

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 511

But Dominic, even if he'd been equally enraged, had accepted the offer of help. "We need every competent man at his moment," Dominic had snarled at Rafe's protest, baring his teeth at his son, letting him know that the issue was decided.

But to Rafe's relief, Luca had been banished away from the family to this job. An important job, but certainly one where Rafe didn't have to interact with him much.

Until, of course, his mother kept finding pale excuses to send Rafe down here, eager for the two to find common ground. "Can I help with anything?" Mark asks, moving around Luca's desk and beginning to sort through some of the messages.

"Some personal things came through for your mom and dad," Luca says, friendly, handing Mark some folded pieces of paper and envelopes. "You could take these up."

"You did security sweeps on those?" Rafe snaps, lifting his chin at the mail. "Ensured it was all safe?"

Slowly, Luca turns his eyes to his former friend. "You know I did, Rafe."

Rafe bares his teeth a bit. "Yeah, well, I'm not sure I really trust your word when you say you're committed to keeping the royal family safe."

Luca drops his head, ashamed, knowing that there's nothing he can say to make it better. That Rafe is right – no matter his reasons for it, he did leave Ariel alone and vulnerable.

Mark looks anxiously between the two, torn. Because even if he is of course on his family's side...his heart goes out to Luca, who looks so forlorn, and is trying so hard to make amends.

"All right," Rafe snaps, nodding to Mark. "Anything else, Luca?"

"Um, just this missive," Luca says, reaching for a pink scrap of paper on the desk. "From that Hank guy – letting your mom know that he's coming in via helicopter tomorrow with a report on The Community – that place Jackson is from. He says he's hoping he'll be able to have an audience with her, but he understands if she's busy."

Rafe rolls his eyes a little and takes the piece of paper. "I can't believe Hanks asking for that at a time like this," he murmurs, tucking it into his pocket. "But mom will make space for him. She always does."

He turns away, waving to Mark to come with.

“Rafe!” Luca calls out behind him as the Sinclair boys move towards the door.

Rafe sighs, but turns.

“Please,” Luca says, holding out a pleading hand. “Can we talk? I’m – I’m so sorry, man

“You know, things might have been different,” Rafe interrupts, harsh. “If you’d been there on that battlefield? If you’d been holding her hand, like Jackson was?” Rafe shakes his head, anger welling in him.

Luca takes a deep breath, dropping his eyes and leaning hard against the desk in front of him.

“We can talk when she comes back, alive and safe,” Rafe snaps, turning away. “Until then, I don’t have a god damn thing to say to you.”

He strides from the room.

Mark hesitates for a second, looking between Luca and the door, worried and torn. Because...even though Rafe is right, Mark’s wolf scratches at the dirt of his soul, urging him to realize that somehow Rafe is being unfair. That Luca could have helped – but his presence on the battlefield...

Would it truly have prevented Ariel from being taken?

But whatever the answer is – if there even is one – Mark turns to follow Rafe, knowing that even if he is being unfair, Rafe is still his brother. And his allegiances, always, are with his family.

“See you soon, Luca,” Mark calls to the boxer as he goes, feeling sorry for him.

“Yeah, you too, Mark,” Luca murmurs. After a second of standing very still he sighs, getting back to work.

Gabriel shifts us back into the hallway outside my door, which is bustling with people. Gasps echo around us as Gabriel angrily shoves open my bedroom door, striding into the room and slamming it shut behind him.

Two more gasps sound as Gabriel strides across the room and tosses me hard on the bed.

“Oh, Ariel,” Pippa moans, dashing immediately for me.

But Gabriel steps in front of her, blocking her hard with his arm. “You will leave my Luna where she is, Pippa,” Gabriel snarls. “Especially considering that it was you who let her out.”

“Don’t you dare touch Pippa,” Elias snarls, stepping forward and grabbing Gabriel’s arm, hauling him away. “That is my fucking Luna, who is carrying my child.”

I snarl at Gabriel, sitting up on the bed and pushing myself back so that my back is against the cushions and the headboard. “Leave Pippa out of this,” I snap. “She didn’t do anything. I tricked her so I could escape.”

Elias steps close to Pippa, wrapping her up in his arms, looking anxiously between Gabriel and I.

“You think I am a fool, Ariel,” Gabriel snarls, stepping closer to me and leaning over the bed to glare into my eyes. “You thought that you could go flitting around the castle as much as you wanted, and that as long as I caught you running around the exterior fence in the Dark Lands that I’d think you were trying to escape. I know you went for the ambassadors. I know you spoke with one of them, or else you’d never have gotten to that part of your plan.”

Inwardly, I curse my grandmother for giving me a mate who’s not only completely evil but smart enough to see through my plans. God, couldn’t she at least have been cool and given me a dummy?

“You have embarrassed me for the last time,” Gabriel growls, leaning closer and raising his hand, the threat to strike me real. I lean away, genuinely afraid, my hand going to my jaw. Because if he hits it again – I don’t think it would stay intact –

“Gabriel!” Elias barks out, horrified.

Gabriel stays his hand, but doesn’t take his eyes from me. “I have important things in the works tonight. And you will fall in line, Princess, and be the utter picture of what an Atalaxian Luna is meant to be when I bring you out in public this evening.”

I stare up at him, hate in every line of my face.

“And if you don’t,” Gabriel says, quite soft. “I will not only beat you until your entire body is black and blue – but I will kill each and every one of those Moon Valley ambassadors in front of your eyes. One by one. Is that clear?”

He snarls once more before he turns and stalks from the room, leaving me panting with fear.

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“Oh, Ariel,” Pippa whispers, climbing onto the bed and scooting close to me. “Oh, darling, are you okay?”

But I can barely pay attention to her ministrations as I shift my eyes to Elias.

He looks at me, terrified, a silent question on his face.

I just nod, slight enough that Pippa doesn’t notice my confirmation.

That Ben is here with the Ambassadors. And because of my actions today, his life is on the line.

Pippa and Elias argue quietly for a few moments at the center of the room as I quietly work my jaw back and forth, attempting to ease the pain as I go over my options in my mind. I pick up on about half of their words – Pippa’s insistence that I absolutely cannot go to anything tonight since my confinement is started, Elias’s counter that if I don’t go, Gabriel will see it as subterfuge and find a way to punish me for it.

I only really snap back to the moment when Elias murmurs his farewells and storms from the room, pulling the door shut hard behind him.

I look up to see Pippa standing with her hands on her cheeks, looking anxiously at the door after her Alpha.

“Is he okay?” I ask, dropping my hands to my lap. “Are...are you?”

Pippa quietly turns to me, her eyes moving slowly over me. “He’s fine, he’s just...worried.” Her voice is soft, motherly, used to taking care. It doesn’t pass me that she ignores my question regarding her own welfare as she moves to my side. “Are you all right, darling?”

“I’m fine,” I say, taking her hand as she crawls onto the bed next to me. “I’m so sorry, Pippa, if I got you in trouble.”

“Oh, they were fools to make me your jailer anyway,” she says, smiling a little as she squeezes my hand looks at me with those pretty brown eyes. “I was never one to keep things caged. But Ariel – it’s important to me that you know that whatever you’ve heard about Atalaxia and the way women live here...it’s never okay for an Alpha to hit his Luna. That is...that is not all right.”

My eyes fill a bit with tears – both at the pain in my face and the fact that this is what this sweet girl is worrying about right

now.

