

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 521

“Wait, wait,” I breathe, holding out a hand to him even as I shift my gaze inward to my wolf and to his, studying them. ” Gabriel – he’s got a talisman too that allows him to come here. But to get it he had to...”

My words fade as I study Jackson’s wolf for any sign of corruption. For that oil, or a dark light in his eyes, or...anything. But Jacksons’ big dark wolf just stands very still, his head cocked to the side, staring at my little rose-gold one. Slowly she moves forward and sniffs at him.

I think he’s okay, she says, anxious.

“He had to what?” Jackson asks, hesitant.

I refocus my eyes on Jacks as my wolf again moves forward to Jackson’s wolf’s side. “He had to sell himself to Darkness, which corrupted his soul. I – it’s very bad, Jackson. He’s...horrible now.”

Jackson snarls and steps close to me again. “This man. Is he your mate?”

I exhale a long and slow breath, keeping my eyes steady on his. “He is, Jacks.”

Jackson snarls down into my face, though I don’t budge an inch, completely unafraid. Because even if fear and anger ripple through him at that confirmation, I know that none of this is for me. For my grandmother, perhaps – but not for me.

“Hey,” I whisper, reaching a hand up and cupping his cheek in my palm. “This one? This stupid mate? I hate him.”

Jackson stares at me for a long moment before a laugh pulses through him. “Seriously?”

I nod vigorously. “He sucks, Jacks. He’s really mean, and he murdered his cousin tonight, and he punched me earlier -” Jackson stands up straight, his eyes flaring. “He punched you?”

I smirk a little, turning my face to show him my bruised jaw. “The regicide is okay, but the punching is where you draw the line?”

He snarls, deep and true, as he leans close to me and wraps his hands around the bars. “Come on, we’re getting you out of here, and then I’m coming back to kill him.”

“Jacks,” I say, a little frantic, my hands covering his on the bars. At least, as much as they can. “Not – not yet.”

He whips his head up to look at me, again shocked. "What are you talking about? We have to go, Ariel!"

"No, please," I beg, my wolf howling her desperation so he can see how deeply we're feeling it. "I just – there's so much more happening, Jackson. Can we just take a minute, and think about it, before we go tearing this cage apart and make our escape?"

"What else could we possibly want to do, Ariel?" Jackson asks, bending forward to lean against the cage, to bring his face closer to mine. "Than get you the fuck out of here?"

I bite my lip and shrug. "Um...destroy Atalaxia and end the war?"

Jackson just stares at me for a moment like I'm insane. Then he shakes his head, once, hard. "Nope. Not our job. I'm getting you out of here."

He again tightens his hands on the iron and I smack at them. "It is my job! It is – these are my people and my nation that are being threatened by Atalaxia!"

"And my mate that they've got in a cage!"

"Please, Jacks," I beg, shaking my head at him too. "Please, let me just... tell you everything. And then we'll decide."

He sighs and hangs his head. "You are...killing me, tiny."

"I know, baby," I whisper, reaching up and again cupping his cheek in my hand. He sighs and leans his face against my hand, filling my heart with joy. "That's...also my job."

Jackson huffs a laugh and then glances around. "Do we have time? Is anyone coming here?"

"I don't think so," I say, shaking my head. "They're really busy tonight trying to solve a murder even though everyone already knows who did it."

Jackson raises an eyebrow at that but lets it pass. "If anything weird happens, Ariel," he says, his voice low and serious. "I'm ripping these bars apart and taking you out of here. Okay?"

"Okay," I say, agreeing to these terms.

"Okay," he sighs, sinking down to the ground and indicating that I should do the same so that we can talk. I grin as I do as I'm told, settling down across from my mate and beaming at him through the bars of my cage. "I hate this a lot."

"Yes, but I love you for listening to me," I say, reaching forward and taking his hands. "Amongst a thousand other things."

Jackson sighs and raises one of my hands to his mouth, kissing it. And I begin to tell him everything.

The telling takes a long, long time, and the moons in the Land of Darkness crest all the way over the sky as I tell Jackson about Elias and Pippa, and Gabriel and his poor corrupted wolf, and the life of Atalaxian women, and of Faiza, and the cyanide, and Ben being here, and everything that happened tonight.

Jackson holds my hand in his nearly the whole time, staring at my palm as he listens, tracing over its lines with one of his fingers. He interrupts only a few times when he needs more information or I've skipped something over, but mostly my sweetheart mate just lets me talk and listens intently. As he always does, taking me quite seriously, considering my thoughts and observations and opinions. As I go, our wolves curl up together, his making a neat circle completely around mine. She stretches her nose over his paw, completely content.

"So..." I say at the end, studying the wide set of my mate's shoulders, the top of his dark head. "What do you think about all of that?"

He takes a moment before lifting his lovely sapphire eyes to mine. "I can't say I'm thrilled about the sudden appearance of a handsome new mate."

"Handsome new murderous mate with very anti-woman leanings. Honestly, Jacks, he's...not a threat to us. To our relationship." Jackson raises an eyebrow at me. "And yet you want to stay."

I sigh, moving closer to him, suddenly wishing desperately that Jackson would bend these bars so I could crawl though and curl up in his lap. "Jackson," I say, quite seriously. He looks into my eyes. "At the end of this? It's me and you."

He blinks once, I think shocked.

"I'm serious," I say, squeezing his hand, holding his gaze. "I've had time to think in here – time is the only thing I have –

and when I get home? You're the only mate I want. I don't want Gabriel – and I don't want Luca, okay? I just want you. Me and you and that's it forever."

Jackson swallows hard and I can see hope filling him.

I turn my head to the side, a little surprised by his silence. "Isn't that what you want too?"

Slowly he nods. "But...I don't want to hold you to it, Ari. If that's not the destiny your grandmother wrote for you."

"Yeah well," I sigh, frustrated. "Granny and I need to have a chat. But what she said was that she wanted me to have my mate's marks – not that she wanted me to live in some kind of bizarre foursome. And that's why I don't want to run right now, Jacks – because..."

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I bite my lip. “I think I need to explore the magical connection between me and Gabriel. I think that my grandmother gave this link not because she thinks he’s some great match for me – but because his magic can lend something to mine.”

Jackson sighs and looks away. “It would be easier if he were ugly.”

I laugh a little, squeezing his hand. “Nobody’s as pretty as you.”

Jackson raises his head and an eyebrow along with it. “I’m not sure I’m precisely pretty.”

“You’re very pretty.”

“Luca’s pretty,” Jackson murmurs, looking away and – I suspect – hiding a blush. “I’m...good looking.”

“You’re super hot, Jacks” I say, wrinkling my nose at him. “And rugged. And very sexy.”

Jackson tries to hide his smile and blushes a lovely raspberry red, making me laugh.

“Did you know Faiza just refers to you singularly as ‘the hot one?’”

“Stop, no she doesn’t.”

“She does!” I say, laughing. “Just like all the tabloids. I mean come on, Jacks, you’re gorgeous.” I grin at my mate and tug on his hand again. “So, Gabriel’s lesser attractiveness aside, what are your other hesitations?”

“Well, I’m not thrilled about you still not having my mark,” he says, sighing and scowling at me a bit, which just makes him... a thousand times hotter. I bite my lip, looking him up and down, tempted to throw my national duty to the wind and just let him take me out of here. And immediately to bed.

“Oh, I’ll get that mark soon enough,” I sigh, knowing that I have to be good. For the sake of the nation.

“Do you want me to just...give you the mark now? Through the stupid bars?”

