

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 541

“Jacks,” I say quietly, stroking a thumb over his bloody beard, loving him a great deal. “I need a minute with Gabriel alone.”

His eyes flash, accompanied by a rough snarl. Gabriel flinches back, but I just smile.

“No,” Jackson growls, pulling me closer.

I laugh a little and shake my head. “It wasn’t a request, baby.”

He takes a deep angry breath in through his nose, clearly mulling it over in his mind. When he exhales, his breath carries a heavy growl. “I am not leaving you,” he says, shaking his head.

But I just sigh and vanish us away to the Dark world, where we stand alone. “I’m going to take two minutes, Jacks. And then I’m coming back here.”

“Ariel,” Jackson snarls, shaking his head, not letting go of me.

But I step away, gently twisting my wrist in a request that he let me go. Not forcing him but...letting him know that I wish to be free.

“Two minutes, Jacks,” I say, looking him clear in the eyes. “And then the rest of our lives. Me and you. Okay?”

He huffs out a sigh, putting his hands on his hips, and then he hangs his head and nods, I think unable to turn down that offer. “I love you,” I say, beaming at him.

“Any sign of danger, Ariel,” he snarls, lifting livid eyes to mine. “And you cut that two minutes short.”

“I promise,” I say, pressing my hands to my chest. And then I vanish back to Atalaxia to say goodbye to my Prince.

When I appear back in the room with the Prince and the corpse of the King, I find Gabriel looking very pale.

“What am I going to do?” he murmurs, shaking his head. “How will I explain this?”

“Tell them the truth,” I say, kneeling next to him and looking a bit sorrowfully at the dead King. I mean, he was a horrible man, but the end of a life...it is always a weighty thing,

always significant. "Tell them Jackson did it. Or that I did. Blame Moon Valley, we'll be happy to take the credit."

Gabriel looks at me, his eyes full of wonder and a bit of fear. "I'm King."

"You're King," I say, reaching out to stroke a hand over his hair. "Can I trust you to rule well? Or do I have to kill you too?" Gabriel laughs for a second but then stills when he realizes that I mean it.

"I want to work with you, Gabriel," I say quietly. "But Atalaxia needs to change. No more enslaving humans. No more keeping women illiterate and confining them when they get their period."

Slowly he nods. "It will take time. But we can do it."

"Moon Valley will give you whatever aid we can if that's truly your goal," I say. "But if we get any information that it is not, we will destroy you. And the next time I come here, it will be with a knife at your throat."

"God damn it, Ariel," he says, laughing a little in shock, shaking his head. "I did not expect...you are a surprise."

"Yes," I murmur, smirking a bit. "You underestimated me. It was to my advantage."

"Please," he begs, shaking his head, lifting a hand to caress my face. "Please stay, Ariel. Stay with me. Be my Luna and my Queen – this world needs you – we could be so good together, and could truly change Atalaxia..."

But his words fade as I just look at him with a bit of pity in my eyes.

Gabriel sighs, his shoulders slumping. "You love that other one, don't you?"

I grin a bit. "You know his name."

Gabriel narrows his eyes. "Yes. I do. I know all about him, Ariel, and the Community too – probably more than you do. I also know that McClintock isn't even a real surname. You'd pick a nameless brute over a Prince? Over being Queen?"

"Your prejudice is showing, highness," I say with a smirk, my wolf growling warning in my soul. "Besides, you forget that my mother was an orphan too, that she was also nameless. But she's a Sinclair now. And she's made a magnificent Queen. I think Jacks and I will do quite well as a Sinclair."

Gabriel blushes and looks away, rueful. "I can't live up to him in your eyes, can I?"

"If it helps," I whisper, truly feeling sorry. "No one can."

“I still think I’m better looking,” Gabriel grumbles, discontent.

I just settle back my shoulders a little and smile. Because he is getting dumped, after all. I don’t need to rub it in by telling him that he’s wrong.

“Anyway, Gabe,” I say quietly, rolling up my sleeve and extending my arm to him. “I have to go. But I want your mark, if you’ll give it to me.”

He turns to me, his eyes wide. “What?”

“Your mark, please,” I say quietly, nodding down at my wrist. “Granny’s orders.”

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Gabriel laughs, low and pretty, and takes my wrist in his warm hand, tracing his fingers lovingly over my skin. A shiver passes through me and lovely sparks bloom in the air all around us, making us smile.

“Big demand to make of a King,” Gabriel murmurs, looking down at the soft flesh of my inner arm. “With nothing to offer in return.”

I laugh a little. “I already cleared you of Darkness today,” I say quietly. “What else do you want?”

“A kiss,” he answers, turning his pretty blue eyes back to me. My breath catches and my wolf yips excitedly in my soul, urging me forward.

Traitor, I growl at her, laughing inwardly.

He’s our mate too, she says, trotting around with her tail held high. Do it! Kiss him!

I smile at Gabriel. “One kiss. After the mark.” I nod decidedly at my arm.

He laughs again, throaty and sensual, and I have to admit...he is very sexy, when he’s not all consumed by darkness.

