

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 531

Midnight looks around at the group with a frown and then up into Jesse's eyes. "Are they family?"

"Yes, Mids," Jesse says, smiling down at her and stroking a hand softly over her hair in a way that makes my heart swell to see, even if...well. Even if another part of me is remembering Daphne sobbing on her knees, Mittens clutched to her chest. "They're family. Everyone here is family now." I bite my lip against the emotion that races in me – because none of it is a lie.

"Okay," Midnight says, shaky. "Um. If they're family, I'll take them."

"And then back to Moon Valley?" I ask, hopeful, knowing that Midnight can do it.

Midnight's eyes fly wide.

"We'll talk about that part of the plan later," Jesse says, shooting me a warning look. At the same moment, Midnight bares her teeth up at him, shadows beginning to leak from her skin. My eyes flash wide because – wait, she can do that too?

"The Ambassadors," Ben says quickly, turning my gaze to him. He shakes his head. "We can't leave them, Ariel," he says. "They'll kill them all if we do."

I curse, glancing at Elias for confirmation. Quite sad, he nods, indicating that it's true.

"All right," I say. "We'll get everyone out. But...this first, yes?" I wave a hand at Gabriel, who looks dangerously close to death. I bite my lip, wondering at my imprecise measurement of the cyanide and how much time has passed. Has it gone too far?

"Can I help?" Ben asks, kneeling across from me.

"Sure can," I say, taking out the IV pack and the two syringes of liquid medicine, explaining quickly to Ben how to use them. "I have...a new respect for espionage track," Jesse murmurs as Midnight again peers out from behind him, her curiosity getting the better of her. "You know how to do all of this from memory?"

"Neumann trained us so we could do it in our sleep," I murmur, glancing up at him as I hand the IV to Ben to hold high as I search for a vein in Gabriel's arm and insert the trocar needle there. "It's not all just studying chemical formulas."

"I want to double major now," Jesse murmurs, fascinated. I grin a little, even as I concentrate.

“Um, what’s the plan here?” Ben asks. “Why are you bringing him back – isn’t he all...corrupted? And violent?”

“Yes. He punched her,” Jackson growls, still livid. Ben and Jesse gasp, appalled, which is very satisfying to me and my wolf. But I push beyond that.

“He also made me rub his feet in public. But no, um, we’re going to heal him up on the outside...and on the inside.” “What do you mean?” Jesse asks, turning his head at me.

“Well,” I say, looking up at Jacks, wanting his reassurance. “I think...that that flame does more than what a normal flame does. I think it’s more than just heat and fire – I think it’s Goddess-blessed.”

Jackson nods solidly, agreeing with me – he felt it too.

“Well with that dark blue color,” Jesse says, nodding consideringly. “That makes sense.”

“Why does that make sense?” I ask, turning my head to him and cocking it to the side.

He smirks at me a little. “It’s just...a very goddess-blessing-y color. Part of the story for another time, cuz. Just keep going.”

I frown at him for a moment, not getting it, but then I move past that too. “I think that I can use the flame to help Gabriel, to help his wolf. Perhaps clean up his corruption.”

Midnight gasps in horror and I attempt to peer around Jesse to see what has frightened her so much, but she ducks away. Jesse takes a deep breath, again reaching behind him to comfort his strange little mate, even as he keeps his eye on me.

“Do you really think you can do that?” He asks, working hard to keep his voice serious, though I can hear the hope in it.

Midnight, Jackson says into my mind in explanation. She’s corrupted too. But I think she’s afraid – so...maybe don’t say anything.

Shocked, I turn my eyes up to Jackson and then whip them over to Jesse, who intuits what just passed between us and nods to me very seriously.

I nod back and then fight every instinct I have to reach for Midnight, wanting to help and comfort her too.

But I turn my eyes back to Gabriel instead.

“Do you...really think you can do that, Ariel?” Pippa asks in a whisper. Surprised, I turn to see her peering at me, still pressed against Elias’s chest with his arms around her.

I look up at her and give a little shrug. “I can only try. And if it doesn’t work I’ll reject him and hope that it doesn’t go further than that.”

I turn my face back to Ben, giving him a few more details of the treatment and asking if he thinks he can handle it. He assures me that he can – it’s fairly simple, after all – as Jackson folds his long legs beneath him and sits at my side, offering me his hand.

“Thank you, Jacks,” I say quietly, taking it. Because this is a choice he’s making too – if he wanted, he could refuse to help heal Gabriel. But he’s doing it for me, because he loves and trusts me. I sent him a warm pulse of gratitude down our bond.

“I still think we should let him die,” Jacks says softly, a little rueful, his eyes moving to the bruise still livid on my jaw.

“I know but...” I shrug. “If I can help him? Surely that’s better.”

He sighs, turning his eyes on Gabriel, his voice dour. “It’s what Ella would do.”