I wrinkle my nose and shake my head, even as my wolf leaps to her feet and turns in frantic circles, yipping her approval of the idea. “You’d change my scent and then the ruse would be up.”

“But you’d have my magic,” he points out, tilting his head. “Which means you could blow the whole place up. And then there would be no need for a ruse.”

I grin at him. “There are people I like in there. Benny and Pippa and Elias.’

“Fine, fine,” he says, leaning back on one hand as he keeps the other firmly in mine. “Then on to the true thing that’s worrying me. You could die, Ariel,” he says, holding my gaze quite seriously. “If this Gabriel is as unpredictable and power- hungry and violent as you say he is? He could kill you, and then...the world would lose its flame. Its entire reason for being.”

My heart clenches a little at the centrality to which Jackson holds me, the idea that he thinks the universe would come to a grinding halt without me. And while I think that’s ridiculous – obviously, I can’t be that important – I see the true meaning beneath his words.

That he loves me, desperately. And he wants me to live a long full life at his side.

“I’m going to make it, Jacks,” I whisper. “One...one more day, and then we’ll go. Okay?”

Slowly, he shakes his head, hating it. Hating that he’s going to give me this bargain – that we both know he will, because I’ve asked it. “All of my instincts are telling me to take you now. To just throw you over my shoulder like I did in that Examination and carry you home, Ariel.”

I smile softly at him. “And you can do that...tomorrow.”

He groans, pulling his hand from mine for the first time in hours and burying his face against his palm. “You’re torture.”

“And you’re an angel,” I whisper, meaning it, beaming at him.

“All right, tiny demon,” he says, dropping his hand and pretending to glare at me. “What’s your big plan?”

I bite my lip and straighten up, pressing myself against the bars. “Okay, yes, help me out with this.” And then I begin, and my mate and I stay up until dawn fine-tuning a plan to end this war and get us all out alive.

Jackson kisses me softly through the bars of my little Atalaxian cage. I lean my full weight against them, letting my hand slip up over Jackson’s stubbled cheek and then back into his hair.

He pulls away, snarling a little, both for want of me and, well-

“I hate these fucking bars,” he growls, glancing around at them even as he wraps an arm around my waist as best he can, pulling me tight against him. “This was not the reunion I had in mind.”

I smile at him. “Well, for the reunion, can we keep the beard?”

He raises his eyebrows at me in surprise. “You like it?”

My smile deepens. “You’re all rugged and rough, like you were when we first met and you didn’t know how to get your hair cut -”

A laugh bursts from him and he tightens his arm. “You were a fan of that?”

“I was a fan of it once you stopped trying to murder me and I realized how sweet you were beneath,” I say, grinning at him fully now, unable to help it. “Rough exterior, sweetheart inside. Gorgeous through and through. Come on, how was I supposed to resist?”

He nudges his nose against mine. “Yeah, see, this is why I want to get you out of here now. Before you look more deeply at the mate who currently wants to murder you and realize how sweet he is beneath.”

“He doesn’t want to murder me, he just wants to corrupt my wolf and enslave me to darkness so that he can use my powers to destroy my homeland,” I say, giving Jacks my sunniest smile.

Jacks groans, tilting his head back. “Oh, god. I can’t believe I’m letting you go back.”

“For a couple of hours,” I say, laughing at him in turn. “Then its me and you, forever. Right?”

He sighs and lifts his head again. “Right.”

“Okay, now juice me up,” I say, putting my hand flat on his neck for contact.

He laughs at my phrasing – both of us thinking of Jesse, I know – and does as I say, filling me with his power and making me feel ridiculously awake and sunny after spending all night awake and scheming.

I shiver all over as the power rushes into me and I drop my hand when I’ve had enough, though I stand close. “You’re still good with your magic and energy levels?” I ask quietly. “Even after not sleeping and eating all week?” My eyes slip over his slimmer form, honestly surprised at how much weight he’s lost. I mean, I know that Jackson told me that his magic is intimately tied to his body, but the evidence I have of it here really proves that point.

“It’s not ideal,” he says with a shrug. “But I’ve still got plenty. It’s not anything you need to worry about.”

“Okay.” I say, sighing and stepping away. “Be safe. I’ll be back in a little bit and then I’ll call to you, right?” I tap my temple, indicating how he’ll hear it.

“See you soon, Ariel. I love you.”

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“I love you too, Jacks,” I say, my voice nearly a whisper. And then, beaming, I tumble myself backwards through the darkness and back into Atalaxia.

Jesse and Midnight lay flat on their stomachs atop the hill, looking down at the rather remarkable network of cages down below. As Midnight continues to peer closely at the blobby blur at the center of the network that may or may not be people – they can’t quite tell at this distance – Jesse groans and closes his eyes, resting his head against his folded arms. “Shhh,” Midnight says, shoving at his shoulder with the tips of her fingertips. “I’m watching.”

“And does my groan of agonized boredom interfere with your sight?” Jesse mutters, frustrated.

“Oh, just be quiet and let me concentrate.”

Jesse does as he’s bid, only grumbling a little. Because they’ve been here for hours, and while the blob at the center has shifted a couple of times, there’s no way to really know if it’s people or...something else. Either way, it seems thoroughly encaged, so Jesse is not precisely sure why it matters.

Midnight, however, refuses to vanish them back to the yurt and have done with it.

“Let’s just go closer,” Jesse mutters.

“No!” Midnight hisses. “We must stay unseen. Darkness doesn’t want anyone to know about me. I’m his super spy. bit is preening.

.” The last

“Then just call him up and tell him what you’ve found,” Jesse sighs. “Or, better yet, never talk to him again and zip us back to Moon Valley.”

“You’re being a brat, Jesse,” Midnight snaps. “You begged to come along and now you won’t even let me do my job.”

“It’s not a job,” he snaps back, lifting his head to glare at her. “You’re paid in what, one yurt he got you twelve years ago and a lifetime supply of dark cabbage?”

She glares at him and then turns her eyes back to the cage. When she gasps, Jesse sits up, turning back to the problem at hand. “Look,” Midnight whispers, pointing. “It’s moving.”

Jesse realizes that it’s true, narrowing his eyes, trying to see, frustrated at the distance that Midnight made them keep for the sake of anonymity. After all, he’s very curious why there are these cages in the Land of Darkness that correlate, according to Midnight’s report, very closely with the location of the Atalaxian castle.

As Jesse and Midnight watch, the colors at the center of the cage shift and then separate. His eyes widen as it becomes very, very clear that one truly is a figure. And that it’s passing through the bars of the cage. “How is it doing that,” Jesse murmurs, leaning closer as if that’s going to help.

“Did you see the other one?” Midnight whispers, sounding anxious. “It disappeared.”

Jesse snaps his eyes back to the color within the cage and nods when he sees that there’s only white left. “Shit,” he whispers. “What...who is it?”

“I don’t know,” Midnight says, definite. “But we have to tell Darkness – “

Jesse’s hand snaps out and grabs her wrist, making her eyes fly wide. “No, don’t tell him.”

“Why not!?”

“Because!” Jesse says, searching his mind for a good reason, even though he knows the truth is that he just doesn’t want Darkness to have any information – at all – that could help him with anything.

“Darkness...wouldn’t want an incomplete report! You have to wait until you know more about who that is, coming towards us.”

Midnight gasps, turning towards the figure who is now outside of the cages – and moving incredibly fast. “Is he...coming towards us?”

Jesse frowns, not answering, because...

God, but there’s something familiar about the way that person moves...

“Jesse?” Midnight says, reaching for him, curling her fingers around his arm. “Is he coming for us? Do you...do you think he knows we’re here?”