“I’m glad that’s true,” I whisper.

She shakes her head, her eyes moving to my jaw, and she grimaces – which lets me know that a bruise is probably forming. “I hope you hit him back.”

A little laugh bursts from me. “I didn’t get the chance. Though trust me, if I could have, I would’ve.”

Pippa gives me a smile and then, to my surprise, asks me if I’m up for another bath. When I ask her what on earth for – I just got out of the last one – she laughs and tells me that I rather ruined that by getting all covered in dirt from the Land of Darkness. “Plus,” she adds with a sigh, “the confinement bath is all lavender, which is supposed to be a message to anyone who happens to smell you to leave you alone. Because your month has...begun. So,” she sighs. “We have to find a way to get you...un-lavendered, if Gabriel is going to insist on you being in public tonight.”

“Oh goodness,” I sigh, pulling myself out of bed and following her to the bathroom. “If you say so, Pip.”

She gives me a small smile that lets me know her worries aren’t totally gone and gets to work again filling the bath and moving to the wall of scented soaps and oils, picking out something that will sufficiently cover the lavender scent. She also pulls a bell rope on the wall, which I know orders up a tray of tea when pulled.

I just stand by the tub, letting her work, thinking that Atalaxians spend a great deal of time in the bath. My mind drifts, then, to the big tub in our Alpha Academy bathroom. And the rain shower next to it. And to being in that rain shower, with Jackson, his skin flush against mine...

“Ariel?”

I jump a little and then blush as I see Pippa peering at me curiously, the bathtub completely full.

“Sorry,” I murmur, untying my robe and letting it slip from my shoulders. “I got...distracted.” Pippa turns slightly to give me some privacy I don’t need – Moon Valley wolves don’t tend to be shy about nakedness, even if Atalaxian ones do – as I slip into the bath.

When I slip under the water, opaque with bath salts and oils and bubbles and soap, Pippa turns back to me and sits on a stool at my side, handing me shampoos and conditioners and more soaps as I go through the process of bathing, keeping me company as much as she’s helping me.

“Did you know,” Pippa says, her voice a bit distracted and dreamy as she leans against the side of my tub, “what Gabriel meant, when he said he wants you to be the perfect picture of an Atalaxian Luna tonight?”

I shrug a little, looking at her with interest as I rinse shampoo from my hair. "I mean, I think I know. But...I'm not sure I do. Not really."

"I'm not sure he knows either," she says, turning to look at me, her face more serious than I've seen it before. "I'm not sure any of them do."

I stop moving my hands, letting them fall into the water. "What do you mean?"

"We spent a lot of time on a country estate when we were children," Pippa says, looking away again, surprising me with this turn in the story. "It belonged to my uncle – my mother's favorite brother. He never took a Luna." She shrugs. "Some don't. Perhaps there aren't enough perfect Luna's for all the Alphas who are left wanting."

She smiles a little and then scoots her stool back, taking a little cup off of the back of the tub and filling it. I tilt my head back as she pours the water over me, beginning to rinse the rest of the shampoo out of my hair like I'm a child.

"But we had a very idyllic childhood there," she continues. "We spent a great deal of time wandering through the meadows, and making up stories in the mountains, and building forts up in trees or beneath them. There was a great deal of freedom to that life which...I think we all lost when we came back to the Castle for the winters. And when we started living here forever."

I listen carefully, still confused, as Pippa puts the cup back onto the edge of the tub and takes up the conditioner, quietly beginning to massage it into my hair.

"My uncle, he never came with us to the Castle," Pippa says quietly. "I think he would have missed the freedom too much. He had a very special friend there, you see – his gamekeeper. He raised my uncle's hounds, and tended his horses. He was a very nice man – always with a ready smile. I haven't seen him in years. Duck in, darling, and run your hands through your hair, please. It's faster that way."

I glance at Pippa, wordless, and then does as she says, ducking under the water. As I float beneath the water, running my fingers through my hair, I wonder if...

...god, is Pippa telling me the story I think she's telling me? Or...

Breathless for want of information and, indeed, air, I resurface. She's waiting for me, a towel in hand, and she gives me a gentle smile as she offers it to me so that I can pat my face dry.

"You see," Pippa says, quiet soft and fond, "Gabriel doesn't understand that that's the true role of an Atalaxian Luna – seeing more than they think we see, and keeping men's secrets to ourselves. Tucking them away to deep that they don't even know that we know. Elias – as good to me as he is...he doesn't know either. What it is Atalaxian Lunas hold for our men. What we know."

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I turn to her suddenly, shocked. Because...

“Yes, Ariel,” Pippa says quietly, taking the towel back from me. “I know. I’ve known...for a very long time. I notice everything about my Alpha’s life, and the way he loves me, and the way he...looks at others. And I noticed when he came home from his trip to Moon Valley at Midwinter that...everything had changed.”

I continue to just stare at her, not really knowing what to say, my face slack.

“Don’t pity me, darling,” she says quietly, reaching out to stroke my cheek. “I have a better Alpha than most. He keeps my secrets too.”

“You have secrets?” I whisper.

She nods a little. “Gabriel and Elias taught me to read when we were children, which they ardently were not supposed to do. And... Elias gave me this baby,” she says, looking down at her belly and putting her hands on either side of it. “Even though we’ve never lain together.”

I stare at her in shock. “Is it...that’s his baby though, right?”

She looks up at me with a wide grin. “Yes, Ariel, I’m not a complete harlot. We were just...creative,” she says, laughing and looking away with embarrassment. “With the transfer of the seed.” She blushes a deep red. “Though, I hope that if you’re in training to be a perfect Atalaxian Luna that you will...help me by keep that secret as well. As well as the others, which I know you hold.”

I shake my head in wonder at my friend. Because who knew that she had so many secret hopes and dreams beneath that calm and sweet demeanor? Especially those that her own culture would see as acts of sin and blasphemous betrayal, desires worthy of death.

“Pippa,” I say quietly, reaching to cover her hand with my own. “Why are you telling me all of this?”

“Because I want you to know my secrets, Ariel,” she says quietly, turning her head back to me. “So that you’ll tell me who my Alpha’s mate is, if you know. And so that...when I ask you when you’re planning to escape from all of this, you’ll trust me enough to tell me the truth. And so that you’ll take me with you when you go. And this little baby. And Elias as well.”

I stare at Pippa, shocked at the depths she's revealed. Because, I mean, I never thought her truly stupid – just incredibly innocent but...

Damn, did she have me fooled.

"Well shoot, Pippa," I murmur, smiling at her a little as I shake my head and squeeze her hand. "With the ability to maintain a life-long poker face and keep secrets like that...we'll have a role for you in the Espionage unit at Alpha Academy whenever you want it."

She stares at me in shock for a moment before we both burst into laughter.

"Oh dear," Pippa murmurs, shaking her head and pressing a hand to her cheek. "Oh, I don't think I could do that. With all those Alphas? And all from Moon Valley where they...where they kiss girls before they're married?" She shakes her head like it's all kind of terrifying and wonderful.

I grin and lean back in the tub. "You know they do a lot more than kiss the girls."

Pippa's eyes dart to my neck and then back to my face as she bites her lip, hesitating. But then she breaks, leaning forward with an eager smile on her lips. "What's it like?" she whispers, breathless. "Is it great?"