Do it, do it, my wolf chants. I give her a little smack on the rump, other ignoring her.

“She drives a hard bargain, my mate,” Gabriel murmurs, lowering his mouth to my arm. Gently, almost reverent, he presses a soft kiss there. And then he extends his fangs, and closes his eyes, and sinks them into my flesh, giving me his mark.

I groan, my head falling back on my neck – because it hurts like fucking hell – but it also – god, I can feel it, the bond ringing rich and true in our souls, the magic that floods over to me, his gift as much as my grandmother’s. I pant a little, my eyes pressed tight against the intensity of it, and as I try to balance the new fullness of my soul with the flash of pain that consumes my entire arm.

When it’s done, Gabriel lifts his face from my wrist and slips a hand behind my neck.

“The other half of the bargain now,” he murmurs and pulls me close, pressing his mouth to mine.

I moan a little at this too, tasting my blood on his lips, my wolf howling for want of him. Because it’s true – I do – I want him. I want to explore things with my most challenging mate, the only one who has ever truly stood up to me. I want to stay, and to help him get better, to help this entire land and all of it’s people.

I want him. I want him badly.

But...not nearly as much as I want Jacks. 1

I run my hands through his hair once, cupping the back of his head in my palm, and move my lips one last time against his before I pull away.

“Gabriel,” I whisper, smiling softly at him, regretting it but knowing what needs to be done.

He just looks back at me, his eyes half-lidded and stunned.

“Gabriel, I reject you,” I whisper, meaning it with every inch of my heart.

My wolf howls as she stands at the edge of the bridge between our souls, howling mournfully before she lowers her teeth to the edge of the bond and begins to tear it away.

Gabriel groans, reaching for me, his wolf howling horribly in pain as my wolf continues to destroy our bond. But even as pain races through me, even as I’m wracked with it, I hold on...

Hold on to just...one little piece, just like Luca did, at the end of his bond with me. One tiny piece to unite us forever. Because I can’t I can’t bear to let him go completely. He is mine, after all, as complicated as he is, as horrible as he’s been.

Gabriel – my Atalaxian Prince, my mate. He’s mine.

He groans again, slumping against me as my wolf finishes, panting and in pain.

“I’m sorry,” I murmur, stroking a hand over his hair. “I have to go.”

A heavy, demanding knock comes at the door just as Jackson appears at my side to loom over us, angry and worried.

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“Highness!” the voice commands. “Please, highness! Are you all right!?”

“It’s been three minutes,” Jackson growls.

Gabriel groans and pushes himself up straight, looking into my eyes one last time, devastated. Silently he nods, giving me permission to go.

I smile back at him even as I reach for Jackson’s hand. He pulls me shakily to my feet and sniffs my hair, starting back a step and frowning down at me. “Did you...”

“Let’s go, Jacks,” I say, exhausted and shaky after breaking the bond with my mate.

“Oh my god, Ariel,” Jackson murmurs, frustrated. He shakes his head even as he wraps me up in his arms. My eyes are on Gabriel for one last moment as Jackson and I tilt away to the Land of Darkness, leaving the Prince – now King – alone with the corpse of his uncle to face whatever fate awaits him. A fate of his own making, after all.

The Land of Darkness is surprisingly quiet when we arrive. I look around in surprise, searching for the soldiers I saw before. But the only thing I can see is the shadowy enclosure that still holds the God of Darkness – though it shudders once from the inside, clearly starting to weaken.

“Where...is everyone?” I whisper.

“Soldiers went away,” Jackson says, heaving an easy shrug, his eyes on me. Softly he pushes back my hair, inspecting my neck. “Well? Where is it?”

“Where’s what?” I ask, turning my head to look up at him.

Jackson just raises one eyebrow at me, willing me to remember.

“Oh,” I say, laughing and holding out my arm, which continues to ache, looking down at Gabriel’s mark still raw and bloody on my wrist. “Sorry, Jacks.”

He takes my arm in his hand and glances at my face once before returning his eyes to the wrist. “Did you want it?”

“I asked him for it.”

Jackson takes a deep breath and fixes his eyes on mine. “You know what I’m asking you, Ariel.”

I smile and pull my arm from his hands, letting it fall to my side as I reach my other arm up, cupping the soft skin of Jackson’s neck in my palm. “I wanted the magic, Jacks. I wanted to collect his mark, as my grandmother told me was my birthright. But the only mark I really want is yours. This one?” I glance down at the mark. “When it heals? It will already be faded. Yours I will carry forever.”

Jackson snarls, possessive, and pulls me close, looking intently down into my face. “Ariel,” he sighs, shaking his head as he stares at me like I’m the great mystery and frustration and love of his life. I beam back at him, sending all of my love down our bond in a heavy swell. “Can we go home, please?”

“Yes,” I say, smiling up into his face, blissfully happy even though we’re no where near out of trouble. “But, um...can you carry me?”

He looks at me with concern, his eyes scanning all over me, looking for a problem. “Why?”

“Because I just rejected my mate, Jacks,” I say, laughing and standing on my toes, reaching up, wanting him close. “And I’m all sick and exhausted.”