I smile, squeezing his hand. Then I look around at our collected little group one last time before I reach out and again put a hand on Gabriel’s neck, close my eyes, and begin to concentrate.

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I do my very best to imitate my mother in this moment, trying to fall into that deep meditative state she uses when she heals people. Because I have to go into my soul now, and into Gabriel’s, to try and help him. Ben – he’s handling the physical healing of Gabriel’s body.

But I’m here to concentrate on my new mate’s soul, and his wolf.

When my inner eyes open, I see that I am indeed in the world of my soul, my body appearing there next to my wolf’s in a way that it never has before, except perhaps in dreams. “Oh, hello,” I say, laughing as she bounds over to me and gives my face a few happy licks. I run my hands quickly through her soft, pretty fur – something that I’ve only done in pieces before, rushing a hand over it or grabbing it with my fingers.

Yes, here in my whole body for the first time, it’s different.

A little whine makes me turn, and I laugh when I see Jackson’s gigantic dark wolf standing there too.

“Oh, you’re here!?”

He huffs and steps forward, his head lowered towards me, as if to say where the hell else would he be. I laugh and scratch his head too, smiling when he turns his face into my palm in the same wolfish way that Jackson does in the real world. He gives my hand a playful nip before bounding off after my wolf, heading towards the edge of my soul where she stands, her paws shifting anxiously, looking over the edge.

I follow them there and peer across the little soul bridge towards Gabriel's soul, seeing his wolf still there sunk into that pit of oil and tar, just his nose and his eye above the line of it like a crocodile. That is, if a crocodile also had pointy tufted ears that stuck out a little bit too.

My wolf whines and looks up at me, desperately wanting to help.

"I know," I murmur, reaching over and patting her head. "I want to help him too."

I take a deep breath and step forward onto that bond, the bridge between our souls.

But Jackson's wolf whines and grabs my skirt with my teeth, pulling me back, crying anxiously in his throat, not wanting me to go.

"I have to," I murmur, reaching out stroke a hand over his lovely, strong face. "I'll be safe, I promise."

He whines again, doubtful, but then huffs and drops my skirt. I hate this, Jackson says, directly into my mind. I smile and lean forward, pressing a kiss to his wolf's face, but then turn to my wolf, who is already halfway across the bridge. And I follow.

The first thing I recognize when I stand on the steady ground just at the edge of Gabriel's soul, the last bit not yet consumed by oil, is that it is...so much colder on Gabriel's side, within his own soul. I glance back over my shoulder to where Jackson's wolf stands, sniffing at the bridge, clearly trying to see if he, too, can cross. But it's not his bond. Stuck, he howls softly, calling to us, and my wolf howls back to him even as we both turn to peer at Gabriel's wolf.

Gabriel's wolf gives a burbling sort of snarl that chokes him, even as he gives a last-ditch sort of lunge for my wolf, clearly wanting to pull her in. She steps away, lifting one foot up high and looking down at the oil in distaste.

"Save your energy, little wolf," I say to Gabriel's wolf on a sigh, going to my knees and already beginning to pull on my magics – on Luca's wind, and Jackson's fuel, and Gabriel's own spark. "We've got work to do, and we'll need your help on the other side."

The blue flame appears in my hands, burning and bright, and my wolf spins in eager circles, delighted by the sight of it. Gabriel's wolf shrinks away, floundering in the oil. I sigh and get to work, knowing that he might not have a great deal of time left.

I urge the fire to burn even hotter and then slowly reach it towards the dark substance that traps Gabriel's wolf.

It doesn't...quite burn, not really. It's not true oil after all, and it doesn't burst into flames or anything. Instead, it merely seems to shrink away, or to dry out, losing all of its power when faced with the Goddess's heat and light. I begin to experiment when I realize how it works, my wolf staying close at my side, panting eagerly as the oil begins to recede. When I think that I've got a hold of it, I really let it rage, the fire burning wide and hot through the darkness.

Slow at first, but then faster and faster, the pit of oil in which Gabriel's wolf has sunk begins to recede, leaving a dry hole behind. Piece by piece his wolf's head appears, and then his neck and shoulders as he gasps for air. He snarls at the fire at first but then as the flame comes closer, and warms him, he gives the most pitiful little cry, reaching his snout towards it.

I reach for him too, leaning far out across the pit and taking his little snout in my hands as the fire continues to burn, shrinking the darkness inch by inch.

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"There there, little baby," I murmur, thinking of all the nice soft things my mother would say when we were kids, and we were hurt, or sad, or wanting. "We've got you now. We'll keep you safe." I take some of the fire and coat my hands with it, brushing it against his face, drying the residue of oil there until it turns into dark flakes – like mud or dirt – and then I brush it away.

By the time his face is clear and I clean the muck out from his tear ducts and his ears, most of the dark oily substance has receded from Gabriel's soul. As I clean off his whiskers and scratch the muck from his chin, Gabriel's sweet wolf looks at me with a great deal of shame in his eyes. So much that it makes me laugh.