But Jesse doesn't answer, instead scrambling to his feet. "Jacks!" he shouts, beginning to sprint down the hill, waving his arms, desperate for his friend to see. Because it all snapped together in an instant – the size and speed of the figure as he indeed came closer to them, though not with any real intent in the way that Midnight is thinking. But he's sure – there's only one person that big who can move that fast.

"Jesse!" Midnight shrieks, true fear in her voice as Jesse continues to scramble down the hill.

Jesse ignores her, shouting Jackson's name again as the figure goes still and then turns towards him.

Midnight, snarling, suddenly appears before Jesse in his path. "You stop," she growls, a hand held out towards him. "You stop right now –"

Jesse just gives her a look like she's insane and dodges around her, picking up speed as Jackson calls out his name and starts to run for him in turn. Laughing, Jesse pounds towards his friend. Both of them move swiftly until Jesse can pick out Jackson's features, see his shocked and smiling face. Jesse grins, thrilled –

When suddenly a huge wolf appears between them, hair shaggy and black, eyes bright and red as a ruby. She bares her snarling teeth at Jackson and slowly starts to prowl towards him, a warning in every step.

Jackson's smile is wiped from his face as he looks at the wolf in shock for half a second and then steps towards it, his own teeth bared in challenge.

"Midnight, don't!" Jesse gasps, dashing forward and grabbing at the ruff of fur rising on her hackles just as Jackson shifts into his own wolf, which is somehow even bigger and more terrifying than Midnight's.

"Fuck!" Jesse bites out, hauling hard at Midnight's fur and making her skitter a step back as Jackson advances. Before Jacks can do more than snap his fangs at Midnight, though, Jesse is between them, holding a palm out to each. "Stop! Stop it, both of you!"

Midnight and Jackson pause, both staring at him.

"Jacks!" Jesse barks out, turning to glare at his friend. "She's my fucking mate, okay!? She's just freaked out! If you shift back, she'll get the picture that no one's going to fight anyone and we're all just going to be cool!" He whips his head back to the terrifying she-wolf on his right. "Right, Midnight!?"

Midnight just snarls. Jesse rolls his eyes and looks back at Jackson just as his cousin's mate shifts back to his human form, staring between Jesse and the dark wolf.

"That's your mate?" he asks, pointing one finger at the wolf.

“Oh!”

Jesse spins at the sound of the girlish voice, turning to see that she has indeed shifted back into her human form. He looks down at his tiny, adorable, weird, ragged mate, standing with her hands on her hips. Jesse blinks at her, kind of...in disbelief that a girl who looks so innocent can be that terrifying in her wolf form.

“Oh!” Midnight says again, laughing a little. “I’m sorry – I know you! You’re the big boy! Your Ariel’s mate!” She waves hello. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“You didn’t...scare me...” Jackson murmurs, frowning at her. “I scared you.”

“No, I scared you,” Midnight sighs, beaming at Jacks. “It’s nice to meet me!”

Jackson just shifts his eyes back to Jesse. “What...is happening?”

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“It’s...a long story, man,” Jesse says, striding forward with a grin and patting him on his shoulder. “Good to see you, though! Man, you got really skinny. What happened?”

Jackson just continues to stare at Jesse for a moment before he shakes himself and gathers the Duke into a big hug. Jesse laughs and hugs his best friend right back.

“I’m so glad you’re okay,” Jackson murmurs, tucking his head next to Jesse’s. “Ariel is going to be too.” “Wait,” Jesse says, pulling back and frowning at the taller Alpha. “Where is Ariel, if she’s not with you?”

“Oh, man,” Jackson says, exhaling slowly and running a hand through his hair. “We’ve got a lot to catch you up on, kid.”

“Wait till you hear what I have to tell you,” Jesse says, grinning at his friend before launching into a story about a Princess and a sparkly blue ghost that makes Jackson’s jaw drop.

I land back in my bed happier than I’ve ever been in Atalaxia. Because I have a plan now, and my big sweet mate waiting for me on the other side. Yes, by this time tomorrow hopefully we’ll all be out of this and I’ll be on my way home.

Humming, I hope out of bed and move into the bathroom to take a shower, eager to get the smell of Jackson off of me and hide all my clothes deep in the hamper so that no one knows where I’ve been all night.

When Pippa comes in about an hour later with my breakfast tray, I wave merrily to her. She stops a bit in her tracks and I scold myself, remembering that I have to be Ariel of last night, who was confused and hopeless and scared.

“Did you sleep?” Pippa asks, pushing the door shut as I move to the little breakfast table by the door.

I shrug, implying that I did not. Which is true! “I’m okay. How are you?” I look at her as she pours my coffee, truly worried when I note the exhaustion of her features, the worried lines of her face.

“It’s hard, Ariel,” Pippa says on a heavy sigh. “Elias and I...don’t know what to do.”

We spend the morning together, then, with Pippa spilling out her heart and her worries to me. I do my very best to pay attention, to listen as intently as Jackson does to me, but the whole time I have to admit that my mind is whirring on my plan. How am I going to get clothing suitable for a journey home? My period should end today – thank god – but do I need to pack any supplies? In what will I pack them?

“Well, I should get back,” Pippa sighs a little later, standing and smoothing her hands down over her dress as she glances towards the door. I grimace inwardly at myself, feeling incredibly guilty for not truly listening and being a good friend. “Is there anything that you need today?”

“Um...” I say, biting my lip. “Do you think you could...send Gabriel to me? At some point this afternoon?”

She snaps her head back to me. “Whatever for?”

I shrug. “He’s my mate. We should...talk.”

“Ariel...” Pippa breathes, leaning forward and shaking her head at me. “I do... I do not think that is a good plan. Alone? With Gabriel? Anything could happen.”

“Please, Pippa,” I whisper. “Just...trust me. This is something I have to do.”

Pippa groans a little and looks at me with that same mix of hesitance and wonder that Jackson gives me when he suspects that I might be mildly insane. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” I say, giving a steady nod. “Sometime this afternoon, perhaps?”

She heaves a heavy sigh and shakes her head. “All right. But Elias and I will be right in our room if you need us during that meeting, okay?” She points towards the bell pull in the corner of the room, reminding me that one tug will send them running for me.

And I smile back at her, thinking that I’m very well aware of that.

In fact, that I'm depending on it.

"Hello, mate."

Gabriel's voice is low and curious as he comes into my room a few hours later. He quietly presses the door shut behind him, leaning back against it.

I exhale, slow and steady, and get to my feet, dipping my hands into the convenient pockets of the pinafore apron that I'm wearing over my simple blue dress. "Hello, Gabriel."

Gabriel smirks as he crosses the room to me. "Why are you dressed like a servant?"

I look down at myself and shrug. "It's practical. And more comfortable than those stupid princess corsets you make me wear."

A finger curled beneath my chin obliges me to raise my face to his again. "You look beautiful in those corsets. Not that you don't look nice in this as well. yes," he says, letting his eyes drift down over me. "I find that I...like you subservient. And calling me to your room."

I drop my eyes and let my lashes drift down, playing my role even as my mind spins. It's late – later than I'd hoped it would be, closer to night than afternoon. Shit. Is Jackson going to be worried about me, wondering why I'm not calling to him to continue our plan?

"I find," I say quietly, even as my mind continues to panic a bit. "That I'm... readier now, than I was before, to take a more subservient role."

"And what has convinced you of that, Princess?" Gabriel asks, his tone suspicious.

I raise my eyes again to him and then wave my hand at the breakfast table, at which I've prepared some wine and a snack of some cured meats and cheese. "Shall we have a nice conversation? Maybe come to an understanding?"