“Oh god, Ariel,” Jackson sighs, scooping me up into his arms and holding me close. “Of course I’ll carry you.” He presses a kiss to my forehead and nuzzling against me, warm and generous and kind as he always is, even if I now have a second mark that’s not his. My Jacks – always so good to me.

“I love you, Jacks,” I whisper, pressing a kiss to his shirt as I rest my head against his shoulder.

“I love you too, Ariel,” he replies, striding through the land of Darkness, clearly already knowing where he’s headed. “Where are we going?” I ask with a little frown.

“To my tent,” he says with a sigh. “To get my backpack and my ATV. And then we’re out of here.”

I blink up at him, surprised and confused. “You have a tent?”

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“Mids,” Jesse sighs, putting his hands on his hips and shaking his head at Midnight, exhausted and frustrated. He peeks over the top of the separating screen that Juniper gave them, well aware that the tent full of ambassadors and Atalaxian royals is listening to their heated conversation and casually pretending that they’re not.

“I don’t want to go,” Midnight growls, curled in a ball at his feet, her face tucked tight against her knees and her hands sunk deep in her hair. “You can’t make me!”

“I can’t make you,” Jesse agrees through his teeth, crouching down next to her. “But if we stay here, we’re all going to get killed.”

“We won’t get killed,” she hisses, whipping her face up to glare at him. “I will negotiate with Darkness when he breaks out of that stupid egg! I will assure him that we are still his humble servants! He’ll just kill all of them!” She jerks her head towards everyone else in the tent.

One of the eavesdropping ambassadors groans in fear. Another hisses at him to shut up.

“Oh, Midnight,” Jesse sighs, falling back on his ass and reaching out to stroke Midnight’s back. This conversation has been going on for...far too long. And every moment that passes gets a lot closer to that reality – to Darkness getting free, and coming here, and destroying them all.

Except, unlike Midnight, Jesse has no intention of declaring his fealty to evil or watching his countrymen die.

“What are you really scared of, Mids?” he asks, continuing to softly stroke her back. “What’s stopping you from letting me take you home and give you a wonderful life?”

She just shakes her head and tucks her face back against her knees, as she’s been doing this entire time.

“I mean, everyone’s going to be really nice to you,” Jesse says softly. “I’m sure they can’t wait to meet you. You’re going to have a fantastic life in Moon Valley.”

“They’ll make me be a whore,” she moans.

Jesse can’t help laughing, just a little. “Midnight, I promise, no one will make you be a whore.”

She goes silent and Jesse lets her have a moment to think.

When she speaks again, Midnight’s voice is softer than before, and laced with fear. “She’s going to take my magic from me,” she whispers.

“Who is?” Jesse asks, his shoulders straightening in surprise.

“The blonde rat!” Midnight moans, devastated at the idea.

Jesse frowns at his mate for a second, confused, and then bursts into a smile. “You mean Ariel?”

Midnight lifts her head and nods vehemently. But when she realizes that Jesse is laughing, she smacks at him, hard, with her tiny hand.

“It’s not funny!”

“I mean, calling Ariel a blonde rat is very funny,” Jesse says, scooting closer to Midnight and tugging her close. “But why would you think she would take your magic away?”

“Because she took that Prince’s magic away,” Midnight murmurs, leaning against him. “And now he’s all weak and useless.”

“And healthy,” Jesse adds. “And not corrupted. That darkness was making him horrible, Mids. He punched Ariel and... probably did all sorts of other awful stuff that the corruption made him do.”

Midnight turns her face up to Jesse’s, her eyes wide and sad and shining. “If you think the corruption makes people horrible,” she whispers. “Do you think I’m horrible?”

“I think you’re magnificent,” Jesse replies, stroking a hand over her hair, speaking his honest truth. “I think that whatever that darkness does to people, you’ve somehow managed to resist it for years. I think you’re a miracle.”

Her little mouth begins to tremble and Jesse’s whole heart aches.

“I have to admit, though,” he adds, soft. “It breaks my heart to see your little wolf sunk in the Darkness like that. I want to see her running free. And you too.”

Jesse’s wolf howls in his soul, standing at the edge and peering over at Midnight’s long-suffering wolf, sunk deep in the dark oil, panting hard, her eyes lit with a maniacal glow.

Midnight just slowly shakes her head. “Jesse, I don’t know who I am without the Darkness,” she says quietly. “I...I don’t remember agreeing to the bargain. I don’t remember...who I am.”

“You’ll still be you,” he whispers.

“What if I’m not?” she asks, tears slipping down her cheeks. “What if darkness is too much of who I am? What if I’m...gone?” Jesse sighs, completely without an answer for that concern. Because Midnight is right. Gabriel – his whole personality shifted when the darkness left him. Midnight – would she lose herself completely? Become someone else?

His wolf snarls at the idea, hating it. Because as strange as this little person is, she's already become so incredibly important to him.

"I promise you, Midnight," Jesse says, pressing his hand to his heart. "No one will force you to give up your magic or your darkness unless you ask it. I promise."