"Oh, come on," I murmur, scratching at the clean fur now between his ears. "It wasn't your fault, darling. Nobody blames you."

He gives a sad little howl, and across the bridge between our souls Jackson's wolf gives a dark snarl, letting him know to behave. I laugh as my wolf comes to my side, eagerly reaching out for Gabriel's wolf with her snout, wanting to help.

"You ready, boy?" I ask, reaching back behind his neck for his scruff with a flame-coated hand, still very careful not to let that oil come anywhere close to any of my flesh.

He gives a sad little howl, and then a nod, and so I grab his fur and haul him forward, pulling him as best I can out of that ditch into which he's sunk.

My wolf helps too, taking some of my flame into her mouth and grabbing at his fur, pulling as Gabriel's wolf pushes with his withered little legs, trying desperately to get out, to get free.

He's far too light for a healthy wolf, but still very heavy for me, and it takes a great deal of effort to pull him free of the ditch. But finally he's out, and standing on his own shaking feet, panting and looking around with fear and wonder. He tries to turn, to see more, but his legs give out beneath him and he falls to the ground.

"That's okay, little baby," I say, moving near and conjuring more flames on my hands as my wolf trots in proud circles around us. "We'll get you fixed up soon."

I work on the wolf, passing my hands all over his fur, drying out the darkness and the oil as my wolf discovers that she, too, can carry the flame. She trots all around his soul, drying out the nooks and crannies, ensuring that there's nothing left – no darkness, no oil.

I have no idea how much time has passed, but by the time we're finished I feel very tired. But still, my heart soars at the sight of Gabriel's gorgeous grey wolf with his bright blue eyes, laying happily in his soul, his tongue hanging from his mouth as he pants and stares happily up at my face.

I laugh and scratch his ears as my wolf gives him a happy lick. "I don't know what you're going to do about that," I say, nodding towards the big crater still in his soul. "But... I think my business is done here."

I get to my feet and he looks at me quite mournfully.

"I'm sorry," I say, truly meaning it. "But..." I look over my shoulder to where Jackson's wolf still stands, peering anxiously across the bond bridge. "He's been very patient. And I love him a great deal."

Gabriel's wolf huffs but then stretches out his nose, a whine sounding in his throat, his request quite clear. I bend close, taking his muzzle in my palm as he gives me a long lick, just once, up my cheek.

"You're welcome," I whisper, smiling at him.

And then I turn, my wolf at my side, and cross the bridge back to my soul.

Jackson's wolf growls a little, pouty and moody, as we come back to his side. Instantly he gives my wolf a sweet, jealous little nip on her haunch and begins to rub himself all over her, wiping away any traces of Gabriel's wolf's scent.

"Possessive," I scold, grinning, watching him with my hands on my hips.

Damn right I'm possessive, Jackson snarls in my mind. Get back here.

I laugh and do as he bids, leaving his wolf to his business and opening my eyes in the real world.

Jackson drops my hand and cups my cheek, staring into my eyes with his pretty dark blue gaze. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I say, beaming at him.

Jacks exhales, long and slow, resting his forehead against mine, his eye falling shut. "That was amazing."

"It really was," Jesse breathes.

Confused, I look up at him. "How do you know?"

"You were...glowing," he says, nodding to me eagerly. "All blue. Like aunt Ella when she heals. And," he shrugs, nodding down towards the Prince laying on the ground. "The results speak for themselves."

For the first time I look down at my un-corrupted mate.

And find what looks like a new man staring up at me in shocked wonder. "Ariel," he whispers.

"Hey, Gabriel," I say, laughing a little as tears spring to my eyes. "It's nice to meet you.'

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"Gabe," my mate says, shaking his head at me and working hard to sit up. "Please, call me Gabe.'

He groans, though, and falls back.

“Easy, easy,” I say, glancing up at Ben, who nods to me – letting me know that he finished administering the antidote via IV and that it all went well. “Your body is still recovering from...well, from when I poisoned you.” I grimace. “Sorry about that.” “I’m not sorry about it,” Gabriel sighs, turning his head to me and shaking it. “I’m so grateful to you, Ariel. I was completely lost to that darkness – me and my wolf both. And I’m so, so sorry.” His eyes take on a true, deep sadness and guilt as he looks over my face, his eyes lingering on the bruise on my jaw.

“Gabe?” Elias asks, hesitant, coming to kneel by my side, Pippa following. “Is it...I mean, is it you?”

“It was always me,” Gabriel says, shifting his eyes to his brother. “As shameful as it is, I can’t pretend I was body snatched or something. It was me, grasping and jealous and hungry for power. But everything just looked so...different, from inside the darkness.” He shakes his head, tears starting in his eyes. “I’m so sorry. Pippa – I,” he sighs as she reaches out and takes his hand. “Pippa, I was so horrible to you.”

“You were a real brat,” she says, laughing a little, her voice thick with tears. “But I forgive you, Gabey-baby. I’m just glad to have you back.”