He smirks at me. "And why on earth would I agree to negotiate with you? I have you completely under my thumb."

I straighten my shoulders a little, pretending that it takes a bit of courage to do so. "You wish me docile, don't you, Gabriel? I can continue to make this hard or..." I shrug. "It could be pleasant."

Gabriel smirks at me like a man indulging a child and then moves to the table, lounging in his chair. Inwardly I roll my eyes at this smug prince who thinks he is completely in charge. I sit as well and take one of the wine glasses, lifting it towards him. "To your health, Prince."

He smirks at me. "I don't drink from glasses I haven't prepared for myself. Or haven't you heard that there is someone on the loose, killing Princes?"

I stare at him a little for a moment, letting him wonder at my motives, and then I shrug and take a sip of the wine. “The death of the Crown Prince seems to be in your favor, Alpha. And it puts me in a much more interesting position.”

“Oh, really?” he asks, a bit dry. “How so?”

“You think you know me,” I snap, putting my wine back down on the table, pretending an anger I don’t feel. “But have you not considered that I have also long been second in line to the throne? And that I, too, might have wanted it for myself?”

Gabriel raises his eyebrow at me. “What are you saying, Princess?”

“I’m saying that I want this war done,” I snap, slapping my hand on the table and pretending to be the foolish girl he expects me to be, playing at negotiation with a prince. “And if you were to become King, and to end it the war...” I shrug. “I might enjoy being Queen of a peaceful nation. Even if it were Atalaxia.”

He raises his eyebrow at me. “So that’s your offer? Become King, end the war, and you’ll rule peacefully at my side? Or, not precisely at my side.” He smirks. “At my foot, perhaps.”

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I raise my chin. “I can live with that. And I’ll give you children. Beautiful ones.” I smirk a little too. “Powerful ones.”

Gabriel leans across the table towards me, studying my face. “Our children will rule the world, Ariel, if you would just trust me to guide your life. To guide theirs as well.”

My breath hitches and I pretend it’s temptation, letting my eyes move across his face, down to his lips.

“Come,” he says, standing and reaching a hand out for me. “It’s a deal. We’ll seal it with a kiss.”

I pretend to hesitate and then stand, looking up into his face. “You won’t hurt me?”

“Oh, I didn’t promise that,” he murmurs, slipping an arm around my waist and pulling me tight against him. “But I won’t hurt you...much. And you will learn to like the pain.”

He lowers his face towards me but I lean away, turning my face aside. "Please," I beg, pressing my eyes shut, my right hand dipping again into the pocket of my apron. "I – I am not used to such a willful Alpha..."

"Oh, and you expect me to believe that," he says, low and sardonic, his left hand raising to brush at Luca's mark on my neck. "With such a passionate, messy mark as this."

I turn my head to look up at him with big doe eyes. "My other mates are weak-willed. They follow my own lead, do as I say," I whisper. In my soul, my wolf creeps close to the abyss between my soul and Gabriel's – the place where the bond would be. She taps her feet, anxious and curious, urging Gabriel's wolf to appear.

"Nothing like me?" Gabriel asks, smug, a growl forming in his throat as his wolf appears at the edge of his soul, ready to pounce on mine the moment I accept the bond.

"Nothing..." I whisper, truth in every word as I raise my trembling hand towards his face. "Nothing like you."

My wolf holds out her nose to Gabriel's dark wolf, trembling a little at the sight of him. Then, as we planned, she lays down, laying herself flat, submitting. Eager, Gabriel's wolf pounces and snarls at the edge of Gabriel's soul, frenzied with want of her.

I lift my hand as if in awe and slowly brush my fingertips over Gabriel's lush lower lip, my eyes moving to it as well.

"Are you hungry for me, Gabriel?" I whisper, my heart pounding, my breath coming short.

"I am, little mate," he snarls. "Submit to me. Accept the bond."

And then, as I hoped he would, Gabriel licks that lower lip just once in preparation to kiss me.

But then he flinches back, surprised at the slightly bitter taste on his lower lip.

And I smile.

Because cyanide works fast.

Gabriel's breath hitches and he stands straight as I roughly push myself away from him, taking a step back, wiping my cyanide -coated fingertips against the fabric of the apron. "Thanks for providing me a room with so many beauty supplies," I say, quite casual, as his breath starts to come short. "The petroleum jelly is very useful for chapped lips and..." I wave my fingertips at him. "Keeping poisons from entering through the skin."

"You bitch," he rasps, stumbling back, oxygen already starting to fail him. "Have – have you killed me?"

“Not yet,” I sigh, crossing my arms over my chest as I watch him fall to the floor. “I just gave you a little bit of cyanide. Because I still have questions. Bye bye for now!” I wave to him as his eyes flutter shut and he begins to moan in pain and confusion, a hand going to his chest, where he’s likely started having heart palpitations.

I watch him for a moment, considering my dosage and the effects, monitoring him closely. But when I’m pretty sure that I’ve gotten it right and that he’s in no physical state to grab and hurt me, I stride forward and sort through his pockets until I find the talisman there. I study it – just a little rectangular rock very similar to the one Jackson showed me last night, though black instead of grey. I sigh, putting the talisman in my pocket, taking my nearly unconscious mate’s hand and smiling down at him. “Let’s take a little trip to Darkness,” I say quietly. “Don’t worry, I’ve got a little nest all set up for you there.”

I pull on my inner power and tilt us both away to the cage. Gabriel moans, his eyes fluttering as he works hard to hold on to consciousness.

“It’s okay, baby,” I coo, patting his hand. “Let it go. I’ll take care of you.”

He snarls and I grin, but otherwise ignore him, sitting next to him and keeping his hand in mine.

Before I do anything else I shut my eyes and shout in my mind for Jacks, the signal we arranged earlier, urging him to come back. There’s no immediate response but I don’t worry about that, instead focusing on the man laying in front of me.

I shift my focus inward to my wolf. Is his wolf down? I ask, eager and interested.

Yes, she replies, prowling back and forth at the edge of my soul, peering to where his wolf is laying in a puddle of that oily substance, gasping for air, just his snout holding above that dark liquid. Pity fills me as I look at that poor abused wolf, but I force myself to turn away, knowing that pity isn’t going to get me anywhere right now.

Is he faking it? I ask, anxious, not wanting to take any risks on this point.

I don’t think so, my wolf murmurs in reply, still peering at him. I think... I think he’s taken down by the poison too. He was very weak to begin with.

I nod once and then stand, shaking my head at the prince for a moment. “Okay,” I say to him, even though I doubt he can hear. “I’ll be back...in a little bit.”

And then again I vanish away to my room and stride for the bell pull that connects to Pippa and Elias’s room, giving it a strong tug.

A heartbeat after I pull the bell a worried knock sounds at my door.

“Well, that is...way too fast,” I murmur, frowning.

I hesitate only a second before the knock comes again, alongside a shouted “Ariel!”

I gasp and dash for the door, yanking it open and grabbing Ben, pulling him inside.

“How the hell did you get here!?” I gasp, staring at him with wide eyes as I slam the door shut.

“Ariel,” he says, staring back at me, just as appalled. “The castle is...complete chaos. Half of our guards have been diverted to searching for this mystery murderer – I spent the entire night sneaking out of my room and trying to bribe people to find out which room was yours -”

“Why are they searching for the murderer?” I ask, my face twisted in confusion. “It’s very obviously Gabriel – ”

“Ariel!” Ben breathes, putting his hands on my shoulders and giving me a little shake. “When I say chaos I mean chaos – are you aware that the protective magic all over the castle has just fallen?”