She looks away, clearly considering it.

"But Midnight, we've got to go," he says. "Darkness – he doesn't love you in the way you think he does. He doesn't care. He'll kill you along with the rest of us – I seriously think that's true. He thinks that you betrayed him – he'll take you out as a threat"

Midnight considers for a moment longer, beginning to rock back and forth, clearly torn and not handling this big decision well.

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"Do you...just want to go back to be with the whore?" she whispers.

Jesse grits his teeth against a sigh because...well. Because he does want to see Daphne again. Very, very badly. "Mids, I promise that I want to go back to keep us safe."

"Are you going to go to her?" she snaps, turning to him with a frown.

"You are my first priority," he says, assured, leaning close to her. "I actually want you two to meet

She snarls, turning away, and Jesse grimaces, realizing he may have said the wrong thing. "Midnight," he sighs, dropping his head into his hands. "Please."

"I don't want to leave my house," she says, quite mournful.

"You'll have a new house – a whole palace – "

"No," she snarls, starting to cry. "I want...this is my home, Jesse. It's the only home I've ever had."

He sighs and looks up at her again, realizing that his offer was callous. "Then we'll take it with us." "What?" she says, turning towards him in surprise.

“We’ll take it, the whole thing,” he says with a shrug. “Whatever you want, Mids. We’ll do it.”

“You’re not just saying that?” she whispers. “To make me go?”

“Midnight, I love you very much,” Jesse says, putting both of his hands on her shoulders. “I want you to have everything that you want and need. If that is this yurt, then hell yeah we’re taking it to Moon Valley.”

She looks to the side, her mouth twisting. “And I can decide...who comes in and out of the yurt?”

“Of course,” he says, his heart lifting.

She turns back just a little to glare at him from the corner of her dark eye. “So...I can have a rule? No whores in my yurt?”

Jesse works hard to fight his smile and fails. “Not a single whore in the yurt, Midnight. I promise.”

She exhales slowly with her eyes closed.

Jesse waits, barely breathing.

“Fine,” Midnight snaps, suddenly jumping to her feet. “But we have to go now.”

“All right!” Jesse says, jumping to his feet and very nearly knocking the screen down in his hurry to get everything sorted. “I need all hands dismantling this yurt, and everything inside it, into as small a package as possible! Everyone hold a little bit if you have to!”

The entire group just stares at Jesse for a long moment of shock.

And then at once, they leap to the task, hope humming through the room.

Midnight stands at Jesse’s side, watching everyone dismantle her home, tears in her eyes.

Mark and Rafe stand on the palace roof, watching as the helicopter comes in for the landing.

“Did we seriously have to come up here?” Mark sighs, shaking his head and glancing at his brother. “It’s not like Hank doesn’t know how to get inside.”

“Mom asked us to greet her friend,” Rafe bites out, glaring at his little brother. “So, we’re doing it.”

“Ariel’s in Atalaxia, Juniper’s in the freaking underworld, both of them facing death and negotiating wolf and cosmic power matches,” Mark mutters, scuffing the toe of his boot. “And we’re here saying hi to a delinquent.”

“Oh, be polite,” Rafe says, unable to help laughing a little as he gives Mark a little shove. “I’m sure even you can take a little human delinquent on. She can’t be that tough.”

“Mom said she got kicked out of school for trying to set it on fire,” Mark murmurs.

Rafe laughs and shakes his head, focusing on the helicopter as it begins to land. “She was suspended for being incendiary and rallying her fellow students to protest. That’s...very different.”

Mark mutters further discontent but Rafe ignores him, straightening his shoulders and preparing to meet Hank and his delinquent daughter with as much grace as he can muster. Hank called earlier, letting Ella know he had to bring his daughter along with him on the trip as there was no one to stay home with her and ensure that she didn’t get into any further trouble. Ella had, of course, been enthusiastic about the addition – but Rafe? He wasn’t so sure. She sounds like a handful and he doesn’t really want any further trouble right now, not with his life already falling apart.¹

Both Rafe and Mark watch closely as Hank steps out of the helicopter and waves to them before turning back to the door and getting in an argument with whoever is still inside.

Rafe grimaces a little as the argument continues for way longer than it should, until Hank has to reach bodily into the helicopter and yank his daughter forward.

The moment she appears – tall and slim, in baggy jeans and an oversized hoodie, a disgruntled sneer pasted over her mouth – Rafe’s expression drops from his face. ¹

His wolf goes still in his soul, staring forward at her.

Rafe’s heart basically stops beating as Hank and his daughter come forward, Hank arm wrapped forcefully around her elbow, obliging her to come along, clearly against her will.

But no...it’s impossible...Hank’s daughter, she’s...human... ²

“Hey Mark, Rafe,” Hank says, perfectly amiable, apparently missing the fact that Rafe is frozen to the spot and not breathing. “You remember my daughter, right? Say hello, Maryam.”

Maryam just sneers at the princes, clearly refusing to obey.

Rafe’s wolf howls in delight.