I wrinkle my nose at her and lean forward, nodding. "It really is great, Pip. Especially...especially if you love them. I know that Elias is your best friend and he's good to you. But...I want more for you than that."

She takes a deep breath and looks away, shaking her head slightly. "Oh, I don't know if that's in the cards for me."

"Maybe it will be," I say softly. "When we get you to Moon Valley. And don't worry," I say with a smile. "I won't let any of those big Alphas go anywhere near you until you want them to."

She lets out a long breath as she smiles. "Yeah. But. Maybe one day...I'll want them to."

I smile back, my heart singing with joy and hope for her.

Before I can say more, though, a soft knock comes at the door.

"That will be the tea," Pippa says with a sigh, rising to her feet. "Do you mind if the maid comes in? It will be a woman, of course."

"No, I don't mind," I say, wrapping my arms around my knees as Pippa moves to the door. "I could use a cup."

I stare idly at the water for a little bit as the maid wheels a little trolley in and Pippa thanks her politely for her service. But I go very still the moment the maid begins to speak.

“This one is for the Princess,” the maid says, calm and quiet. And even though I’ve never heard this person’s voice be calm and quiet except in the deadliest of situations, I’d recognize it anywhere. My head whips up. “We heard in the kitchens that she is entering her Confinement, so we included a few pain tablets on the saucer.”

Even as I stare, frustration grows in me at the fact that apparently everyone in the castle knows that I’ve started my period.

But there’s no time for that thought as I lock eyes with the maid for a single moment before turning away, remembering my lessons. Remembering everything that she, indeed, taught me.

Because Faiza would be deeply ashamed if she worked so hard to get into my room at the Atalaxian palace only to be unmasked now.

I don’t look at Faiza as she leaves, though I desperately want to take another look at the false nose she’s wearing, as well as the grey hair that’s aged her at least twenty years. Is it a wig? Or has she dyed it? She goes and I just sit idly in the bath, hoping desperately that Pippa can’t sense the new pounding of my heart.

“Do you want these tablets?” Pippa asks, pouring out two cups of tea and looking askance at my saucer. “It’s probably too early for your cramps to be hitting as hard as they will – I can just toss them aside and we’ll get fresh ones later. Or oh wait, darling, your jaw – ”

“Yes, I’ll take them now,” I say, doing my best not to sound too eager. Pippa just nods to me, understanding, and brings the two cups of tea over, sitting next to me and handing me my cup.

It takes an incredible amount of willpower for me to quietly sip my tea, not even looking down at the two little pills until Pippa gets up to fetch me a new robe, my bath finished.

But when I do glance down, a little thrill runs through my heart.

Because just as I suspected, they’re not pain killers at all.

No, I recognize these anywhere – Neumann taught us to recognize cyanide by sight, smell, and taste.

Very carefully I palm the pill-shaped poison in my dried hand as I stand and allow Pippa to help me into my robe. And then I

slip them quietly into my pocket as we move into the other room to pick out clothes for me tonight.

And all the time, even as I chat with Pippa, my mind whirls with how to wield this new power.

Because with this little gift, suddenly everything has changed.

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Jesse lounges back on his new cot in the yurt, his head nestled against a soft pillow. He runs his hands idly over his stomach, which is distended with too much cake. He smiles as he turns his head and observes as Midnight happily sets new order to her “kitchen,” finding places for all of the new pots and cooking tools that Juniper and the rest of the kind people in the Fancy House sent home with them.

God, but it was good to see June, even if all it did was make him worry more. He hadn’t even known she was gone. And if he hadn’t known that – what on earth could be happening with the rest of his family? Were they even...okay?

“You want more cookies?” Midnight asks cheerfully, putting away the last of her new dishtowels and beaming over at him.

“No, I don’t think I’ll ever eat another cookie ever again,” Jesse sighs, smiling at her.

She frowns at him. “That’s ridiculous, Jesse. Cookies are delicious. Why would you even say that?”

He just heaves a happy sigh. “I don’t know, kid. I was joking.”

She narrows her eyes at him, trying to figure out what about that could be funny, and he laughs.

Midnight turns her head at Jesse, curious. “Why are you upset? We have so many nice new things – how could you be upset?” Jesse frowns at her. “How’d you know I was upset?”

“You get a big line,” she murmurs, drawing a finger between her own eyebrows and the perfectly smooth skin there. “It’s all angry and bothered, like you got scratched by a weasel.”

Jesse laughs again. “How on earth do you know what weasels are?”

“We have Weasels of Darkness here, Jesse,” she says, looking at him with wide eyes and nodding seriously. “You do not want to mess with them.”

Jesse laughs again but her face falls into a frown.

“Seriously, Jess,” she says, her shoulders slumping. “Our lives are so good right now. Better than they’ve ever been. And soon your Juniper will be Queen of the Underworld – she’s much prettier than the seal girl. Why are you so sad?”

“Because, Mids,” Jesse says, reaching out a hand for her. She quickly scurries to the side of his new single-person cot, taking his hand. “Seeing June just made me worried about the rest of my family. You took me away from a war. They could be hurt, or dying. I can’t help them while I’m here.”

She frowns, squeezing his hand, and he can tell that even if she doesn’t fully understand...she wants to.

“Please, Midnight,” Jesse says, looking at her earnestly. “Please take me back. Take us back.”

She snarls, her eyes going dark, and she whips her hand from his. “I’m not taking you there, Jesse.”

“Please,” he begs, sitting up, reaching for her hand again, wanting to honestly plead his case. “My family is all there – our family – it will be so good -”

“Your family is there, but so is that whore.” Midnight bares her teeth as she glares at her mate.

Jesse just drops his hand and doesn’t say anything, because Midnight’s not wrong. He has been thinking about Daphne – dreaming about her every night – even if he feels guilt about it with every breath he takes, because he knows it’s not fair to Midnight or to Daph. But still, he can’t help it – he’s still in love with her. His wolf howls the confirmation in his soul.

“I am never taking you there,” Midnight snarls, standing sharply up and storming across the yurt, grabbing her little purple backpack as she goes.

“Then take me to the Atalaxians!” Jesse pleads, pushing even though he knows he shouldn’t – he knows that Midnight doesn’t budge when she’s lost her temper like this. “I want to see what they’re building! You should show me!”

“No!” Midnight shouts, ducking behind a little folding screen that effectively cuts the yurt into two separate sections. Juniper gave it to them vaguely “for privacy,” but Jesse is very glad to have it. It has been...challenging, to say the least, to share a one -room yurt with his strange little mate.

Jesse just sighs, turning his head back up to the ceiling. “What are you doing over there?” he calls, wondering about the choice to bring the purple backpack.

“I’m learning about getting the pups!” Midnight shouts back, still peeved. “I’ll give you the pups, and then you’ll want to stay! Everyone says so!”

Jesse groans inwardly but just turns his head back up to the roof of the yurt, mildly miserable now. He sighs, wondering how one can be so miserable after eating such quantities of cake. Surely, the two states cannot co-exist.

He sits, pondering on it for a long few quiet moments, when suddenly a horrified squeak sounds from behind the screen. “Midnight?” Jesse calls, sitting up, worried. “Are you okay?”

Suddenly she storms out from behind the screen, the book Juniper gave her clutched tight in one hand, her face furious.

Jesse’s eyes go wide as she hurls the book at his head.