Gabe laughs at what is clearly an old nickname, his eyes fluttering shut in relief and exhaustion.

“Are you...sure he’s fixed?” Jesse murmurs, looking anxiously between Jacks and I, Midnight still tucked protectively behind him. “He’s not just faking it?”

“He’s cleared of the darkness,” Jackson murmurs, his voice grumbling as he narrows his eyes at Gabriel. “But like he said – he did all those things, even if his free will was...tainted. I’m not sure he gets to land solidly in the ‘good guy’ category just yet.”

I click my tongue at Jackson, giving his shoulder a little shove, but he just turns his steady gaze on me, shaking his head, letting me know he still doesn’t like the guy. And I smile a little because...well, because Jacks is biased against anyone who is my mate and has punched me in the face. And I rather like that about him.

“Do...do you still have your magic?” Midnight ventures, taking a step to the side to peek around Jesse, looking interestedly at Gabriel. Jesse smiles at her, encouraging, and slips an arm around her shoulders.

“I don’t know,” Gabriel says, looking down at his hands.

As we all watch he begins to experiment with it, creating the sparks of magic that are the part of his skill that he lends to me and then flashing up a shield all around him. Jesse tries his shadows against it and finds that they can’t get through.

“Um,” Gabriel says, apparently trying something else and failing. He glances at Midnight. “It looks like my powers are what they were before I made a deal with Darkness, which significantly expanded them. Before I could start and stop magic – urge other magic to begin, or create a personal shield against it, but now...” He glances around at all of us. “I can’t protect the Castle anymore – that big barrier was only possible with Darkness’s influence. And I probably can’t shift to this world either.’ I sigh, and nod, sorry to have taken power from him. But still – this has to be better, right? My memory flashes back to his poor wolf, drowning in that oil. And to Gabriel’s hot temper and avarice – I mean, he killed his cousin so that he could take the throne, happy to be Darkness’s puppet there.

Midnight steps back behind Jesse, tucking her face against his back and wrapping her arms around his waist, looking incredibly anxious. My heart goes out to her because – what do her powers look like without Darkness’s influence? Does she even know?

“Look, this is all very cute,” Jesse sighs. “Family reunion with the newly non-evil brother. But...”

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Suddenly Jesse’s face goes pale and his words fade as he stares at something behind me. I gasp even as Jackson grabs me to him, pulling my back flush against his chest as he, too, turns. But then my eyes go wide as I shriek with fear at the darkness turning there just outside of my cage, slow and furious.

I watch in terror as a man steps from the darkness, his face livid, his eyes fixed on me.

“You dare,” the God of Darkness growls, his eyes flashing, “to take my servant from me?”

He waves a hand and the walls of the cage around us crumble to rust, collapsing to the ground. My heart pounds in my chest as

I panic, searching my heart and my mind for something to do – a way out – 1

Immediately I want to shift back to Atalaxia – but I’m only touching Jackson – I can’t leave everyone behind

Darkness stalks slowly forward, glaring at all of us. Midnight’s terrified sobs echo through the air as the god turns his eyes to Gabriel, who sits up with Ben’s help.

“Submit,” he snarls. “Take back your covenant or suffer death for your betrayal.”

“Ariel!” Jackson snarls in my ear. “Go – go back -”

“No!” I cry out, leaning out of his lap and reaching for Pippa, for Ben, for Jesse – for everyone – “I can’t leave them!” “You will!” Jackson commands, pulling me back. “Go!”

“I will not submit,” Gabriel says, glaring up at the dark god, shaking his head slowly. “I agreed to your bargain once and found the rewards wanting. I won’t do it again, even if it costs me my life.”

I cry out at this – horrified at the idea – even as Jackson commands me again and again to shift, to tilt, to go –

“Stop,” Jesse snarls, stepping forward towards the God, even as Midnight sobs and begs him to come back. She flashes away and back again and again, apparently trying to vanish Jesse with her somewhere safe –

But somehow – I don’t know how he resists –

The God of Darkness refocuses his eyes on Jesse, who slowly starts to stalk around Gabriel, heading for me. I reach for him, wanting his hand – wanting to touch everyone so I can take them out of here.

“You fool,” the God of Darkness intones. “You think to command me? I am not some half-soul in your little Castle school anymore, boy. Your meager powers hold no challenge for me – not in my own land.”

Jesse holds Darkness’s gaze as he comes to my side. “What you seem to fail to grasp,” Jesse says, slipping his hand in mind and flashing his eyes to me for a single moment, giving a shake of his head. I still, not understanding. “Is that it’s not just my powers you have to contend with. Not anymore.”

My eyes go wide as Jesse squeezes my hand. And I spin my head to the God, wondering –

Can it be true?

But a memory flashes through my mind – the Goddess, in our little magic classroom, beaming at Jesse, calling him her protector –

Because his powers, and our bond...