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The Land of Darkness hums in peaceful silence beneath its trio of moons. A dark weasel sets his little rump on the ground and sighs contentedly, raising his nose to the sky, sniffing in the cool night air. Or day air. It doesn't really know – it's all the same here. It begins to wonder if there's any wild cabbage growing close by –

WHAM.

The weasel screeches and turns on its tail, dashing away from the twenty-four people that suddenly appeared from absolutely nowhere, each with their arms full of a piece of yurt or a treasured possession.

“Are they all here?” Midnight gasps, dropping Jesse's hand and running around to check, her favorite little stuffed penguin still clutched to her chest.

“Um,” Elias says, standing on his toes and using his superior height to look around at all the ambassadors. “Yes, I'm counting twenty, and then all of us – I think we all made it -”

“Not all the people – I don't care about them -” Midnight snaps, glaring at Elias. “I'm talking about all the pieces of my house!”

“I'm sure it's all here,” Pippa says very soothingly, reaching out a hand to pat Midnight on the shoulder while Ben fights to keep his face straight, avoiding the urge to laugh. “We know how important it is to you, Midnight – we've all been very careful to make sure we got it all.” Midnight growls and flashes her teeth at Pippa, not trusting her. Not yet.

“Where...where is here?” Jesse asks, turning in a circle and peering around with a frown on his face. Honestly, it all looks... exactly the same as the place they just left. Just hills and waste in the darkness. Midnight promised that she'd vanish them all away to somewhere that lined up with Moon Valley but...god, how does she know?

“Can't you see my map?” Midnight says, turning away from the quiet and wide-eyed ambassadors who keep their respective yurt pieces held tight in their arms, awaiting further instruction and praying not to die.

“Map?” Jesse asks, frowning.

Midnight nods and points around at the ground. “See? All etched into the dirt. It's the map of your stupid Alpha castle with all the big boys running around in it.”

Jesse's eyes go wide as he sees what she's talking about – that Midnight has, indeed, painstakingly drawn out a map of Alpha Academy on the ground, presumably so that she could more effectively spy on him for Darkness.

“So...you...” he exhales sharply, hardly able to believe that it's so close – that this whole insane journey is so nearly finished.” That's where we are? One more vanish and we're... in Alpha Academy?”

“Well, that's what you wanted, isn't it?” Midnight snaps, turning to him and putting one hand on her hip. “That's what you made me give up my entire life for, and destroy my house, and betray the Dark God -”

“We're very grateful, Mids,” Jesse says, stepping forward and ending the harangue before Midnight can have a melt down and second guess herself yet again. “And trust me – it's right. But you can't take us to the palace? In the capital?”

Her little shoulders slump as she looks at him, tired and afraid. “I don't know where that is. I – it took a long time to find your stupid boy school.”

Jesse smiles at the description, stroking a hand over her hair, looking with a great deal of love at her dark eyes, her sad little face. “The Academy will do perfectly, Mids. Thank you so much. We're ready when you are, okay?”

He looks up around at all of the collected people, each of whom looks hopeful and excited, except perhaps Elias, who looks worriedly at Pippa, and Pippa herself, who stands with her eyes closed, her arm looped around her Alpha, her other balancing a basket full of Midnight's kitchen supplies.

“Where in the castle do you want to go?” Midnight whispers, looking up at Jesse with a great deal of faith in her eyes.

“Um, maybe to our room?” he offers, wanting someplace safe and secure for her to land.

“Okay, this way!” Midnight says, turning and striding off to another part of her little map. Jesse blinks when he recognizes the space that she walks over to – where Midnight has carefully detailed the shape of the room he shares with Rafe and Ariel, including the details of the location of their couch, their beds...

Damn, how much did she spy on them?

“Everyone stay in the lines!” Midnight calls as the entire group begins to step within the threshold of the map. “If you don't, you'll shift to Moon Valley inside a wall and then you'll be dead!”

Jesse spins to her with his eyes wide. “Is that true!?”

“No,” she grumbles as the gathered crowd gasps and presses in close to each other, fastidiously avoiding the lines that demarcate the sides of the room. “It will just be easier if we’re all together. If they’re scared they’ll listen to me.”

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Jesse stares at his little mate for a moment and then huffs out a laugh, shaking his head and taking her hand. “All right, Mids. Do your work.”

Everyone else again shuffles around and holds hands or otherwise makes contact with their neighbor so they can all travel together, quietly waiting, expectant.

Jesse watches closely as Midnight exhales a long breath, looking around at the Land of Darkness as if she’s saying goodbye to it. Jesse squeezes her hand and she looks up at him.

“You promise?” she whispers, a great deal of trepidation in her voice.

He gives her a soft smile in return, leaning close to press a kiss to her hair, knowing that she’s asking if he means it everything he promised her. That his family will be kind, that Ariel won’t take her magic away unless Midnight asks, that she will have a wonderful life.

“I promise, Mids,” he says, nearly a whisper. “Every word.”

Midnight exhales slowly and the entire crowd of twenty-four instantly disappears, nothing but their footprints left behind. 1 The Land of Darkness returns to its eternal state. Quiet, and dark, and peaceful beneath the sky lit by three moons.