“How dare you, Jesse Sinclair!” Midnight shouts, enraged.

“What did I do!?” Jesse gasps as he dodges the book and then turns back to Midnight, stunned.

“If you think I am doing any of that!” Midnight continues, her arms stiff at her sides, her hands clenched in fists, “to give you a pup! Then...! Then...!”

As he sees her struggling for words, Jesse can’t help it as his face bursts into a wide grin. “The idea of getting a pup is not so appealing now, is it?”

“You stay away from me, Jesse Sinclair!” Midnight shouts, livid. “And you keep your clothes ON!” She storms out of the yurt, clearly needing a minute.

Jesse just turns on his stomach and laughs and laughs into his pillow, desperately needing to let it out even as he doesn’t want her to hear. Because he knows his laughter would hurt her feelings, and above all things...

Well, above all things, he just wants Midnight to be happy, and healthy, and safe, and loved.

Which means getting her the hell out of here.

But how on earth is he ever going to convince her to leave?

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Pippa fusses over me when we leave the bathroom, chattering about my poor bruised jaw and how we're going to cover that up with makeup. But I sit down on my bed and make a big show of yawning, wanting a minute alone to catch my proverbial breath and better hide my new weapon. As I lean back against my pillows, though, something crinkles beneath me in a very non-fabric-y way.

It takes all of my willpower not to let my eyes fly wide, to grab at whatever little piece of paper is there. Instead, I just lean more fully back and stretch my arms over my head.

"Oh, you poor dear," Pippa murmurs, noticing finally. "I'll leave you for a little, perhaps? So you can take a nap? I'm always sleepy on the first day of my confinement."

"Perhaps a nap would be best," I sigh, letting my eyes fall half-shut. Inwardly, my wolf howls our victory and hops from foot to foot in her eagerness to get started on our plans. But as Pippa comes close and fluffs my pillows a bit, I frown at her. "Pippa, do you seriously do this every month? Just...sit alone for two full days?"

"Is your cycle only two days?" she asks, looking at me with wide eyes.

I blush a little but shrug, admitting it, knowing that I'm luckier than others. But otherwise I just look at her, waiting for an

answer.

"Yes, I do it," she sighs, shaking her head a little as she does. "Not that Elias ever cares or follows the rules. He always sneaks in and spends nights together with me as usual – it would be very dull to be without him at night."

I smile a little, loving the closeness of their friendship, but also wondering...

Well. Wondering what's going to happen when Ben comes on the scene. Because I'm not foolish enough to think that Ben just came to Atalaxia to help me. No, he's been worried about Elias for months, working hard to study Atalaxian history and political theory so that he could be an ambassador and come here.

But his coming here and finding his mate...is it going to destroy Pippa's life? She is, after all, having a child with this man who is clearly her best friend.

"Would Elias get in trouble?" I ask quietly. "If he were found breaking your confinement?"

“Oh, the men don’t actually get in trouble for anything,” she murmurs, frustrated, as she straightens up and puts her hands on her hips. “Honestly, I’d probably get in more trouble for tempting him. But we’re pregnant now, which means we’re not so closely watched.”

“Are you excited?” I ask quietly. “To become a mom?”

Pippa shrugs, running a hand over her belly. “I always knew it would happen someday. And there were...suspicions about Elias and his lack of interest in women before this.”

I frown a little, noting that Pippa didn’t really answer the question.

“Okay, darling,” she says with a sigh, a forced little smile appearing on her face. “You take your nap, and I’ll come and check on you later.”

I settle back on my pillows with a sigh and wave to Pippa as she slips out the door and pulls it shut behind her. As soon as she’s gone I whip up, shoving my hand under the pillows, grasping everywhere for a piece of paper. As soon as it touches my fingers and I yank it up and out, unfolding it as fast as I can.

Immediately, I recognize Faiza’s handwriting and burst into a grin.

My sneaky spy professor. God, I love her.

But the contents of the note immediately make the smile fall from my face.

Accept the bond – it says, the words hastily scrawled across the paper. And then, in a line beneath it: Trust your grandmother.

I inhale deeply, re-reading it again and again because...

Seriously? That’s her advice – that’s what Faiza wants me to do?

I scowl as I fall back on the pillows again, my mind racing. Inwardly my wolf whines and turns in a slow, tight circle before plopping down on her haunches, confused and afraid.

He’ll corrupt me, she murmurs, anxious. If we accept him and build the bond, his wolf will cross it and bite me and get that oily stuff all over me and claim me for Darkness.

I shudder at the thought, every instinct in me screaming not to do it. My wolf is right – Gabriel’s bossy wolf will bully her, and corrupt her, and turn her to his will. The idea of my sweet rose-gold wolf all covered in oil, her eyes glowing in the darkness, her lungs heaving with her singular desire to fulfill the God of Darkness’s will...

I clench my teeth against it as another whine slips from her muzzle. No, impossible – I’ll never let that happen.

But...Faiza is right. My grandmother gave me this bond for a reason – and now that I know that accepting the bond and receiving my mates mark gives me new and intensified access to my magic? Isn't it...isn't it my duty, and my fate, to accept that magic? Especially if it can help my nation and even – maybe – end this war.

I mean, that's possible, after all. Look what I can do with only two mates by my side. What will my magic become with three?

I groan, torn, falling back against my pillows with a scowl. Maybe if I just...wait three months the Goddess will make good on her promise and give me a new mate instead of Gabriel, whose good looks do nothing at all to counterbalance his crap personality and penchant for violence. I growl a little as I raise my hand to my bruised jaw, pissed off and kind of wishing that Faiza did indeed send me some pain killers alongside the poison.

God, what the hell am I going to do? Now that I have a weapon, how will I wield it? And what steps do I want to take before I do? Would I be worth exploring my connection with Gabriel now to investigate how his magic impacts mine?

Or should I just kill him now and have it done?

I sigh, tucking myself into the pillows and letting my mind turn over the problem, closely inspecting every detail.

"Gabriel!" My door flies open and I shriek, nearly jumping out of my skin at the sudden noise after several hours of relative silence. "Don't you dare go in there!"

"Oh, shut up, Pippa," Gabriel snaps, sneering over his shoulder at Elias and Pippa as they storm in after him.

"She's being confi-"

"No one cares!" my mate barks as Elias angrily shuts the door behind him, sending me an apologetic look. Gabriel turns to me, his hands on his hips. "Get up."

I narrow my eyes and settle myself more completely in my pillows. "I can't," I say, petulant and pouting. "I have cramps. Ow." My mate rolls his eyes at me. "You women and your weakness. Get up!"

I take a deep breath, prepared for a prolonged fight in which I force him to drag me to my feet if he wants me to get out of this bed, but Elias sighs and steps forward.

"Honestly, Ariel, it's not worth it," he says, shaking his heads and slipping his hands in his pockets as Pippa comes to his side, her face furious. "He's called a banquet tonight and he wants you there. He'll drag you there by your hair if he has to, confinement or not."

Gabriel bares his teeth at me, letting me know that it's true.

“This is scandalous,” Pippa growls. “The entire staff know that she’s being confined – this breaks a thousand years of tradition – ”

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“Well, I will be King soon,” Gabriel snaps, his eyes still on me. “Which means that I get to say what tradition is. And if I want my mate by my side, she’ll be there, confinement or not.”