God, we were made for this, weren’t we?

Suddenly I grasp Jackson’s hand tight in my own, even as I squeeze Jesse’s. “Gabriel!” I shout, extending a leg out to him. “ My ankle! Now!”

He turns his shocked face to me, not understanding. But he obeys – which is all that really matters, his fingers curling around my bare skin.

And when Jesse begins to let his shadows unfurl, flowing from his hands and his skin in great waves, he summons not only his own power.

But mine too. And Jackson's, and Luca's, and Gabriel's.

So that at the heart of each curl of shadow is a blue flame.

The God of Darkness takes a single step back towards the darkness from which he emerged. "No," he whispers. "Her fire – how is it..."

But it's too late.

In a single swell of shadow, Jesse's magic surges forward and envelops the God whole.

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I gasp, my hand pressed to my mouth, as Jackson tenses behind me. A glance at Gabriel lets me know that he feels it too Jesse pulling on our magic – that we're experiencing this in a way that the others aren't. Midnight screams in fear, reaching out for Jesse, only held back by Ben who grabs her wrist at the last moment as she dashes for her mate.

Pippa stands very still, pressed close to Elias, as Jesse moves his hands like a sculptor working clay, creating some kind of ball, or a dome. A shape begins to appear before him, surrounding the God of Darkness, like a dome, or an oblong...oval orb? To the naked eye it all looks very simple and easy – though those of us whose magic is working can clearly feel the God within, pushing against it, pounding against our magic and seeking escape.

But Jesse pushes, taking a step forward, and his shadows swirl slower and slower, becoming solid. A tiny smile starts to form on my mouth as I feel him shaping my magic alongside his little sparrows and minnows and panthers, all limned in blue, taking shape within the shadows themselves on the dome's hollow form.

And suddenly, I can feel it – complete. Jesse lets his hands fall, his shoulders relaxing, as I laugh and jump to my feet. Jackson gasps, reaching for my hand – unaware that it's done – but I'm too fast, dashing for Jesse and throwing my arms around him.

“That was amazing!” I gasp, nearly strangling my cousin with my hug even as I look over at the solid mass of shadow now sitting in the middle of the wasteland, the blue forms still moving subtly over its surface. “Did you know you could do that!?”

“Um, nope,” Jesse says, giving me a quick squeeze and smiling at me before turning, looking for Midnight. “No, that was sort of...improvised.”

He holds out a hand to his little mate and Ben releases her. She runs, sobbing, into his arms. “What is it?” she whispers, shaking, pressing her face against his chest. “What did you do?”

“I don’t know,” he murmurs, bending low to drop a kiss to her hair. “It’s some kind of...containment.”

“It looks like an egg,” Jackson says, a little dry, and I grin as I turn to see him still sitting on the ground, his arms wrapped around his knees, studying the solid shadow before him.

“Oh my god, it does...” Ben murmurs and then bursts out laughing, his eyes shining with pride as he turns them on Jesse. “Is that what you made? A magic egg to contain the God of Darkness?”

Jesse’s smile is more hesitant even as he, too, laughs, one arm around Midnight as he runs a hand through his hair. “I guess so. But guys – it’s not going to hold him forever. I mean, maybe one day? I could make something...more solid?” he looks to me now. “But this was hastily done – we have to...we have to move.”

Even as he says it, noise breaks out elsewhere in the Land of Darkness. All of our heads turn to see soldiers, of all things, appearing on the other side of the great cage.

“Shit,” Elias whispers, looking frantically around at us. “The King – he finally figured out where Gabriel is – he’s sending his soldiers for us – ”

Pippa squeaks in fear, pressing herself to his side.

“That thing,” I say, fast, pointing to the egg as Jackson gets to his feet and comes immediately to my side. “Can you leave it, Jesse? Or is... is he going to break out the moment you go?”

“I can leave it,” he says, his brow furrowing in confusion. “I made it like the little shadow cat I left with...” his voice fades as he glances down at Midnight, who looks up at him with wide dark eyes. “Um, I made it like Mittens,” he says, looking over at me, his face grim. “I can leave it behind. But seriously, it’s...” he shudders as we both feel a pulse against our magic, the God of Darkness pressing hard against the inside of the shell. “We can’t stay in this land long. He’ll come for us again.”

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“Okay, well then let’s go,” Jackson says, all business, pulling me against his chest and reaching out a hand for everyone else.

Everyone scurries close and I take a deep breath, looking around to ensure that we’re all here, all touching. When I am sure, I exhale and tilt us all away, the weight of our entire group pulling against my magic in a way that it hasn’t before.

We appear a moment later in the palace, but we all shriek and turn towards the door, which is beginning to splinter, someone on the other side starting to break it down.

“Back, back!” Jesse shouts.

I obey, tilting us back to Darkness.

We all stutter back a step when we land, glancing frantically around at the soldiers that are now charging for us from the other side of the castle – slowed by the bars of Gabriel’s cage but by no means stopped by them – and over at the shadowy encasement that holds a god hell bent on vengeance.

