him. “To get us out, if we can...lower that magical protective barrier?”

Ben hesitates. “We do, but...” he shrugs. “It would all happen very fast. We need...we need to be quite careful, Ari.”

I nod, understanding, anxiety churning within me even as I nod.

“Ari,” he snaps, reaching out and grabbing my arm, even – I think – despite his intentions to do so. “Please, is...” Ben just shakes his head, unable to ask the question I can tell his wolf his howling for him to utter.

“Elias is wonderful,” I say, my face breaking into a smile. A groan slips from Ben’s mouth and his eyes flutter shut. As Ben takes a long, deep breath I’m quite struck, actually, by the fact that Ben’s reaction to the news that Elias is safe is quite similar to Elias’s own. But then I remember Pippa. “Benny, it’s more complicated than you think -”

He opens his eyes and frowns down at me.

But before I can continue, there’s a clatter out in the hall.

“I have to go,” I whisper, stepping away from him. “I probably won’t be able to come back like this – I’ll be in trouble. Oh, and if you see me again, don’t be surprised at all if I act just...very different.”

Ben smiles and nods, letting me know he understands.

“I love you, Benny,” I say, pressing my hands to my chest. “Just pretend everything is normal and that you didn’t see me.” He nods, bending down to snatch his cookie off the floor. “You got it.”

“Oh Ben, don’t eat that,” I sigh, sticking my tongue out a little. “Just get a new one.”

He’s still laughing as I disappear into that other world.

Immediately when my feet hit the dirt in the Land of Darkness, I start to run. I just turn and dash, rather desperate, for the furthest edge of the cage. Not because I want to escape – bizarrely, now, that is the last thing on my mind. But just because I need an excuse for being outside of my room and I do not, at all, want Gabriel thinking that I am anywhere near Ben and the delegation from Moon Valley.

To my surprise, it’s fairly easy to reach the furthest edge of the cage, the one that surrounds the entire border of the castle. I begin to run alongside it, searching for any flaws in the structure that might be useful to me, thankful suddenly to Rafe and Jesse for torturing me every morning for the past few months. Interestingly, I do pass two gates which open out into the Land of Darkness – presumably the sort of place where Gabriel brought me into the castle after driving me here in that weird little cart – but they’re so locked up with chains that they don’t present any immediate solutions.

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I make it about a mile around the perimeter when suddenly I hear my name shouted angrily in the air.

I spin immediately towards Gabriel, knowing that it's him – that it can only be him. I was expecting him eventually, after all. For a second I consider flitting back to the Castle and evading him more but...no. It's not necessary. This encounter is going to happen, and I don't need any more information within the Castle to elongate the chase.

He's still quite a distance away, though, so I turn and keep running, both to keep up my façade of trying to escape as well as to put him through his paces a bit. Gabriel – he's annoying, and I think I'm fitter than him, so the more I can make him work to catch me the better.

It doesn't last long, though. I never had a chance – as with Rafe and Jesse and Luca and Jacks, I can't outrun those long Alpha legs. Plus, I am wearing slippers, which are very impractical for running.

"Ariel!"

Gabriel snatches my arm, pulling me backwards to him, snarling with his rage.

"Let me go!" I shout, trying to rip my arm from his grip.

"God damn it, Ariel!" he shouts, smacking me hard across the face. I gasp, a hand flying to my cheek as I glare up at him. "Stop doing that, you fucking coward!"

"Stop being disobedient, you tiny whore -"

I narrow my eyes. "How dare you. How dare you speak to me like that. How dare you hit me."

"You are my Luna," he growls, leaning dangerously close, his canines elongated and ready to bite. "You will do as I say and obey me." I flinch back despite myself, knowing that he's lost his temper enough now to be dangerous, and with his wolf corrupted by darkness he's doubly unpredictable.

Still, I push, knowing that my only chance to keep his mind off of whatever I was really doing outside of my room is to distract him. "Why would I obey a pathetic little Beta prince like you," I hiss, stepping forward like I'm the one in charge.

He flinches at this, his pride clearly hurt. God, it's just...too easy to see the flinty chips in his façade.

"You want your Luna to obey?" I ask, my voice dripping with condescension. "Then be a real Alpha and give me a reason to want to obey you. You're pathetic, Gabriel – you're so weak that you need to cage your Luna instead of giving her a reason to want to stand by your side. And you can't even build the cage right."