I go a bit still as I stare at my mate, at the coldness of his blue eyes. Because what does he mean he’ll be King soon? After all, he’s still got a cousin and an uncle in the way.

“Come, mate,” Gabriel snarls, looking me over. “It’s time for you to dress for dinner. And tonight I will have you looking every inch my Queen.’

An hour later I enter the banquet hall at Gabriel’s side, my hand perched quaintly atop his as the Prince escorts me forward. I’m again wearing the diamond collar that hides Luca’s mark, though I’ve got no crown today, which is fine by me. Pippa dressed me in acres of pink satin overtop another corset which does nothing to aid the cramps that torture my back and my stomach. At every moment, I avoid the urge to scowl for more reasons than one.

But my face shows none of it, a pretty smile and vacant look in my eyes as my head swivels around, nodding to everyone who sits at the tables which are arranged in a wide horseshoe before the small King’s table at the front so that all of the courtiers can get a good look at us.

And not just the courtiers, I realize as I smile around the room. It takes a great deal of control to keep my face bland as my eyes sweep over the table of Moon Valley ambassadors who have been included in this event. Their table is tucked away behind the table of Atalaxian nobles and heavily guarded, but they’re here.

I let a little surprise and fondness show as I give them a tinkling little wave, as if seeing an old acquaintance about whom I don’t particularly care. My eyes find Ben’s, though, and he smirks at me, shaking his head a bit, onto my game. But the rest of the ambassadors just look terribly confused, clearly wondering how I’ve fallen this quickly under this Atalaxian spell.

I quickly turn away from them all, wondering what the hell is going on. Why does Gabriel want us all here for dinner? And why would he invite the delegation from Moon Valley – what does he want them to see?

Gabriel predictably leads us immediately to that front table, even as Elias and Pippa fall to the side, taking seats of honor closest to the high table. I frown as they sit, wondering where Elias and Gabriel's father is. Calvin – my mother's friend – the King's brother. I haven't seen sign of him at all since I arrived. Is that odd? Should he be here? I don't even know.

The King gives Gabriel a loud, formal welcome as we finally reach our destination. Gabriel bows, answering in a bored way as I dip into a deep curtsy, ignoring their words and concentrating instead on the fact that neither the King's Luna nor the Prince's are here. And, indeed, that there is no chair for me.

Just...a big red velvet pillow on the floor next to the high table.

Inwardly my wolf growls as I see where this is going. Because even though I wasn't raised with a great deal of ego regarding my royal status, I certainly was raised with enough pride to know when I'm being insulted. And to resent it.

"Princess," Gabriel says, flopping back into his chair and grinning darkly at me he gestures to the pillow. "If you wouldn't mind. My feet do ache."

"Of course, my love," I murmur, folding my legs elegantly beneath me as I settle on the pillow and let my skirts spread prettily around me on my floor. Then, as Gabriel extends his booted foot my way, I reach out and take it in my hands, holding the boot steady as he pulls his foot away.

Over the course of the next hour, I seethe quietly as I rub my mate's feet. I do my best to tuck all of my anger away, forcing myself to play the role of the imaginary, perfect version of the Atalaxian Luna who really would want to rub her mate's feet after his long day of stomping around, being a cursed jerk.

But I can't help, a few times, the cruel little pinches and squeezes that make Gabriel growl quietly but which he cannot allow to show on his face either. Because he, too, is bound by the ridiculous gender roles of his nation and couldn't ever let anyone know that his pretty little Luna could hurt him.

So instead I just rub until my hands ache, well aware that I'm being humiliated, that the whole thing is in service of showing just how completely he's tamed me, and that photographers have captured the entire scene to print in the world-wide press tomorrow.

But whatever. Anyone I care about will just see these images and laugh.

Mostly, I let my mind wander, thinking of better things. Of my family at home, and how pleasant it is to sit around a lovely fire with them, joking and laughing. Of Jackson, and how honestly I wouldn't mind rubbing his feet if it made him feel nice after a long day. How he would insist on returning the favor.

I don't have to fake the smile that comes to my mouth at the thought of his big powerful hands anywhere on my body.

My focus returns, though, at a very particular change in the tone and timbre of Gabriel's voice what must be...two hours into a dinner at which I've been fed absolutely nothing.

"The problem with that," Gabriel says, sounding smug as he brushes my hands away and begins to tug on one of his boots. "Is that the future of Atalaxia will not be heading in that direction. Not at all."

"Pardon?" Gabriel's cousin – the Crown Prince – says, turning to him with a sneer. "Gabriel, you over-step. I appreciate your input, of course, but you will never have the power to delegate such decisions."

"Oh, I wouldn't be so sure," Gabriel says with a sigh, his eyes latching onto mine as he smirks and pulls on his second boot. I go a bit rigid with surprise – he hasn't looked at me at all this entire dinner, except to give me instructions on how to massage his feet.

What...what is happening?

"You grow tiresome, Gabriel," the King murmurs, taking a long sip of his red wine and looking out over his courtiers. "With your plans for this nation and your spur-of-the-moment plans, like banquets such as this which seem to have...no point. We are all allied with Darkness, but you forget your duty to our people and traditions in your vehement dedication to the God. There must be a balance."

I watch very carefully as servants begin to file into the room, trays in their hands, starting to deliver deserts to the table. I watch carefully as the silver domes are removed from the trays, revealing to each courtier a single cup filled to the brim with red liquid.

Is it... is it wine? Or some kind of liquid desert?

"Oh, everything as a point," Gabriel sighs, sitting back in his chair as the servants come to our table last, delivering three trays with those same red drinks.

"What on earth is this?" the Crown Prince murmurs, leaning forward to sniff at it.

"Try it, it's delicious," Gabriel says with a satisfied smile. "Everyone should have a sip of such ambrosia before they die." The Crown Prince frowns, reaching for his glass.

As he does, the servant behind him – a tall man, too well-built for a server – draws a stiletto blade from his sleeve.

I gasp, skittering back a little even as one of my hands reaches out for the prince.

But there's nothing I can do as the servant draws the blade raw across the Crown Prince's throat.

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The Prince's eyes go wide as blood spills down his front, his hand falling away from the cup, as he gasps and slumps forward.

Screams erupt in the room, everyone leaping to their feet. I just stare in horror as the heir to the Atalaxian Throne gasps for breath, his face desperate as his father screams his name, reaching for him.

"Come, Luna," Gabriel says, completely calm and he bends down and reaches for me, his hand wrapping firm around my arm. "Time for us to go."

I shift my gaze up to his devious face as Gabriel pulls me to my feet. There's no horror there at his cousin's murder – only cold pleasure.

"You," I whisper, shaking my head slightly.

"Come," he snarls, yanking me. "It is dangerous here. We go."

Before anyone can protest or react, the new Crown Prince of Atalaxia hauls me out of the banquet chamber. I stumble after him, shocked as I realize at last the true danger of this man. I spare a glance for the Moon Valley delegation, desperately afraid that they're going to be next, but to my relief I see that guards are already on them, leading them quickly from the room even as the nobility panic and scream their shock and protest.

Clearly, this has been very carefully coordinated. And I'm fairly sure I know by whom.

Gabriel pulls me through the halls behind him, heading for my rooms. A myriad of emotions fly through me as we go – fear, of course, at this man's unpredictability and cruelty. But quickly chasing that comes anger, and rage, and the sheer determination not to follow the Prince's fate.