“Fuck,” Elias whispers. “What – what are we going to do -”

“Mids,” Jesse says, grasping his little mate by the shoulder and looking at her seriously. “You need to take us out of here. Back to Moon Valley.”

“But I can’t!” she gasps, shaking her head and pointing upwards. “It’s not lined up to here! If I shift, we just go to Atalaxia!” “Then vanish away first,” Gabriel snaps at her, leaning hard against his brother, his body still incredibly weak. “Take them somewhere that aligns with Moon Valley and then shift.”

Midnight’s mouth forms into a little o of surprise and then she nods, stepping away and reaching out her hands. Jesse and Ben move to her side, and Jackson starts that way, but I don’t move.

“Them?” I ask, staring at Gabriel. Because – is he not coming?

“Go,” Gabriel says, pushing himself up from Elias’s side, glancing anxiously at the soldiers who shout and charge our way. Take Pippa where you’ll be safe.” He turns his gaze to me. “I have to stay – the King still holds significant influence – I can convince him I’m still under Darkness’s spell, I can right the wrongs I’ve made __”

“You can’t shift, Gabriel!” I shout, storming for him.

He goes still as he realizes that I'm right.

"Go!" I bark at Pippa and Elias, shoving them towards Jesse and Ben and Midnight. "I'll take him back."

"Ariel!" Jackson shouts, coming to my side. "We need -"

"We need to get the rest of the ambassadors," I snap, taking his hand too. "I'm not leaving them here to die." His eyes go wide as he realizes that I'm right.

I grab Gabriel's hand as well, looking over at Midnight and the four surrounding her, each with a hand on her shoulder. "Come back for the ambassadors in...twenty minutes. For now, go."

"

Jesse looks at me with wide eyes, starting to shake his head, but Midnight – frightened – presses her eyes shut and vanishes them away.

I exhale a sigh of relief.

"This is insane," Jackson snaps, glaring down at me.

"It is," Gabriel says. I turn my head to the right and can't help my smile when I see that his expression matches Jackson's.

"Oh, you boys," I sigh. "Why did my grandmother give me two mates so intolerant of good ole Sinclair chaos? Come on. This is going to work."

On a wave of brash headlong faith, I vanish us back to my bedroom in Atalaxia, one mate on either side.

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Jackson, Gabriel, and I immediately focus on the bedroom door, which is roughly splintered now, just moments from being ripped from its hinges. I squeeze their hands, suddenly thinking that my decision to come back here might be a little rash –

Who is on the other side of that door?

What are their orders?

Gabriel groans, his legs buckling beneath him in his weakened state, falling back against the bed.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” Jackson growls, storming for him and ducking one shoulder beneath Gabriel’s arm, standing again and propping my other mate up. “When they come through that door, you need to be a cruel Prince again. Can you manage that?”

Gabriel growls a bit, glaring at Jackson, even as he nods. “Ariel,” he says, gesturing to his side, begging me to come there.” They need to believe you’re on my side.”

I nod and immediately move there, tucking my hands behind my back and attempting to look as innocent as I can, like I didn’t just poison their Prince.

Almost the instant that I take my spot the door shatters, pieces of it coming slamming down.

Soldiers shout as they flood into the room, but they stutter to an awkward stop as they see the Prince standing before them, a nasty sneer on his face, apparently quite well – even if he does have his arm around a sneering Alpha that they don’t recognize.

“Is this how you enter my Luna’s chambers?” Gabriel snarls, and I snap my head to him, a bit surprised at how easily he falls into his old persona.

“Sir!” the soldier in front says, dipping into a quick bow. “We thought you were in danger! We _”

“Danger?” Gabriel sneers, laughing low. “At my Luna’s hand!? You fool. I’ll have your head for this.”

The soldiers look awkwardly at Jackson, still not getting it, but Gabriel’s authority is absolute. “Be gone!” he snaps, waving a hand at them. “If I wished to be disturbed I would have answered the door, you idiots – ”

Still not understanding the soldiers begin to back away.

They start to move a lot faster when Jackson takes an aggressive step towards them, snarling low, letting his canines extend to fangs.

“The ambassadors,” I whisper, glancing at the door at the soldiers retreating backs as they scurry away – probably to report to the King. “Where will they be?”

“Across the Castle,” Gabriel says, slumping a little against Jackson as he turns his head to me. “They’ll be close to their quarters, but confined. I think I know where, Ariel, but I – I don’t think I can walk – I’ll have to give you directions – ”

Jackson rolls his eyes at this, apparently finding Gabriel's weakness distasteful, and bends low, scooping Gabriel up in his arms. Gabriel gasps and then snaps his head to snarl at Jackson, his displeasure clear.