I gasp, my eyes going wide. Because how the hell did I not think of that as a consequence!?

On one hand...this is very bad. Shit – shit! People are going to be looking everywhere for Gabriel.

But on the other hand...I whip my head to the side and stare hard at my comforter, the corner of which bursts into flame.

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Ben shrieks and dashes for it, jumping on the bed and quickly smothering the fire as I laugh and clap my hands, jumping up and down a few times. Ben snaps his gaze back to me, a growl on his voice. “Ariel, this is not the time to play pyromaniac princess. We need to come up with a plan! We need to -”

The door flies open, Pippa and Elias stumbling in. “Ariel!” Elias gasps.

But then he goes very, very still as he sees who is kneeling on my bed, a charred bit of fabric in his hands.

Pippa's eyes whip between the two men and I grimace a little, worried for her as she quietly pushes the door shut. "Um, everyone," I say quietly. "This is...Benny."

"Benjamin," Ben snaps, shooting me a glare. "Or, um, Ben. Ben Ternicki. I'm an...ambassador from Moon Valley..."

He finishes rather lamely as Pippa comes to stand next to Elias's side, her hand going immediately to her stomach. Then Ben goes very, very pale as he puts together the pieces. I mean, he would have seen them last night, but today...

Well, today, with the possessive gleam in Pippa's eyes...

It's very clear who the father of her child is.

"Okay," I say, my voice humming a bit with anxiety. "Um, so, this is weird, but it's about to get...weirder."

"What?" Ben and Elias say together, spinning their heads to me.

I can't help my grin at their synchronicity. "So, I kind of...did something..."

"Oh, Ariel," Ben groans, slipping off the bed and coming to stand by my side. "Ari, god damn it. What did you do?"

"Don't get mad, okay?" I say, turning towards Pippa and Elias now, my face pleading.

Pippa's eyes go wide as Elias's narrow. "What's going on?" he asks, stern.

"Um, just...come with me," I say, holding out my hands to everyone.

Elias groans but obeys, his eyes locking on Ben's as each of them hold my hand and Pippa takes Elias's.

I take a deep breath and then shift to the other world, where we all land together in the cage, Prince Gabriel collapsed in the nest of blankets at my feet, his breath faint.

Pippa shrieks, looking around at the other world as Elias shouts, falling to his knees at his brother's side.

"Holy shit, holy shit," Benny murmurs, staring between Gabriel and me. "Ariel! Did you...did you poison him!?"

"A little bit," I say, pinching my fingers together as I grimace first at Ben and then at Pippa and Elias when they turn their heads to stare at me in shock.

I give all three of the conscious people in the cage my best princess smile.

But I let it drop when all three just continue to stare at me, appalled.

“Oh, come on!” I huff, stomping my foot. “I only poisoned him a little bit!”

“I think it’s nice,” Jackson says, looking around the yurt.

“Thank you!” Midnight says, quite pleased, lounging back on her little bed and squeezing one of her new stuffie toys to her chest.

“It’s great for camping, but come on Jacks, this is not nice for a house – please don’t encourage her,” Jesse sighs, a little frustrated with his friend.

“Nicer than a lot of places I lived when I was growing up,” Jackson murmurs, reaching for another cookie on the plate and eating it in one bite. “Do you have anything else to eat?”

“We have cabbage!” Midnight eagerly volunteers, dashing for the kitchen.

“Great,” Jackson says, his eyebrows going eagerly up.

Jesse just rolls his eyes, because he did indeed forget that Jackson and Midnight are both members of the foundling club, and that in trying to have this discussion with them he was going to be sincerely outnumbered.

After a great deal of negotiation, Jesse convinced Midnight to vanish them back here to the yurt so that they could more comfortably fill each other in on the events of the past week. Talking her into that was easy, but persuading her not to tell Darkness that Jackson is here was much more difficult. In the end Midnight given in, but only when Jesse explained that Jackson – like her – was family.

Family, it seems, is a keyword that means a great deal to Midnight now.

“So, the cages are for Ariel?” Midnight asks, turning her head to look at Jackson with interest as she begins to slice the cabbage with a sharp new knife Juniper gave her. “I was wondering why they built them.”

“Yup,” Jackson says, looking at her seriously. “But can we save the cabbage for another time? You’ll have to take me back now. Ariel’s calling me back.”

Midnight looks at him with fascination. “How do you know that?”

“We can talk mind-to-mind,” Jackson murmurs, dusting off his hands and standing to his full height, his head brushing the roof of the yurt.

Midnight gasps and spins her head to Jesse, her face miserable with jealousy. “I want to talk mind-to-mind! That would be so much fun!”

Jackson frowns between Jesse and Midnight. “You guys can’t do that yet?”

“Don’t get her started,” Jesse mutters, looking down at the ground, guilty.

“He won’t accept the bond,” Midnight snaps out, pissed off. “He’s being rude and withholding.”

“Who taught you that word,” Jesse asks, lifting his eyes to her with a scowl.

“You did,” she bites back.

“Why won’t you accept the bond?” Jackson asks, his voice suspicious. “Is there something wrong with her?”

Midnight stares at Jackson, aghast at the suggestion, a hand pressed to her chest. “Rude. I am perfect.”

“She’s perfect,” Jesse agrees, waving a dismissive hand. “But her wolf is…”

“Corrupted?” Jackson asks, his head whipping back to stare at Midnight.

Jesse frowns at him. “How…did you know that?”

“Because she’s not the only one,” Jackson says, holding out a hand to the girl. “Come on, we’re taking you to see Ariel.” “Why?” Midnight asks, leaning away from him. “What can she do?”

“Probably nothing,” Jackson says with a shrug, his hand still out. “But she knows someone like you. Could be interesting to compare notes. Especially since he’s apparently been made horrible by his corruption, and you are still lovely.”

Midnight beams at this compliment, and Jesse smiles because he knows Jackson probably didn’t mean it to flatter her. No, he was probably just stating the facts as he sees them. Midnight eagerly drops her knife and moves to Jackson’s side as Jesse, too, gets to his feet.

“Can you take us back to the cages now?” Jackson asks, looking down at the girl.

“I can,” she says, giving an eager nod. “But first, can you pick me up?”

Jackson bursts out laughing as Jesse frowns at his mate. “Why do you want him to do that?”

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“Because I’d always see him doing it with Ariel!” Midnight says, laughing. “And it looked like fun!”

Jackson laughs again and nods towards the door of the tent. “Sure, little girl, I’ll pick you up. But come on, let’s go do it outside so you don’t hit your head.”

Grinning, Midnight slips her hand into Jackson’s as the pair head out into the darkness, Jesse on their heels.

When they’re free of the tent, Jackson crouches low, wrapping an arm tight around Midnight’s thighs and hoisting her high into the air so that she perches neatly on his elbow, her head high above his. Midnight laughs with delight, looking around eagerly from her new height as Jackson likewise laughs, pleased to see her so pleased.

“You never ask me to pick you up,” Jesse mutters, his wolf walking a jealous path back and forth in his soul as he comes to stand close to his mate and his friend.

“Yes, but you’re significantly more delicate,” Midnight says with a happy sigh, leaning forward to pat Jesse on the head. He scowls and shoves her hand away.

“All right, time’s wasting,” Jackson says, nodding up to Midnight. “To the cages?”

“To the cages!” she says, delighted, reaching a hand out for Jesse. And when Jesse – still scowling – petulantly reaches out to take her hand, Midnight vanishes them away.