This jackass – he thinks he has everything figured out. And he might be in control of me for now, but I've got my own weapons up my sleeve.

As we approach my room, I begin to pull back on my wrist, determined to be free. "Let go of me, you idiot," I snarl, putting my weight back into my heels.

“Come on, mate,” Gabriel bites out, glaring at me over his shoulder and tightening his grip on me. “I’m done with you now and putting you back in your cage.”

“Great man indeed,” I say, my voice deep with doubt, “that needs to cage his mate.”

“Only when she’s a wild bitch,” Gabriel snarls, hauling me forward. “Who needs to be schooled in the ways of proper femininity.”

I snarl in turn and twist my wrist in the way that Blaze taught me, breaking Gabriel’s grip and stepping back in the hall. When Gabriel roars and turns, reaching for me, I’m ready for him – my fingernails extended into claws that I rake first over his extended hand and then stepping close so that my second blow scrapes across the soft skin of his neck.

Not deep enough to kill – no, I’m not ready for that yet. But deep enough to let him know that I can.

“Properly feminine enough for you?” I coo, my eyes narrowed as I step back, watching his body language for sighs of how he’ll strike next. “After all, cutting a man’s throat does seem more of a woman’s method of killing than an Alpha’s.”

“You damned bitch,” my mate snarls, stepping forward towards me, his eyes watching my claws as blood blooms in dots across his neck.

“Gabriel!”

Elias’s voice booms out in the hallway as Elias and Pippa come racing down the hall. Their sudden arrival breaks our tension and I skitter quickly out of the way, pressing myself against the wall as Elias storms past me and shoves Gabriel, hard, so that he stumbles back.

“Don’t you dare – ” Gabriel growls, catching his feet.

“Did you do it!?” Elias cries out, advancing again on the taller Alpha, not an ounce of fear in his voice. “Did you – did you fucking kill our cousin!?”

Gabriel snarls, looking around the hall, aware that others could be listening. And though it’s quite obvious to me that Gabriel did indeed plan the assassination that advanced him one step along the line to the throne, he does not want to make a public admission that will put him in jail. I mean, it’s pretty obvious to me that he wants everyone to know that he did it – but not to the point where he can be prosecuted. No, my mate will not have left any trail behind except for rumor.

“What happened,” Gabriel snarls, advancing one step towards Elias now, threat in his voice. “Was the God of Darkness’s plan. It is his decided fate.”

“He’s our fucking cousin, Gabe!” Elias shouts, his voice cracking. Pippa bursts into tears, ducking her face into her hands. I slip my arms around her shoulders, tugging her close.

“You fool,” Gabriel grumbles, grabbing Elias by the arm and hauling him to my room, shoving the door open and forcing him inside. “To speak of such things in public -”

Anger roils at me as I consider what Gabriel just did in public, but I keep my mouth shut, instead guiding the sobbing Pippa towards the bedroom and bringing us inside as well. As soon as we get in, Elias shuts the door behind us.

“I don’t even know you anymore, Gabe,” Elias says, taking Pippa from my arms and gathering her to his chest. “A murderer? I knew Darkness had his grip on you, but to cold bloodedly murder our family -”

“I am meant to be King, Elias,” Gabriel snarls, leaning aggressively forward towards his brother. “It is my fate. It is the will of Darkness.”

“Oh, you’re nothing but his pawn,” Elias snarls, leaning forward towards him in turn. “The King still has some vestige of morals, and the Crown Prince did too, even if his wolf is as ruined as yours. Darkness is only choosing you because you’re the most desperate for his approval -”

“Shut up,” Gabriel snarls, advancing now. “You shut your filthy mouth.”

A fist pounds on the door.

“The inquest, I’m sure?” Elias says, gesturing towards it. “Though I’m sure you’ve got that sewn up already, don’t you, Gabe?”

“I am no fool,” Gabriel snaps, storming for the door. “I will be on a throne within days, not in a cell.” Gabriel spins to me, his hand on the door handle. “Consider your place, Princess,” he snarls, gesturing towards his neck, where blood lightly drips. “For you will either be docile by my side or dead. I will not accept any further trials of my patience.”

Gabriel yanks the doors open and begins to speak quickly to the guards standing there, informing them that the Princess – me is now safe and he can turn his mind to the investigation. When the door slams shut I just stare at it, as do Elias and Pippa.

We all stand quietly for a long few moments before Elias turns to me.

“Ariel,” he says, his eyes meeting mine. “You need to run.”

My eyes widen as I turn them to him. “What?”

He shakes his head. “He wants your power, badly, and he’s making moves to take the throne, which means he thinks he can get it. If you gleaned any information from your ambassadors about how to get out of here, you need to use it. And go.

My teeth clench and I step towards the pair. “I’m not leaving without you.”

“You have to,” Pippa says, shaking her head. “There’s no time to consider – ”

“No,” I say, my voice firm. “I’ll find a way.”

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“You need to consider what is possible, highness,” Elias says, falling back on formality I think to stress to me how important this is. “Not what you want. Pippa and I,” he looks down at her, giving a steady nod. “We’ll find our own way.”

She looks up at her Alpha with a great deal of faith.

But no, in this horrible world that’s just getting more and more unpredictable? I can’t leave them here – not with Gabriel in charge. Not...considering what Gabriel very likely knows about these two and their relationship.

Elias and Pippa leave my room soon after that, Elias wanting to know the details of the sham investigation into the Prince’s death, Pippa wanting a quiet moment to herself to process her grief. Because even if I never got the impression that Pippa was close to the Crown Prince in the same way that she was to Elias and Gabriel growing up, it was still a shocking death in the family.

I watch her go with worried eyes that drift to her stomach, knowing that she doesn’t need any more stress in her pregnancy. My heart aches for Pippa even as she shuts the door behind her.

When I’m alone I don’t bother to light any candles, instead preferring the dark. I move to my bed and flop down into the pillows and blankets, staring at the ceiling, wondering what the hell I’m going to do. Because it’s becoming increasingly clear that my mate is lost to Darkness and that he’s determined to take me with them.

Is there a way to navigate this, to trust my grandmother’s intuition – as well as my professor’s instructions – and access Gabriel’s magic without becoming corrupted by his bond with Darkness?

Or...would it be better to just cut and run?

I bite my lip, trying to decide, all the time terribly worried that the wrong choice here will spell destruction for us all.

Jackson dreams, the images moving slow through his mind, churning with his worry. And all of it – the worry, the dreams – revolves around Ariel. Ariel's face, her sweet laugh – they echo in his mind even as he tosses against the shirt he's rolled beneath his head as a makeshift pillow.

But is that her laugh?

Jackson's eyes fly open and he's immediately up, glaring around his tent, the sound still echoing in his ears. He wasn't fully asleep – not really – just resting his eyes, all of his senses alert and aware for any change. His magic allows for such a state- resting so as not to burn through his magic in the effort to keep awake, but not sinking so deeply that he might be vulnerable.

Which is how he knows that that laugh... it had echoed in his mind like a dream, mixing with his memories of Ariel's voice but... it wasn't. It had been in this world.

So then who the hell was it?

Jackson snarls, sniffing the air, able to sense...something. But not even a true scent, more like... the sense of hot metal, or frozen air, which affect the nose and sinuses but don't have a smell. He sniffs again, quite sure that no person was physically here, but still, there's an...impression.