"Okay, both of you need to let it go," I snap, one hand on my hip, the other pointing a finger at both of their faces in turn." Jacks, he was just poisoned, it's not his fault that he's weak. And Gabriel, he's helping. I'm not going to be able to follow directions. So, let's go."

Both snarl unhappily but follow my lead as I stride for the door. Jackson comes to my side as we stride down the hall and then quickly outstrips me so that I have to trot fast – nearly running – to keep up with him. Gabriel gives confident directions at each turn, guiding us through, and Jackson's ready snarl and general size and power stop any protest that anyone might have at the sight of the Crown Prince being carried through the halls by a strange man.

Still, my heart pounds as we go, because Pippa was right – the castle is absolute chaos right now, and the shouts increase as we hurry through the halls, people apparently figuring out that we're here and spreading the word.

"There," Gabriel says finally, pointing towards a heavily guarded door. "They'll be in there."

Jackson nods and strides forward so fast that I have to run to catch up.

The guards at the door hesitate at Gabriel's command to step aside, but when Jackson again places my mate on his feet and the Prince takes a few unsteady steps forward, snarling at them to obey their monarch and fall back if they value their lives, they obey. The guards scatter as we open the door.

"Hi, hi!" I say, frantic and fast, bursting into the room. All of our Moon Valley ambassadors turn to me with wide-eyed surprise and fear, though their terror abates slightly when they see Jackson at my side. I scowl a bit, not liking that he instills relieved confidence when I do not.

"Okay, everyone join hands, please!"

"What?" the oldest Ambassador says, stepping forward. "Princess, we have to –"

"Hold. Fucking. Hands," Jackson growls, the Alpha command heavy in his voice as he steps aggressively towards my father's men, the implication that he'll tear them apart if they don't clear in his violent snarl.

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“Damn,” Gabriel says under his breath, watching Jacksons, clearly impressed.

The Ambassadors snap into action, each holding hands in a long train.

“Thank you!” I say, light and cheerful in my Princess Cupcake voice, taking the hand of the eldest Ambassador, who looks down at me in wonder. “Now, when we get there, if everyone can please continue to hold hands -”

“Get where?” the Ambassador asks, his eyes going wide.

“No time for questions!” I say, quite light, turning my head back to Jackson and opening my mouth.

“But Benjamin Ternicki!” the Ambassador says, shaking his head, vehemently.

“Interrupt her again,” Jackson snarls, storming forward to loom over the smaller man. “Just once more. And watch what happens.”

The ambassador goes very, very pale.

“Thank you sweetie,” I say, patting Jackson on the chest. “I’ll be back in just two minutes -”

“Wait, what?” Jackson gasps.

But too late, I vanish away with all of the ambassadors in tow.

As one, they gasp and shout as they appear in the Land of Darkness, overwhelmed and frightened by the onslaught of magic, and the disappearance of the Atalaxian palace, and the appearance of the new world.

I grimace, but there’s no time for explanations or pity as I stride forward, seeking Jesse and Midnight as well as the soldiers. What’s left of the soldiers – certainly not as many as there were dashing for us before – are luckily clustered on the other side of the castle-wide cage, peering at the egg that still holds the God of Darkness, probably wondering what the hell it is.

“Please keep hold of the hands, please!” I call out to the Ambassadors, stepping forward, peering around, looking for two figures –

And there –

“Midnight!” I shout out into the air, cupping my hands to my mouth. “Jesse!”

The little figure’s head snaps towards me and I smile.

They vanish and a moment later appear at my side.

“Hi,” Jesse says, giving me a warm grin as Midnight looks up at me with wide, frightened eyes. She, too, glances over at the shadow encasement that holds the God of Darkness, worried.

“The others, did you get them out?” I ask, anxious.

“We brought them to the yurt,” Jesse says, his tones frustrated as he glances down at Midnight. “She...we’re having trouble convincing Midnight that Moon Valley is safe.”

“Full of ruffians,” she murmurs, wrapping her arms around herself. “And whores.”

My eyes go wide but Jesse shakes his head at me, clearly letting me know not to question it.

“Jesse,” I whisper, shaking my own head in turn. “You have to get them back – ”

“Look, just give me time,” he murmurs, glancing at the ambassadors. “We’re back at the yurt for now. What do you want me to do?”

“Take them,” I say, gesturing towards the Ambassadors, who all still stand quiet and still, holding hands like a line of kindergarteners. I can’t help but smile at the sight of them.

“Ariel,” Jesse snaps, putting a hand on my shoulder that draws my attention back to him. “What are you going to do?”

“Don’t worry about me,” I say, shaking my head and giving him a confident smile.

“Of course I’m worried about you -”

“I have Jacks,” I say, giving a happy little shrug.

Jesse grins at me. And then nods. “You want us to come to come back for you?”

“I think you need to focus on getting your crew back to Moon Valley, Jesse,” I say, my hands reaching up to anxiously in my hair. “And get in touch with dad and Roger – tell them what’s going on. Don’t worry about me and Jacks – we can handle it. Do you do you think you need me?”