I turn away from him, intending to stalk away.

But he just grabs me back and hits me again, this time not with his open hand. I moan a little as my head snaps to the side, as I stumble a few steps, seeing stars. I lift my hand to my jaw where pain blooms, moving it experimentally, hoping to my grandmother the Goddess that it hasn't cracked.

"You will obey," Gabriel snarls, grasping my arm and pulling me close again. "Or god damn it, I'll make you."

He moves fast, then, ducking low to throw me over his shoulder, and I do nothing to protest. I'm distracted by the pain but also honestly – he's taking me back to the room, which is where I wanted to go anyway. I have plans to make, after all. The blue light manacles appear on my wrists as Gabriel strides back in the direction of my cage, and I bounce so roughly against my mate that it makes me suddenly aware of how gentle Jackson always was with me. After all, he's carried me over his shoulder like this a thousand times. And even when I was bleeding from an arrow in my gut, I'd swear I was more comfortable than I am right now.

God, but my new mate sucks. I scowl, wishing heartily for my Jacks, but knowing that I have a long way to go before I can get back to him.

Mark stays close at Rafe's heels as he storms through the palace. Rafe glances back over his shoulder with a frown.

"You can go, Mark," Rafe snaps, annoyed. "You've got your stupid protection necklace. No one's going to snatch you away." "I can't go, Rafe," Mark snaps back, surprising Rafe by how much his brother's voice matches his own these days, in timbre as well as snappiness. "Mom says you have to babysit me, so here I am. Waiting to be sat."

Rafe turns and gives Mark a little shove on his shoulder. "Would you take this seriously for one minute!?"

"I am taking this seriously!" Mark snarls, casting one hand out to the side. "Do you think this is easy for me, being forced to tail along with you even though I'm useless? Do you think I'm not worried about Jesse and June and Ariel!?"

Rafe growls, because he knows his brother is. "Yeah, well, you could make fewer jokes. Or you could try harder to learn how to do something -"

"I'm not good at this stuff, Rafe," Mark growls, hanging his head a little. "Not like the rest of you are."

Rafe closes his mouth at that, looking at the shame on his little brother's face. Because it's true – Mark has always had more trouble with self-discipline than he and Ari and Juniper have. Mark is...easily distracted and doesn't respond to the pleasures of hard work and achievement like the rest of them do.

Rafe's wolf bites him, hard, on the inside. You need to be kinder.

Rafe sighs and nods, knowing that he's right. It's just...god, he's so angry these days.

But...taking it out on Mark is not okay.

"I'm sorry," Rafe says, rueful, stepping closer to Mark. "I'm being a jerk. It's...good to have you here."

"You're lying," Mark murmurs, scuffing his foot against the floor. "You don't like me. You don't want me around. Only Ariel does."

"I like you, Mark," Rafe says on a sigh, utterly truthful. He does like Mark he just...god, he hasn't made a lot of space in his life for his little brother, has he? "Come on, walk with me, not behind. Mom sent both of us on this task, not just me."

Mark lifts his head a little, a smile pulling at one corner of his lips. And then he nods, the two brothers starting off down the hall until they push through a door into a wide room full of computers and papers and mail.

And at the center of it all stands Luca Grant, who looks up at them, his face very exhausted and serious.

"Hey, Luca!" Mark calls, striding forward with his hand out to clasp the boxer's. Rafe scowls a little, thinking that Mark's a bit of a traitor for accepting Luca back into his heart as easily as Ella did. Rafe and Dominic are...not there yet.

"Hi," Luca says, smiling warmly at Mark and shaking his hand before turning to Rafe, his face becoming more serious. "Um, hey. Rafe."

"Grant," Rafe says, tucking his hands behind his back and speaking quite formally. "Mom sent us to check in on things here, to see if any information has come forward."

"Um, not that I've seen," Luca says, running his hand through his hair and looking around at the chaos of the mail room, where people are rushing to answer phones and check emails and sort through a great deal of mail. They set up a tip-line for any information and a great deal has been coming through, not much of it useful. "It's...a lot, but we're managing to get through it."

Rafe had been surprised when his father had accepted Luca's offer to help. Rafe had been snarling at Grant the moment Ella brought him into the room, ready to rip his head off. Despite Ella's calm assurance that Luca wanted to help, Rafe just couldn't get the mental image of Ariel bleeding and crying in Ben's arms on Luca's bedroom floor out of his mind.