I rest my cheek against the expanse of Jackson’s back, feeling mildly miserable physically, even if my wolf sings for joy in my soul. The ATV rumbles as Jackson drives it through the darkness of the Atalaxian night. My body moves and shifts along with it, jolting this way and that as we go, Jackson’s backpack shifting distractingly on my back as well. But even if I am not in the most comfortable sleeping position, I doze.

I slip in and out of sleep, my body exhausted from whipping from the extreme of a new mark to the rejection of a mate. All the while my left arm throbs, pain radiating from my wrist. Not for the first time in the past week I wish for my mother. God, having a magical healer in the family sure didn’t inculcate a very strong sense of pain tolerance in me, did it?

I lift my head slightly when the ATV begins to slow, blinking back to the present.

Jackson has been all business from the moment he started striding out of those cages in the Land of Darkness, me in his arms. There wasn't a great deal of small talk or conversation as he carried me across that wasteland and far enough outside the cages that when he shifted us back to our world we couldn't be seen from the Castle. Instead, Jackson concentrated singularly on finding his little campsite again, getting that packed up in under two minutes and then driving us hastily away.

"How are you?" he murmurs, bringing the ATV to a stop and then turning to me from his spot ahead of me, his long legs straddled on either side of the machine.

I give him a tentative smile. "I'm stiff and tired. But otherwise I'm great!"

"Great," he grumbles, shaking his head a little and huffing a doubtful laugh. "Ariel, you're always gorgeous, but for heaven's sake you look like you're going to fall off this thing."

"I do not," I murmur, frowning at him and sitting up a little. I immediately betray my over-confident assertion by tilting slightly to the side and losing my balance – just a bit.

Jacks laughs and flashes out a hand, catching me by the arm and setting me up right.

"Why'd we stop?" I ask as Jackson cups my cheek in his palm and passes me a little energy. "You stop that," I snarl, smacking his hand away. "You're running low, Jackson – even if you pretend you're not. You'll be a skeleton by the time we get home."

"I've been lower than this," he murmurs, giving me a smug little smirk and swinging his leg over the seat before standing straight. "And we're camping here for the night."

"What!?" I squeak, looking around at the seemingly random field, all tall green grass situated next to a pretty little stream. "Why!? Can't we go home? Can't we just...call my mom and make her send a helicopter!?"

Jackson laughs and shakes his head, taking a cell phone from its place in a little saddle bag on the side of the ATV. "Lost charge days ago."

"And you didn't bring a charger!?"

"Where would I plug it in?" Jacks asks, leaning down a bit to grin at me.

I scowl up at him, sighing a little with disappointment because...well, I really did want to get home to see all my family. And to just rest. "What's the point of a being a Princess if you can't call a helicopter up at will?" I grumble, crossing my arms over my chest with a pout.

"Poor baby," Jackson coos, a bit dry.

I laugh, looking up at my gorgeous mate, framed as he is against the star-lit sky above...

And I consider that...well. There are worse things than camping alone with your mate in the middle of nowhere, aren't there?

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"Plus," Jackson says, putting his hands on his hips and looking down at the ATV with an odd, almost fond expression. "The machine needs to charge. Clever little device, this is – doesn't need any power source to regenerate, just time."

My wolf grumbles a little, jealous, because quite frankly we want to be the only clever little thing that Jackson looks at that approvingly. I laugh at myself even as I slowly climb off the machine, knowing that I'm being ridiculous. "Is it safe?" I ask. "To stop here?"

I look over my shoulder at the expanse of Atalaxia that we've crossed, though of course I can't see far. The grass stretches for miles in quietly rolling hills. Earlier today we crossed desert wasteland too, but these grassy bits with occasional streams shallow enough for us to ride right through – I like them more.

"Should be safe, Atalaxia is big and they'd have to send out a hell of a lot of troops to find us," Jackson says, helping to steady me and then brushing my hair back over my shoulders when I stand straight and adjust the pack strapped to my back. "Besides, with the Atalaxian King dead and his heir being rather predisposed to like you...I don't think that there's going to be a big search party on our tail."

I laugh a little and grin up at my mate. "And even if they did, my clever Jackson was way too careful in covering our tracks, right?"

He barks out a little laughs and slips his arms around my shoulders. "I prioritized speed, Princess. We should hit the borders of Moon Valley tomorrow and then we can get home."

"So...we're spending the night here?" I ask, looking eagerly around. I mean, for all of Atalaxia's faults, this bright field is... pretty gorgeous, with the wind blowing softly through the grasses and all that expanse of sky overhead.

Jackson hums a confirmation and begins walking us towards the little stream. "Do you mind?" he asks, glancing down at me. "I know it's more rugged than you're used to."

"No, I love camping!" I say, genuinely enthused. "And honestly Atalaxia has ruined me a bit for luxury for a while. If I never see gold leaf again, it will be too soon."