Frowning, Jackson looks around the tent carefully and sends his senses without, searching the vicinity for any movement. And as he turns to ensure his hearing catches all angles, Jackson's hand falls across something new.

He snaps his gaze down, picking up the little rectangular stone, grey and carved delicately with geometrical symbols. What... what the hell is this?

He lifts it in his palm to get a closer look and a voice softly echoes in his mind, making his wolf's hair stand on end.

I have not done much for you, it says, tender and gentle – a woman's voice. But this, I can do.

Jackson's eyes fly wide as he stares at the item and his wolf whines, frightened and confused. Because he's quite sure- quite

sure in this moment – that he's not just going insane with lack of sleep and hunger and stress. No, he's been in worse stakeouts than this and survived just fine.

No, that voice – and this stone – they're quite real.

But who the hell did it?

Jackson crawls out of his tent, looking carefully around, trying to figure out...well, if there is actually someone here even if he can't smell or hear them. But as far as he can see and sense it's just rippling grass and the wind moving softly around him. He sighs, looking down at the little stone in his hand with a frown, wondering...what the hell it is.

Jackson inspects the rock thoroughly, looking for any sign or writing on it that makes sense to him. Then, hesitating only for a moment, he pushes on it with his magic, as he does when he passes his power to Ariel, trying to see if it engages at all.

But no, it's just a...rock.

Jackson scowls, glaring at the little chip of stone, hating it a little bit. Whatever that woman said about not being able to give him much...well, is this honestly that much of an improvement? "Thanks for the...rock," Jackson mutters, bitter. Then he folds his hand around it and turns towards the hill, hiking up the steep side until he reaches the top.

When Jackson reaches the crest of the hill he sits with a sigh, staring off towards the castle which is barely visible in the darkness. That stupid, impenetrable castle where Ariel is held. His girl, so close but...completely unreachable.

Jackson's scowl deepens as he thinks about her, wondering what she's up to tonight. Hoping that idiot who is claiming to be her mate is keeping his damn hands off her. Jackson's wolf growls at this thought, his head dipping low, his lips pulling back over his teeth. Ours, he growls, tension rippling through his fur. We will bite his hands off if he touches her.

Just to start, Jackson murmurs in agreement. His wolf's growl deepens.

Jackson sighs, though, knowing his threat is empty if he can't even get inside to help her, protect her. God, if he could just get in – if he could get close. Jackson wishes with a sudden desperation for any way to get to her –

And the world around him...shifts.

Jackson gasps as he tilts forward, like the universe has given him a mighty shove, and then he falls.

His knees hit hard into the dirt of a new world and Jackson stills with fear, his hands flat against the ground, the little rock still pressed against his palm. Jackson's head spins from side to side, trying to find anything familiar, anything to orient him.

It's dark here as dark as it was in Atalaxia – but there is no vegetation. No...nothing.

Jackson whips his head up and stares around, confused at first by a maze of metal built into the ground before and slightly below him, and then...

Then he looks up, his eyes widening, his heart pounding as he realizes that the sky is completely black except for...

Except for the three moons hanging heavy within it. One moon looms larger than the rest, orange and heavy in the sky. Jackson's eyes move immediately to it, ignoring its two dark brothers to the left and right, one mostly full, the other crescent. No, it is the big central moon which demands Jackson's attention.

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He stares at it in wonder and knows, suddenly, that he's in another world.

But a world which Ariel has described before – where she has been – a land of Darkness, overhung by three moons.

Jackson gasps and scrambles to his feet, careful to take the little rock with him, glancing down at it and wondering if –

But there's no time.

"Ariel!" He shouts, desperate, cupping his hands to his mouth. The word echoes out into the nothingness that surrounds him. Jackson listens desperately for any response, willing his heart to slow its pounding rhythm so he can hear over it.

Nothing returns.

Jackson shouts her name again, louder this time, and waits, holding his breath.

Again, nothing returns.

Jackson drops his hands and works hard to steady himself, taking long, calming breaths as he forces himself to adjust to this new world. He glances again at the rock, knowing now that it's some sort of gift that brought him here. And hope floods him because...she said it was help, right? Or implied it? Whoever that woman was who spoke in his mind?

So...it must be getting him closer to the one thing that matters. To Ariel.

Jackson shifts his attention again to the maze of metal before him – the only thing around to really concentrate on. He frowns as he studies it, slipping the rock into his pocket, wondering...well, wondering what the hell it is. He takes a long few minutes to study the twists and turns of the metal, noting first that it is indeed in the general location of the castle that he's been staring at for hours and hours. And then that the great outer perimeter of the circle takes the form of the general shape of the castle, from what he can discern.

Slowly, Jackson's mouth pulls into a smile as he realizes that this isn't a maze at all.

It's a cage.

A cage with nothing in it. And if there's something that the Atalaxians have built here that they're either trying to keep in, or protect themselves from? Well. That's something he wants to know more about, isn't it?

Eager for the first time in days to have something to do, a problem to work on, Jackson strides forward.

With his long legs and magic pulsing through his veins, Jackson crosses the Land of Darkness at a pace faster than most people can run. It only takes him about fifteen minutes to reach the first set of iron bars that align with the outer rim of the castle. When he gets there, Jackson frowns, taking the iron in his hands.

Because upclose he realizes that this enclosure is much less impressive than it looks from afar. Jackson shakes the bars and finds that, absurdly, they move – not rigorously rooted in the ground or anchored to each other. He huffs a bit in derision, thinking that whoever made this cage did quick or lazy work with it, and that if he had been in charge –

But Jackson wipes the thought away. He's not in the business of making cages, is he? No, he grew up in a cage – a mental one, if not physical. And the realization of that confined upbringing over the past nine months does not make him very fond of any attempts to keep free things bound.

He snarls lightly and takes the bars in his hands, calling on his magic and pulling the metal hard to the side. The bars bend... almost too easily.

"Honestly," Jackson murmurs, glancing at the bent bars as he steps through them. "Whoever made these could have at least tried."

But he puts the thought aside and moves forward through the maze. Of course, he doesn't bother to try to find his way through or around the maze of cages. Instead he just moves forward, just casually calling on his magic and pulling the bars apart every time he comes to a new fence, as easy as pushing a little branch aside while walking through the forest.

About halfway through the maze of cages something hits Jackson's nose and his head spins to the left, his eyes immediately finding a small, dirty patch of white cloth in the distance. He sniffs again and then turns, moving faster now through the cages, heading directly for it. Because he's sure – absolutely sure – that it smells like her.

Ariel. She's been here – within the past few days, at least, she's been here.

Jackson's heart begins to pound as the pile of dirty white cloth comes into sight because – what on earth is that? That's not... that's not....it couldn't be a dress, could it?

But as he gets closer, pushing through fence after fence, Jackson's fears subside as he realizes that it's certainly not her. That it is, instead, a big pile of bedding.

Jackson comes to the final fence and leans against it, frowning down at the dirty duvet and collection of pillows resting there. Because...what the hell?

Why is this...here, when the rest of the cages are entirely empty? And why on earth does it smell like his mate?

Jackson sighs, confused and frustrated, and turns his back to the cage, shoving his hands deep into his pockets as he leans against the bars and stares down at the ground. Because he just doesn't get it – why the hell does this elaborate system of cages exist? And why are they empty, except for a whole bunch of blankets that just smell like Ariel?

