

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 571

When Jackson and I come out of my room a little while later, in fresh soft clothes and all cleaned up, the party is in full swing. I laugh to see my family so heartily celebrating my homecoming, and my newly mated status, and Jackson's addition to the family, and the end of the war.

But still, my wolf howls a little when it becomes immediately apparent that one little thunder cloud isn't here, lurking in the corner and glaring around at everyone, pretending not to have any fun at all.

I sigh, leaning against Jacks and taking a long sip of my wine. He tightens his arm around my shoulder, looking down at me." You okay?"

"Yeah," I say on a soft sigh, my eyes still moving over my wonderful, happy family. "Just...missing Junie. Wishing she was here."

He hums his understanding and tightens his arm, sending a great deal of warmth and love and support down the bond. I smile up at him, truly appreciating that he doesn't try to convince me not to be sad or worried for her. He just hears me, and understands, and wants to comfort in whatever way he can.

"Hey, I love you," I say softly, my face breaking into a smile as I gaze up at him.

His own face breaks instantly from serious repose to happiness, such a drastic change that shifts his whole face from...well, frankly from terrifying to lovely. He grins at me, stroking a hand long over my still-damp hair.

"I love you too, tiny," he says on a happy sigh. "Very much. Now come on, let's go tell everyone the King of Atalaxia is dead." "You don't think they know?" I ask, my eyes wide.

"It wasn't on any of those tabloids," he murmurs, ushering me into the room. "Who knows what the hell is going on. Let's go find out."

We join the warm, well-lubricated party and, to my great joy, four newcomers soon join us – two of whom I was expecting and two who are very much a surprise to me. I give Elias and Benny warm hugs and kisses, asking after Pippa – who truly is feeling her pregnancy at this point – before moving very quickly to the other two, curious about their presence. Jackson stays with Elias and Ben, wanting more details.

"Hi, Dr. Hank!" I say, laughing a little as I stand on my toes to hug the doctor, who is indeed quite tall for a human. "It's so nice to see you! I didn't know you were here!"

“Lucky coincidence, highness,” Hank says, returning my hug and giving me a warm smile. “I’m so, so glad you were able to return safe.” He steps back from me and turns a little, gesturing towards the young woman behind him who...

Well. Who certainly brings Juniper’s thunder-cloud energy, if perhaps with a slightly spicier vibe.

“You remember my daughter, Yes? Mary-”

“Maryam, of course!” I say, laughing and rushing forward to wrap Maryam in a hug.

“Whoa,” she says, laughing and stumbling back a step, hesitating before giving me a very slight hug in return and patting me on my back. “Enthusiastic as ever, Ariel. It’s nice to see you, I guess.”

I laugh a little, pulling away, a bit confused about this taciturn greeting from my childhood friend but...well, we haven’t seen each other in a long time, have we?

“How’ve you been?” I ask, beaming at her, a bit wide-eyed. God, Maryam sure did grow up well, didn’t she? She was always a bit of a plain kid, but now? With that tall, willowy figure that somehow also manages to have curves, and those dark, heavy-lashed eyes, and all that gorgeous hair flowing halfway down her back? Damn, is she a model now? I feel like I should be seeing her on the cover of every magazine.

“I’m fine,” she says, dry, giving a shrug. “Here under duress and protest.”

“Our beloved Maryam got suspended from her college for the rest of the semester,” Hank says, wrapping an arm around his daughter’s shoulders, mock proud. “She’s taking the time to think about balancing her priorities alongside her temper.”

“It wasn’t temper that got me kicked out,” Maryam says, leaning a little against her dad but keeping her eyes on me, her mouth quirking. “It was the institution’s inability to admit their complicity with genocide and pro-wolf politics at the expense of their human students.”

She gives a casual shrug as my eyebrows go up in surprise. But then my face breaks into a huge smile because as cold and critical as Maryam is...I don’t know! I just like her immediately.

After all, one rule breaker tends to quite like another.

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“Cool!” I say, tucking my hands behind my back. “I left school for a little bit too. To like. Fight in the war and stuff.”

“I know,” she says, sighing and looking away like she hates to give me a compliment. “I think it’s...really cool that you infiltrated an all-male academy and kicked the ass of all the Alphas in there and also in Atalaxia. That was really badass, Ariel.”

“Thanks!” I say, perky, grinning at her.

She turns her face back to me, the corner of her mouth pulling up into a smile she can’t help. I wrinkle my nose at her and nod towards the room, inviting Maryam and Hank further inside.

The mood in the room stays high even as the conversation turns a bit, then, to more serious matters. The children, as they frequently do when they’re bored with us talking about politics and “adult stuff,” shift into their pup bodies and chase each other around the room, nipping and wrestling a little in the corners. I laugh as I watch them, not missing the fact that while Hank looks perfectly at ease with this, Maryam – sitting in the corner of the couch – watches with wide-eyed surprise. 1

Rafe settles next to her, offering her a drink that she just rolls her eyes at. He sighs and drinks it himself all in one go.