Jackson smirks, nods, and kneels down by the stream, reaching up and giving me a little mental nudge that clearly requests the backpack. I hand it over, sitting down as Jackson pulls off his boots and then takes a little bar of soap and a bottle of water out of the bag, handing the latter to me.

I sip quietly at the water as Jackson pulls off his shirt and moves closer to the very shallow stream, putting his feet in and then dipping low to splash water up over his face, washing a great deal of King's blood off his face and chest.

My wolf and I sit very quietly as we watch Jackson's makeshift little bath, my shoulders and spine straight. Because...heavens. My fierce warrior mate, King's blood and fresh water running long down his body, rippling over his stomach. The blood of a King that my mate killed because he threatened me; a King whose death likely signals the end of a very long war.

Jackson cups his hands in the stream and closes his eyes, lifting the cool water up and over his head. He does this a few times, letting it run through his hair, which plasters thick and dark to his skull and neck. He exhales in relief at the sensation and my eyes move to the water that dribbles down over his full lips.

When he gives a wolfish shake of his head, sending water scattering in all directions, my mouth falls open slightly and my wolf shifts anxiously from paw to paw, a low whine sounding in her throat.

Slowly, Jackson opens his eyes and smirks at me. "Are you okay?"

"Oh, I am fine," I say, leaning back on one hand and giving him an obvious, appreciative glance up and down that makes him laugh. "I am just...enjoying the show."

Jackson smirks as he drops his eyes. "You're exaggerating," he murmurs, running his fingers through his mussed hair and tucking it back behind his ears.

"I'm like, really not, Jacks," I say, grinning at him. "Honestly, if I had a video camera right now, I suspect I could sell this footage for a great deal of money -"

He barks out a laugh and grins at me, reaching for my arm. "Come on, tiny," he says, beckoning. "Let's get you cleaned and wrapped up so your mother doesn't scold me when I bring you home all wounded."

"Oh, as if Queen Ella could ever be mad at you," I say on a happy sigh, scooting closer and lifting my wrist as Jackson reaches into the pack and pulls out some basic antibiotics and gauze. "Her perfect orphan baby who has now saved me twice? You won't be able to do any wrong in her eyes."

Jackson takes my arm and dips a little piece of gauze into the clear stream water, beginning to dab quietly at Gabriel's mark, cleaning it up. "Think this is enough to take Rafe's spot as favorite?"

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"Oh, I think he should be worried," I say, soft and cheerful. A corner of Jackson's mouth turns up but he concentrates on his work, ensuring that the mark is perfectly clean before dabbing some antiseptic cream on it and wrapping it in fresh white cloth.

When he's finished, Jackson ties a little bow around the bandage and then surprises me by taking my hand in his, ducking his head, and then pressing first one quick kiss to my bandaged wrist and then another to the bare skin above it.

I blink at him as he raises his eyes to mine. "What was that for?"

He frowns a little. "I need an excuse to kiss you now?"

I tilt my head. "I just...never imagined you'd have the impulse to kiss the space on my body where another man has marked me. Even if it is under gauze."

Jacks slips his hand up to my elbow before giving me a little tug towards him, catching me and pulling me into his lap when I tilt forward. I smile, nuzzling my face against his bare chest, quite happy to be there.

"I've told you before, Ariel," he says very softly, the words resonating against my cheek as they echo in his chest. "I love every part of you, marked or not. And I've been thinking about it a lot – I'm...incredibly jealous of both Luca and Gabriel for having some claim on you. Some part of me, selfish or biological, wants you all to myself. And I don't know if I'm sorry about that."

I tilt my head up, peering curiously at the sharp contours of his beautiful face.

He shrugs, like whether or not guilt in this situation barely matters. "But either way, Ari – these marks are... part of your story, part of your power. Beyond not wanting you to ever be ashamed of them, or think that I don't like them, I want you to know that I accept them. I'm proud of them – proud of you. So incredibly proud of you – every piece. Every piece. I'm very sorry if I made you feel otherwise – I was selfish and... unthinking. You'll have to forgive me."

My eyes fill with tears as I just stare up at him, completely blown away. Because how can he be so good? This man whose early life subjected him to such neglect and deprivation – how has he grown to be the most forgiving, accepting, wonderful person? With the most open heart?

Jackson lifts a hand to brush warm over my hair, making me smile. “How can I begrudge these marks when they gave you the power to end a war? I couldn’t bear to be so greedy. You are my mate,” he says, his voice dipping low with both possession and love. “But you are still Moon Valley’s Princess. And I love and admire and respect how seriously you take that role. Seriously, Ariel, you can’t know how much.”

“But you ended the war,” I say, my voice all creaky with emotion, a few tears finding their way out of the corner of my eyes. You’re the one who killed the King -”

He smirks. “That was the easy part. Just a little flash of fangs. You’re the hero of this entire story, Princess. Twenty years of war and then you’re on the scene for what, a month? And it’s done.”

I shake my head, denying it, knowing it’s more complicated than that. Still, I reach my arms up, wrapping them around his neck, wanting to be held tighter, closer. “I couldn’t have done it without you. Not an inch. You’re not taking enough credit.”