I glance down at Midnight, who still looks towards the egg, wondering if she can truly be trusted to save Pippa and Elias and Ben and all of these ambassadors –

“Hey,” Jesse says, patting my shoulder. I blink and look back at him. “You trust me, I trust you, yeah? Let’s just...each do our jobs.”

I smile and throw my arm around him in quick impulse. My cousin hugs me back for a moment, giving me a tight squeeze before letting me go.

“I’ll see you at the palace, right?” I say, pointing a finger at his face, meaning it much more as a command than a question.

“You got it, Princess,” Jesse says, laughing and taking Midnight’s hand, leading her over to the line of ambassadors. “And when you do? We’re having drinks. Big ones.”

I laugh and nod my agreement before I shift again, back to the room where I left Jackson and Gabriel.

My eyes go wide at the sight that greets me there.

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“I should have killed you on that battlefield,” the King of Atalaxia snarls, his eyes focused on me, “instead of listening to this foolish boy when he said he could control you.”

The King moves slowly across the room, black lightening flickering in his hands as he approaches. I take a gasping step back, reaching for Jackson, who I know is there. I can feel his fury as he presses me to his chest for a single instant before moving me gently to the side, starting to tuck me behind his back.

“She is my luna,” Gabriel snarls. “I do control her!” He does his best to stand alone on shaky legs, though I can tell by his gasping breaths that he’s in no position to be standing, let alone fighting. Guilt sweeps through me because this is my fault the poison has made him so weak –

“You have control?” the King snaps, his lightening flashing out behind him to slam the door shut in the faces of the dozen soldiers who stand there, wide-eyed. “Such control that our protective barrier has fallen? Such control that Moon Valley jets are on their way now to drop their bombs on us?”

I go pale at this, because – would my father do that? Bomb a palace full of innocents, just to kill this King?

“I am in charge here,” Gabriel growls, glancing over at me. Down our bond I feel our first communication – stilted and unsteady – but a clear request to play along. I nod to him, subtle, and pass the communication to Jacks.

Jacks gives his answer back instantly. No.

“You are a fool,” the King growls, reaching out a hand towards Gabriel, the black lightening swarming there. “A fool and a murderer – you took my son, you ceded your control to this bitch – and for that you will die _”

The lightening flashes out all through the room and I scream –

But to my shock it does not burn, instead binding me – binding me to my place in the room, to the floor, each of my limbs locked so that I cannot move. My eyes were already turned towards Gabriel so I can see that he is the same – locked in place, completely at this King’s mercy –

I try to cry out, but no sound emerges –

I try to tilt, to go to the Dark realm, to escape – but nothing –

Terror sweeps through me as the King advances on Gabriel, pulling a knife from his belt, clearly intent on delivering death to his heir.

But a sudden roar fills the room and behind me I feel Jackson move – feel him shift –

His wolf’s form bounds past me in an instant, completely unbound and aiming right for the king, his fangs bared. If I could gasp or scream in shock I would, but all I can do is watch from the corner of my eye as the King spins towards my mate, raising his dagger high in the air as he emits a terrified scream –

But it’s too late.

Jackson’s knife-tipped paws hit the King’s shoulders, taking him fast to the ground. And then Jackson’s teeth are in the King’s neck.

I know the moment it is done, when the magic releases me and I stumble forward.

Gabriel falls hard to his knees with a groan and I dash to him, though my eyes are on Jackson as he snarls down at the King, at the ragged hole in his neck, at his dead eyes, royal blood dripping from my mate’s fangs. 1

“Oh...oh my god,” Gabriel whispers as Jackson shifts back, his chest heaving with breath and adrenaline, turning towards us with blood dripping down his chin and over his shirt.

Jackson snarls, more wolf than man just now as he strides for me, even though he's in his human form. He holds a hand out, a demand, and I take it. He pulls me to my feet, looking me over, a snarl still slipping through his teeth.

A pulse of emotion comes down the bond – a question – needing to know that I'm all right.

I nod to him, shaken and afraid but fine.

"Let's go," he orders, low and grim.

"We can't leave him," I whisper, gesturing down at Gabriel.

"He is a king now," Jackson snaps, glaring down at Gabriel, a sneer on his lips. "Let him face his own people and whatever retribution they have for him."

I hesitate only a second before I nod, looking back down at Gabriel. "I have to go," I say, taking another step towards Jackson. Gabriel gapes at me, his heart clearly breaking. Because our bond – it is intact. And even if I am thoroughly, irrevocably dedicated to Jackson now – to Jackson alone – my wolf still howls at the thought of leaving him.

"Please," Gabriel says, shaking his head, begging. "Please, don't go -"

Jackson snarls and pulls me closer to his side.

I sigh and reach up for Jackson's face. He flinches away at first, still feeling very murderous – not at all in the mood to be cosseted – but he checks himself a moment later and ducks his head, submitting to my caress.