“Okay, so,” I say, clapping my hands together and then turning for Pippa. “I need your help especially right now, Pips.”

Pippa looks at me with wide eyes. “What on earth am I going to do!?”

“You’re going to get the antidote!”

The three continue to just stare at me as Gabriel wheezes at our feet. I sigh, starting to get frustrated, needing them all to just get over their shock and on board with my plan.

“How...how do you know what the antidote is?” Elias asks, stepping towards me, incredulous. “Also, where on earth did you get poison!?”

“Where I got poison is not...currently relevant,” I say, waving a hand to dismiss the question. “And I learned about poisons at school!”

“I learned...embroidery at school...” Pippa whispers, looking again down at Gabriel, clearly shocked.

“Ariel is a very competent chemist,” Ben says in explanation, resting his fingertips against his temples in a probably-vain attempt to keep his sanity. “Especially in contexts such as this. If she

poisoned Gabriel, she probably knows precisely what she poisoned him with, and how much, and how to reverse the effects. Yes, Ari?"

I nod eagerly, because all of that is very true. "Yup, I can fix him! But Pippa, I need you to go to the doctor and request a cyanide kit."

She just stares at me, still shocked, so I grab her hand and look meaningfully between Ben and Elias. "I'll be back...in a few minutes!"

And then I use my dark powers to tilt back to Atalaxia, Pippa firmly by my side.

When we get there I move for the door, already starting to tell my friend what to say to the doctor to request the kit. But Pippa pulls hard on my hand, tugging me back and making me fall silent when she looks into my face.

"Is Gabriel going to die?" she asks, her voice tight. My brows raise because...this is not a woman who is scared for her childhood friend asking me. Quickly, Pippa shakes her head, her mouth a thin line. "Elias is next in line to the throne behind him, Ariel," she snaps. "And I do not want to be a Queen."

I step close to Pippa, looking her seriously in the eye. "I gave Gabriel a very small dose of cyanide," I say, fast and low. "If he gets the antidote quickly, he'll revive fast, though it will take him some time to recover to full health. If he does not get that antidote, he will die. So, if you do not want to be Queen, you need to help me with this."

She nods once, her eyes moving towards the door, and then back to me. She raises her chin, her jaw clenched.

And my heart drops because...I know what's coming next.

"That man," she says, her voice tight. "That...Ben. Is he...my Alpha's mate?"

I put a hand on her shoulder and nod once. "Yes, Pippa. He is."

She swallows hard, her eyes flicking back and forth as she processes the news. "Is he a good man?"

"He's the best of men," I whisper. "And like a brother to me."

Pippa exhales slowly and takes a moment to close her eyes, and bow her head, and tuck...whatever emotions she's having deep in her soul. Then, brisk and assured, Pippa nods once before she heads to the door. "I'll be back in this room in fifteen minutes. Please be here."

"I will," I promise her, watching as the proud woman moves to the door and deftly opens it, stepping out into a noisy hall that is as Ben indicated – more chaotic than I've ever seen it. "So,"

Ben says, his mouth turning down as he heaves an awkward shrug. “In the thousand times that I imagined meeting you ...it never went like this.”

Elias stays still for a moment before his shoulders twitch and he lifts his head to look Ben in the eyes. “You mean you never imagined introducing yourself to me in the Land of Darkness? Inside a cage that my brother built to keep his mate trapped here? With said brother laying at our feet, gasping for air?”

Ben just stares at Elias for a second before Elias’s face breaks into a wry smile and Ben stumbles out a laugh. God – god damn it – but he’s hot and he’s funny? Shit. Shit, but he lucked out on this one.

“Are you okay?” Ben asks, taking three hesitant steps forward, his hand lifting towards his mate without him really meaning to.

Elias shrugs and, to Ben’s surprise, takes his hand – just lightly. “I’m surprisingly okay. Gabriel has been...challenging lately. And he murdered our cousin last night, so I guess I’m not entirely surprised that divine retribution came and bit him in the ass like this. Though I am surprised that Ariel was the one who did it. I...didn’t know she had that kind of grit.”

“Ariel poisoning someone,” Ben murmurs, looking down at the dying Prince, “is...oddly enough the one part of this situation that does not surprise me.”

Elias huffs another laugh and glances up at Ben, a little shy. But he doesn’t pull his hand away.

They’re quiet for a long few moments.

“Hey, so,” Ben says, trying desperately hard to be casual. “...so, Pippa?”

“Yeah,” Elias says, lifting his head and looking Ben square in the eye. Ben turns towards him and squeezes his hand, hoping that Elias feels his support, that he can tell him whatever he wants. “Pippa is my Luna. We’re married. She’s...my best friend in the entire world and...I’m not leaving her behind.”

“I...would never ask you to leave her behind,” Ben says, giving a simple shrug, telling the utter truth. Anyone who is family to Elias is family to him now. “And...the baby?”

“Yeah,” Elias says, heaving a sigh and letting his shoulders slump. “That’s...mine. We’re going to have a daughter...kind of any day now.”

“Wow,” Ben says, smiling despite himself, kind of...god, is it weird that he kind of likes that? It’s going to be insanely complicated, and he has no idea how Pippa will feel about Ben being Elias’s mate but... “daughters are amazing, Elias. Congratulations.”

“Thanks,” Elias says, squeezing Ben’s hand back, a hesitant smile coming to his mouth. “Yeah, I’m really excited. Though...” his cheeks puff out with air, an exasperated sigh.

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“I’m not crazy about bringing a little girl into the world amidst so much chaos. I kind of...wanted a simpler life for her.”

“Well, whatever you need,” Ben says quietly, stepping closer, meaning it with his entire heart. “I’m here for you. I’ll help... however I can.”

Elias looks back at his mate in surprise, not used to such an honest offer of aid from a relative stranger. But his wolf howls and eagerly shifts from foot to foot, urging Elias to take it – to leap forward and accept this with his whole heart. The help, and Ben, and the bond – all of it.

Elias steps forward too, pulling Ben towards him with a tug on his hand, just one step-

When suddenly, Ariel appears before them.

“Hi!” I say, snapping my hands to my hips and grinning between Ben and Elias, who hastily drop each other’s hands. My smile widens as I take in their blushing cheeks, but as I laugh I go to one knee at Gabriel’s side and look him over, giving them the space they need to regain their composure.

After all, I’ve got a poisoned mate on my hands. And I really should be worrying about that instead of my bestie’s love life.

Elias clears his throat. “Is Pippa getting the antidote?”

“Yup!” I say, still not looking up at them and instead taking in the basics of Gabriel’s condition and reaching out to take his pulse, which is slow but not erratic. “She said fifteen minutes.”

“Ariel, why did you half poison him in the first place?” Ben asks, his voice a little frustrated. “If you wanted him gone, why didn’t you just...go whole hog? Did you not have enough cyanide?”

I glance up at him. “No, I have enough,” I murmur, taking a deep breath and folding my legs beneath me as I settle in next to Gabriel and take his hand. “I don’t want him dead. I just want him – and his wolf – incapacitated. For a bit.”

“Ariel,” Elias says, stepping forward towards me, putting the pieces together before Ben does. “Don’t do it. It’s not worth it.”

I sigh, giving Gabriel’s hand a squeeze and looking up at my friends. “You don’t get it, Elias,” I say, a little sad. “If I accept the bond, I have access to his magic. And I can experiment with it, try to understand why...why my grandmother gave me this mate to begin with.”

“But the corruption will spread,” Elias says, kneeling down on Gabriel’s other side and reaching across him to squeeze my shoulder. “It’s not worth it, Ariel – what I watched Gabriel go through? I can’t watch you do it too.”