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“Yes, I am,” he murmurs, wrapping me up and holding me close. “You did it, but I’m taking full credit for the assist. Be sure to emphasize this to your dad, please, when we get home, so that he accepts me as your mate. He was probably mad when I left – I was disobedient, which I know is not his favorite characteristic. Your mom and I kind of...arranged it without his knowing.”

I burst into a little laugh, my body shaking against his, and I pull my head back a little to smile into my mate’s face. “Oh, I think he’ll forgive you, Jacks.”

“Just talk me up anyway, okay?” Jackson replies, smiling back – that rich, joyous smile. He takes a slow, deep breath, again running his hand over my hair. “Come on. Let’s get you to bed.”

My wolf howls with joy and I wiggle excitedly against him, making him laugh again as he gets to his feet and carries me back to the ATV and all of our supplies so that we can set up camp.

After all, I will certainly need to get some sleep tonight, exhausted as I am.

Yes, sleep is certainly a priority, I think, stifling a yawn and leaning against my mate’s chest.

Yes, a little tent, and a nice warm blanket, and some sleep...eventually.

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The moment Jesse's feet hit the familiar floor of his bedroom at Alpha Academy he snarls, spinning his head left and right, one arm wrapped firm around Midnight, holding her close. A series of gasps echo throughout the room as the ambassadors stumble a little, finding their footing-

But beyond that? No sounds echo through the air. He lifts his nose, sniffing, attempting to scent anyone strange...

His heart pounds for a moment or two more but Jesse relaxes, just a touch, when he realizes that they are indeed alone. "All right!" Jesse barks out, drawing all eyes in the room to him as he begins to move, ushering Midnight along with him from his place next to the coffee table over to Ariel's nook. "I need Ambassadors by the door - we're taking you downstairs so that we can contact the capital and your loved ones! Please leave the collective yurt pieces and belongings here!"

The ambassadors all gently begin to put what they're holding on the floor and then move towards the door.

Midnight looks up at Jesse, clearly terrified, as he pushes back the familiar curtain that hides Ariel's bed. As he does, her and Jackson's lingering scents hit him hard - god, how long has it been since they were all here together? Since their lives just... completely fell apart?

Will they ever be the same - and quite as good - ever again?

Jesse doesn't let himself dwell for long on the question as nineteen ambassadors move for the door.

"Ben?" Jesse calls, making eye contact with him and Elias and Pippa, gesturing for them to come over to the nook as well. The three do, the Atalaxians - especially Pippa - looking incredibly nervous.

"How are you?" Jesse asks the young woman, his eyes sweeping worriedly over her, especially noting the protective hand she keeps on her round belly.

“Um,” she says, her voice pitched high, quite shrill as she looks up at her Alpha. “I’m fine? I think? Um...” she moves her anxious gaze back to Jesse for a moment and then dropping it. “Are we...are we your prisoners, your Grace? How can we expect to be...treated?”

“What?” Jesse asks, baffled for a second.

But then he realizes that these are indeed two very high-ranked Atalaxian royals – the heir to the throne and his pregnant Luna, in fact. And, considering they’re still technically at war with Atalaxia, important political persons indeed.

“Oh my god, Pippa,” Jesse says, reaching out a hand and settling it on her shoulder. He removes it instantly when she flinches away. “I’m sorry – apologies – but no, you’re our honored guests.” He looks solidly between Elias and Pippa. “I mean, I know this is weird and complicated – and Ben probably understands the complexities of this better than I do –”

An assured nod from Ben puts Jesse’s heart at ease that he does, indeed, have a plan.

“But please,” Jesse says, pressing a hand to his heart. “You’re certainly not a prisoner. I’d like you to come back to the Palace with me? To meet my parents, and the King and Queen? But I swear, you’ll be treated with the utmost respect at every turn. I’m very aware that you came along on this little journey willingly.”

Relief crosses both Elias and Pippa’s face as they glance at each other and then, as one, nod to Jesse, accepting these terms.

“And what about me?” Midnight asks, quite squeaky, her hands clasped anxiously together in front of her stomach, her shoulders tight.

“You,” Jesse says, turning to his little mate and giving her a happy smile. “Are a Moon Valley citizen now, Mids. And a very high ranking one. So, it’s your job, in my stead, to make sure our guests feel at home.”

Jesse gestures towards the nook, indicating that they should all climb in. As he does he glances again at Ben, hoping to hell that Ben understands the true instruction here: that he is in charge, and it’s his job to keep Midnight calm.

“Why?” Midnight asks, her head whipping from side to side as she reads between the lines of Jesse’s sentences and realizes that he’s not staying with them. “Where – where are you going?”

“I’m just going to go call my dad, Mids,” Jesse says quietly, bending down to look her in the eye. “So he can send a helicopter. And bring us home.”

Her eyes go wide. “What’s a helicopter?”

“I’ll tell you all about it,” Ben says cheerfully, pointing to some of Ariel’s little library on her desk. “Plus, we can order up lots of food – whatever you want. All sorts of good things.”

Jesse takes in a deep breath and beams at Ben – because that’s a great idea.