Is he just...wasting his time here? Should he –

A gasp sounds out behind Jackson that makes him freeze. Because...he could swear...

“Jackson?”

He turns immediately, his hands grasping the iron bars, and stares in shock at the pile of bedding piled in the dirt of this wasteland. Or, more specifically, at the beautiful girl now seated in its center.

Jackson's breath heaves from his lungs in a single shocked huff.

Ariel stares back at him, her eyes wide, her mouth open in a shocked “o.”

“No, Jesse!” Midnight laughs, stumbling forward outside of her yurt and grabbing his shadow panther right out of the air, making it dissolve away to smoke and reeling it into herself. Jesse gasps as he loses control of it, letting it pass into Midnight's capable hands. “Why do you keep making animal shapes? You don't need to – that's a crutch. It's just a shadow – the edges are the only things that matter. The edges are the only things that exist.”

Jesse scowls and frowns at his little mate as she very capably releases shadows from her own skin, sending them out in all directions, formless and yet powerful. “Well why can’t I make animal shapes?” he asks, crossing his arms. “If it helps me? And I like it? And it’s cool?”

“Because then you’re limiting them, mentally,” Midnight says, tapping her temple as she sends the shadows streaking for him. Everywhere they touch Jesse the shadows buzz dangerously and he shudders, realizing that Midnight is of course obliging the shadows to go easy on him. Should she wish it, they could cut or burn or slice.

“Can you...help me understand that?” Jesse asks with a sigh, impressed with her power and control but still not getting it.

“If you limit them to animals,” Midnight says, pulling the shadows back and making a panther like Jesse usually favors – though, predictably, her panther is more detailed and refined than his ever are. “Then you’re limited to what you think animals can do.

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A panther can bite and scratch, so his dangerous parts are his teeth and his claws.” She shrugs. “If you just let the whole shadow be a weapon...then all of the shadow is a weapon.”

Jesse sighs, pulling the shadow back from her and letting it take a nebulous shape, shifting and ephemeral. “I still think the panthers are cooler.”

“Power is cooler,” Midnight says, a bit cold, and he turns his head to her. “Control is cooler. The better weapon is cooler.” “Midnight,” Jesse says, quietly studying her. “Against whom have you ever had to use a weapon?”

She shrugs. “When I have to, I’ll be ready.”

Another chill passes through Jesse.

But suddenly, Midnight snaps her head to the side and then tilts her ear up, as if listening.

“What’s going on?” Jesse asks, stepping towards her. She holds a hand out towards him, begging him to stop, and he does.

When Midnight moves again, her eyes narrowing on Jesse. “I have to go somewhere. You stay here.”

“No way!”

“Jesse,” Midnight growls, stepping towards him, her eyes going dark. “I have a job to do.”

“What job!?”

“My job,” she snarls. But when Jesse doesn’t back off, she sighs and gestures out into the night. “Darkness has sensed an intruder. He wants me to check on it for him.”

Jesse’s eyes fly wide. “Fine, but I’m coming with you.”

“You’re staying here! In this yurt!”

“Midnight,” Jesse says, leaning far forward so their eyes are even, his voice low and dangerous. “If you leave me here alone here in the tent, I’m going to burn it to the ground.”

“Jesse, no!” Midnight gasps, pressing her hands to her heart.

“I mean it,” he says, shaking his head. “Those are your choices. Take me with you, or no more house.”

She glares at him, hard, and then scowls and reaches for his hand. “Fine. But don’t interfere, or I’ll let him smite you.”

Jesse squeezes her hand and makes no promises as Midnight vanishes them away.

“Jackson!” I shout, scrambling to my feet and stumbling towards him. Jacks – I’ve only been away for a week, but he looks so different and so hot –

He has about three days’ worth of beard on his face, and he’s slimmer than he was – not that he was ever fat, just big. And now he’s still by no means small but instead lean and muscled, like a winter wolf.

“Ari!” he gasps, my name choked on his shocked lips.

He reaches for me through the bars and I throw myself against them, pressing as much of my body to my mate’s as I can as I burst into tears.

“Oh my god, Ariel,” Jackson whispers, wrapping his arms around me as best as he can and holding me close. I groan, pressing my face to his chest, taking in breath after breath of his wonderful scent.

“Jacks, I missed you,” I murmur, rubbing my face against him, my wolf howling in my soul as she dashes across the bridge of our bond and hurling herself against his wolf, pressing her body frantically all along his length. His wolf snarls with possessive joy, rubbing his

face against her, pawing at her and trying to tuck her beneath him, though she keeps wriggling out of his way.

“Fuck, Ariel,” Jackson whispers, trembling a little in shock and relief. “I’ve missed you so much – I’m so sorry – ”

“Sorry,” I say, lifting my face and sniffing hard, even as tears continue to fall from my eyes. “Why are you sorry.”

“Because I let them take you,” he murmurs, sticking an arm through the bar and wiping the tears from my face with his calloused thumb. “I’m so stupid -”

“Jacks,” I say, scowling a little and pushing back. “Don’t be ridiculous – they’d been planning that capture for months – for years – ”

“I still should have – ”

“Jackson McClintock,” I snarl, pushing fully away but wrapping handfuls of his shirt in my hands, desperate to keep hold of him. “If you blame yourself for one more second, I’m going to punch you -”

His face bursts into his wonderful smile as he laughs at me – at my fury and my possessive love. I moan at the sight of it, loving him entirely, and stumble forward, wanting to be close again.

“No, Ariel, step back -” he says, laughing again and taking a step away that makes me clang into the bars. “Geeze, are you okay? Be careful, Ariel -”

“Jacks,” I groan, reaching for him, “come back!”

“Just step away for a second – I can bend the bars – ”

My eyes fly open as I stare at him. “You can?”

“Yeah, they’re like...they’re not very strong,” he shrugs. “Cheap materials.”

I raise my eyebrow at him. “Cheap materials, or super-human strength?”

He smiles at me and gives a slightly smug one-shouldered shrug that...

...well, it puts him at serious risk of me tearing all his clothes off.

“Go on, Tiny, give me some space,” he murmurs, laughing a little and waving a hand at me as he studies the bars, clearly deciding where to apply his strength.

“No, Jacks,” I say, holding my hand out to him. “Um...maybe don’t.”

“What?” he asks, going still.

“Is that...is that how you got here?” I whisper, shaking my head and then trying to peer around him towards the rest of the cages. “Did you come from outside the fence and force your way in?”

“Yeah,” he says, still frowning at me and dismissing the point. “But why don’t you -“

“Jackson,” I interrupt, shaking my head at him. “How did you...how did you get here? To the Land of Darkness?”

He focuses on me again and huffs a frustrated sigh, seeing that we’re not going to get anywhere towards his questions until he answers mine first. Then he pulls something from his pocket and holds it out to me. “This showed up in my tent,” he says as I peer at the small, rectangular rock. “I – can we talk about the details later? It’s kind of weird. I don’t know who left it there, but... I think it allowed me to shift here, like you can do.”

“It must be a talisman,” I murmur, studying it. And then my eyes go wide as I dart my gaze up to Jackson’s face, my wolf suddenly yelping and skittering away from his.

“What?” Jackson asks, going still. “No, come back...” he murmurs, frowning, his wolf moving after mine.