“Corruption?” Ben asks, his voice suddenly frantic. “What are you talking about?”

“I’ve come this far,” I say with a sigh, shaking my head at him. “No time like the present. And if it starts to corrupt, I can always just...break the bond.”

I sigh, looking down at Gabriel, hoping desperately that it’s true.

“Ariel, please,” Elias begs.

But it’s too late.

I say a little prayer to my grandmother for protection, and close my eyes, and give my wolf a little nod. She stands at the edge of my soul and lifts her nose high, proud and regal, her pretty rose-gold fur blowing in some phantom wind.

And then we accept the bond, which snaps into place between my soul and Gabriel’s.

His wolf shifts in his place sunk deep in the oil, eager, hungry. My wolf steps back, afraid and ready to run. I tense, both in my body and in my soul, ready to break the bond – to reject him – to flee...

But Gabriel’s wolf collapses back into the oil, unable to stir.

I open my eyes in the Land of Darkness and find Gabriel’s eyes fluttering open, searching for me. His mouth moves, making shapes, perhaps trying to say my name. And guilt rushes through me as I feel, anew, his pain – his physical pain, and his emotional agony.

God, how horrible, how terrible – the corruption just clangs through him. How can he have survived this for years?

“Oh, Gabriel,” I murmur, reaching out and stroking a hand over his hair. “You poor thing.”

He moans a little, turning his head towards my hand, even though I’m not sure he’s fully conscious.

“What’s happening?” Ben asks, tense.

“It’s okay,” I say, glancing up at Ben and Elias. “As long as he’s...out, I don’t think he can corrupt me. But when he was healthy ...he certainly wanted to. Which means we don’t have a lot of time.”

“Well, all right then, Princess,” Ben says, his personality and his humor coming back to him now that some of his fear has subsided. I look up and smirk to see him looking down at me with his arms crossed and an eyebrow raised. “You got what you wanted, so? What’s your magic say?”

I smile a little and close my eyes, squeezing my mate’s hand as I pull on his magic. It comes flooding towards me, as Jackson’s does when I pull on it – the magic of a man well used to using it. And to my relief, no corruption comes with it. Instead, I begin to explore the blue light that seems to fill my body – the same light blue magic – almost white – that manifested itself in shackles around my hand, stopping my power.

And I begin to understand it, then. Elias’s power’s functions as a shield, as a block to other magics, a nullifier. Unboosted by the commitment that he made to Darkness five years ago, it could work as a personal shield, something he could wrap around himself so that magical influence can’t touch him.

But I frown as I realize that...it’s so much more than that.

That Gabriel’s magic has two sides. It functions as a stop to magic – an emphatic no, a shield.

But as I experiment with the blue light I realize that it...it also functions as an impetus, as a catalyst.

A huge smile spreads across my face as I open my eyes.

“What?” Ben asks, grinning at me. I laugh as I look up into his face. “What’s that smile for?”

“I get it,” I whisper, shaking my head in awe. “In the end it’s...it’s so simple. Three mates for the three elements of fire. One for air, one for fuel, and one for...” I look down at Gabriel and shake my head. “And one for a spark.”

Immediately I pull on the magic that Luca gifted me with his mark and let wind curl in the Land of Darkness. And then I use my physical connection to Gabriel to pull on his, adding it to Luca’s air.

Elias, Ben, and I all gasp as sparks appear all around us, blue and lovely, soaring through the air, eager and ready to fly. “Now all we need is Jacks,” I whisper, staring around in delight at the magic. “And then we can really see what I can do.” “Great,” a voice says, ringing out, making me laugh as I snap my head left towards the sound. “I love it when I have perfect timing.”

Delighted, I drop Gabriel’s hand and leap to my feet, dashing for the side of the cage where Jacks stands.

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But then I stop in my tracks, stumbling over my feet, my lips turning down in a harsh frown. “Jackson,” I growl, standing straight and putting one hand on a hip, using the other to point to the small girl – young woman? – held up high in my place on Jackson’s arm. “What is that?”

“Sorry, that’s mine,” Jesse says, peering out from behind Jackson and grinning at me before turning to frown up at Jacks.” Though I agree, Jackson. You can put her down now, please.”

I gasp, relief and shock running through me as I dash for the bars, reaching for my cousin. “Jesse!”

Ben gasps and rushes with me to the side of the cage.

“No!” groans the girl, shaking her head. “I don’t want to be put down! It’s so nice up high!”

“Hey, Ari,” Jesse says, laughing and reaching for me through the bars. “Hey Ben!”

I grab my cousin’s hand, yanking him close and pulling him into a hug even as he shouts at the rough treatment, banging against the bars.

“Are you okay!?” I gasp, desperately afraid for him. “Are you -” I pull back, looking him over again and again, “you’re safe!? And how did – what -“

I frantically look between Jesse and Jacks and the girl, baffled, as Ben likewise reaches for Jesse, pulling him into a hug and looking fascinatedly at Jacks. I know he, like me, is wondering where on earth they came from.

“It’s a long story,” Jackson says, bending to put the girl down on her feet despite her protests. “But I imagine what’s going on in this cage is more important.”

I see Jackson’s teeth flash as he looks in at the Prince laying poisoned on the ground.

“What the fuckkk is going on here,” Jesse whispers, looking with wide eyes into the cage.

“Hi, I’m...Elias...” Elias says, giving an awkward little wave.

“What’s up, man,” Jesse says, giving Elias a tiny wave and the universal bro greeting of a sharply lifted chin.

“Can we come in, finally?” Jackson asks, one hand on the bars, his face very serious as he looks at me, his wolf sniffing at my wolf, sensing that something is...different.

“Yes, you may enter,” I say, giving a mocking little bow and gesturing them in.

Jesse frowns. “But there’s no...”

His words fade as Jackson grips two bars and, calling on his magic, bends them backwards as easily as pulling open a cabinet. “All right,” Jesse says as the girl claps appreciatively. “Now...there’s a door.”

“Who is that,” I whisper to Jesse through the bars as Jacks steps in and then lifts the girl through.

“Um, that’s Midnight,” Jesse says, giving me an awkward little grimace. “She’s my mate. Just...go with it, okay? She’s great but...sometimes people take a minute to warm up to her. I’ll tell you everything later.”

I look at Jesse for a moment with wide eyes, but then am distracted from my shock when Jackson strides over and grabs me to him, lifting me high up into his arms and sealing his mouth to mine in a determined kiss. I work hard to stifle the moan that blooms in my throat as I wrap my arms around his neck and pull him close, deepening the kiss, giving myself over to it.

“How come you never kiss me? That looks nice.”

“Oh my stars, Mids,” Jesse says on a sigh. “This is...not the time for that conversation.”

I grin, breaking the kiss and beaming at my Jacks, my sweetheart mate. “Hey.”

He growls, possessive and joyful, tightening his arm around my back. “Anything you want to tell me?”

“Yeah,” I say on a sigh, wriggling in request to be put down. He obliges and I look up into his face, taking his hand. “I kind of... accepted the bond with that one.”

We talked about it, of course this being part of the plan. And he hadn’t been happy about it – which makes sense – though he knew it was coming. Still, I see the pain and the jealousy pass over his expression even if he tries to hide it.

Jackson clenches his teeth against his sigh, squeezing my hand and looking over at Gabriel laying on the ground, his breaths coming slow. Despite his self-restraint, Jackson can’t help flashing his teeth again.

“Is this your other mate?” the girl asks me, wandering over to look down at Gabriel. Then she looks up at Elias. “Or is it that one?”

Elias laughs a little and shakes his head as Jacks, Ben, Jesse, and I join the two of them, forming a semicircle around Gabriel’s body.

“It’s that one,” I say, gesturing to Gabriel as we all look down at him.

Midnight in particular looks back and forth between Jackson and Gabriel, and I grin as I watch her, not fully understanding this strange little creature but liking her immediately. “Hmm,” Midnight says, considering. “I mean, the one on the ground is very fancy, but Jackson is certainly better looking. You should pick him.”

I burst out laughing. Inwardly, Jackson’s wolf preens even if his face shows none of his pride and pleasure at Midnight’s words.

“I’m not sure Gabriel is at his best right now,” I say, sinking to my knees by the Prince’s side, a hand going to his throat as I check his pulse. “I’ve just poisoned him with cyanide, after all.”

“Eh, I still think Jacks is better,” Midnight says, crossing her arms and giving a steady nod, decided. “I am Midnight,” she says, almost as an afterthought. “You are pleased to meet me.”

I laugh, a bit delighted. “Yes, I am. I’m Ariel, Jesse’s cousin.”

“I know,” she says, grinning at me and then turning her gaze to Jesse. “I like her better than the rat.”

“I’m sure the rat will be devastated,” Jesse replies, dry.

“What?” Ben asks, confused. “There’s a rat?”

“Listen this is all...very nice,” Elias says, a little awkward. “But my brother is dying – and even if he’s been horrible lately, I... might prefer if he didn’t? If there’s something we can do to help him?”

“Oh, right!” I say, gasping a little in surprise at how quickly I forgot everything in my shock at Jesse’s arrival. “Jacks?” I say, reaching up for him, wanting his hand.

He sighs and snarls a bit, but crouches down and gives it to me, knowing what it is I’m intending to do now and not wanting much of a part of it. “Can’t we just kill him?”

“No, baby,” I say, patting his hand and shifting my eyes back to Gabriel. “Not right now. Maybe later.”

A little wordless grumble passes through Jacks but he doesn’t fight me on it.

“Um,” I say, glancing up at everyone around us. “I’ll...be back in a minute.”

“Where are you going?” Jesse asks, his face scrunching in confusion.

“Inside,” I say. And then I close my eyes, sighing out a breath, and shift my focus inward as I reach out my other hand and place it across the bare skin of Gabriel’s throat. Then, once I have

skin contact with two of my mates, I shift my focus to the mark Luca left on my neck and pull on all three magics at once.

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Instantly, the magic sings within me, all of the pieces finally coming together like they've been waiting ages to do so. I feel Gabriel's wolf shift in his dark oil, and Jackson gasps, and I do wonder if somewhere on earth – in another Universe – Luca stands up straight, feeling it too. But I can't concentrate on that now because there's a great deal of fuel at my fingertips now, and oxygen, and finally...a spark.

The three come together in my soul just as a great swell of joy passes through me. I feel them combust, feel them join together in the tiny conflagration – a sacred fire, warm and delicious.

A collective gasp runs through our little gathered circle – Gabriel excluded – and when I open my eyes there's no surprise in my expression – just bliss.

Because I already knew it would be there.

The little blue flame flickering in the air, floating about a foot in front of my face.

"Hello, you," I coo, leaning forward to beam at the little fire – at the manifestation of my Grandmother's gift which is now, finally, complete. "Aren't you special?"

"Holy shit," Jesse breathes, and I glance up to see him staring in awe at the little flame floating before me, even as Midnight squeaks in fear and tucks herself behind him, clinging to his hand. "Are you – can you do anything with it?"

"I think I can," I whisper, looking over at Jacks, who I know feels the magic more intently than the rest of them. To my surprise Jackson doesn't even look at the flame, staring at me instead, like I'm the marvel. I laugh, leaning closer to him, loving him a great deal.

But then, before anyone can say anything else, I lift my hand from Gabriel's neck and dismiss the flame, standing up.

"What?" Ben gasps, looking at me. "Ariel, you were just getting started -"

"Magic show has to wait," I say, glancing down at Gabriel's pale face. "I have to go get Pippa."

And then, before anyone can say another word or protest, I tilt back to Atalaxia and appear in the room. Almost at the same instant I do, the door opens and Pippa comes bursting through, a plastic box in her hand, her eyes wide.

“Oh, Ariel,” she says, shaking her head as she dashes to my side, shoving the door shut behind her. “It’s...it’s getting very bad out there. They’ve noticed that Gabriel is gone, and the protective shield has fallen, and apparently Moon Valley is sending planes – it’s all very bad – the King is very upset -”

“Well then we’d better hurry,” I say, taking her hand in mine.

“Ariel, the King can come to the Land of Darkness, and he can send soldiers,” she says in a rush, looking at me with wide eyes. “He is corrupted too has a talisman -”

I nod to her, understanding her point. That we can’t fool around there either – that time is short, even in the other realm. “You have the antidote?” I ask, glancing down at the kit in her hand.

“Yes,” she breathes, nodding eagerly.

“Okay, then let’s go. Um...it’s a little different, than when we left.” I grimace.

“What?” she asks, her brows bunching together in worry.

But there’s no time. I squeeze her hand back and tilt us away so that a moment later we appear in the Land of Darkness.

Pippa takes a single moment to look around before she squeaks in fear and then ducks behind me, peering over my shoulder at the whole new collection of Alphas.

“Is that...” she whispers, her voice shaking. “Is that Darkness’s girl!?”

Midnight peers from behind Jesse but doesn’t say anything.

“My girl now,” Jesse says, reaching behind his back to giving Midnight a comforting pat. Then he gives Pippa his best royal smile. “Hi, I’m Jesse, I’m Ariel’s cousin-”

But Pippa squeaks again and hides as Elias comes to my side. “Pippa...isn’t used to being around this outnumbered by men without a matron,” he says, gathering her close to him.

“Well, they’re very nice!” I say, stepping aside so she can see and waving a hand at Ben and Jesse and Jacks. “That’s Jackson, he’s my mate -”

Jackson gives an awkward little wave but I give up on introductions when Pippa’s eyes go wide when she catches a glimpse of Jackson’s full, moderately feral visage, his imposing height and breadth, and tucks her head tight against Elias’s chest, frightened.

“Sorry,” Jackson murmurs, looking down at himself.

I just laugh a little and take the cyanide kit from Pippa’s hand, sitting again at Gabriel’s side.

“So, I’m going to give Gabriel the antidote and try to make him...not die,” I say, glancing down at his face, which has grown paler since the last time I looked. “But things are apparently very bad up in the Castle. We need a plan for what the hell we’re going to do next. How we get out of here.”

“Are the routes in the castle impassable?” Jackson asks, slipping easily into his Commander line of questioning.

I glance at Pippa, who gives me a little nod. Elias looks down at her and then speaks for her. “I imagine the entrances and exits are locked down and guarded, even without Gabe to magically do it,” he says, grimacing a little.

“Well, can we get out...here?” I say, gesturing around at the Land of Darkness. “Run and then shift back into the world when we’re outside of the palace walls?”

Jackson nods to me, clearly indicating that he thinks it’s the best plan.

“He’ll come for you here,” Pippa says quietly, her voice still shaking. “He’ll figure it out soon, and then he’ll come, he’ll chase you here too.”

“Well then we’ll go to the yurt,” Jesse says, and I frown because...what? “Right Mids? Mids can take everyone to the yurt.” He steps aside, trying to let everyone see the girl, and at first she steps with him, still hiding, until the two have a hushed little fight and she sighs and steps forward.