I snuggle close to Jackson’s side on a little loveseat, filling my family and friends in on all the details of my experiences in Atalaxia, which takes quite some time. Jesse, Ben, Jacks, and Elias jump in on the story too, elaborating with their perspective on the experiences. Dad and Roger listen closely to the close of the story, their glances at each other letting us know that they suspected that the King was dead but that they hadn’t had confirmation of it yet.

“Um,” I say, a little awkward, glancing down at my wrist. “Has there been any communication from...the royal family there?” I glance at Elias here, who likewise looks at my dad. “From Prince...um, from King Gabriel?”

“No,” dad says on a sigh, holding my gaze and then looking over at Elias. “Our army has the castle under siege but even without Gabriel’s magical ability to create a barrier they’re pretty effectively locked down.”

“Why don’t you just break in, guns blazing?” Jesse murmurs, sitting on the floor and leaning back against the armchair on which our moms sit, wedged in together. I smirk at

Jesse, recognizing the languid way in which he's talking, thinking that he's sure enjoying his whiskey after so much yurt-life deprivation.

"Because," Roger says, smirking at his son. "We're not actually attempting to destroy Atalaxia or take it over. We don't want to make it a part of Moon Valley, as was Atalaxia's plan for Moon Valley if they won the war." He glances at Elias here, who awkwardly hangs his head. Ben puts a warm and assuring hand on his back, making me smile.

"So, what are you trying to do?" Maryam snaps out. "Just...violence for violence's sake?"

"Yes," Jesse replies, baring his teeth at her for the fun of it. "We wolves just need blood – gallons of it every day –"

He stops and laughs when his mother scowls and smacks him over the head with the flat of her palm.

"

"We have plans," my dad says, looking at Maryam with a soft smile, "to work with Atalaxia's new King to establish better relations between our two peoples so that our nations can be mutually supportive in the future."

"And the humanitarian crisis there?" Maryam asks, arching an eyebrow at the King, not backing off an inch. Rafe sits weirdly straight at her side, not looking at her, but every inch of him attuned to the conversation. I frown as my eyes pass over him because...why is he being so serious?

"We're working very hard to solve that," my mom says, her voice soft and pleased. All heads turn to her. "We're sending crisis troops in now to help anyone who wishes to leave Atalaxia to do just that. But the ideologies under which Atalaxia exists are well entrenched; we can't simply force people to see rights and culture the way that we do. They have to want to change."

Maryam twists her lips to the side and nods, accepting this answer and the complexities it implies. She sinks contemplatively back into her pillows. Rafe, to my surprise, lets out a long relieved breath and takes another long sip of his drink – the one he's refilled twice now.

My frown deepens as I study my brother because...honestly, why on earth is Rafe being so weird?

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I look over at Mark to find him likewise studying Rafe in the same way I am, confused. Jesse clears his throat and I look over to see him nodding eagerly to me, darting his eyes over at Rafe, letting me know that he, too, clearly sees that something is up.

“Well!” Mom says, smacking her leg and getting hastily up, dislodging Cora, who gives a tiny yelp as she spills to the side. “I need a refill. Who else!?”

Rafe immediately stands, as do others, and Jesse takes the opportunity to scootch over to me.

“Hey,” Jesse whispers, looking up at me from the floor with a grin, “want to go visit Midnight and talk about how weird Rafe is being?”

“Yes!” I gasp, jumping to my feet. I turn to Jackson with a grin. “You in!?”

“No, I want to have a word with Hank,” Jackson says, standing and pressing a kiss to my hair. “You go...if...” he frowns, turning to Jesse as he stands up. “You’ll keep her safe, right?”

Jesse pauses, going a bit still, and then breaks out into a laugh. “Jacks, she has full goddess-controlled fire magic now. She’ll be keeping me safe.”

“Yeah,” I say, grinning up on my mate and flicking blue flame to life in my palm, letting it play over my fingers. “No worries, baby. I’ll be all right.”

Jackson grumbles, truly not liking to leave my side, but he bends low to press a quick kiss to my lips. He also very subtly, surreptitiously swats my ass before striding away, making me yelp and then laugh. Jesse grabs my hand, grinning at me, and tugs me quickly from the room.

“Nooo,” I cry, glancing back towards the party, “we forgot wine! I need more wine! They didn’t give me any wine in Atalaxia, and Jackson didn’t think to pack any for his weird solo trip -”

“There’s wine on the roof!” Jesse protests, laughing and hauling me along. As we run suddenly a group of little puppies come spilling out of the party room, chasing us and yelping their eagerness to come along.

“We’re going to the roof!?”

“You said you wanted to see Mids, didn’t you?” he replies, grinning at me. My eyes widen as I realize the connection here and I hasten my steps, pounding after Jesse down the hall and then up the staircase to our little roof garden.

I gasp as soon as Jesse pushes the door open, my eyes flashing wide to take in the sight of...

God, of an enormous yurt taking up the vast majority of the space.

I burst out laughing as I realize, immediately, precisely what it is.

“Jesse!” I gasp, grabbing him into a big rough hug even as the pups all come dashing up the stairs and into the garden, yelping and barking their joy. “I can’t believe you did this for her! You are – you are so nice!”

He laughs, blushing a little, hugging me back and then running a bashful hand through his hair. “Yeah, well, it’s her house. She didn’t want to leave without it.”

“Oh my god Jesse,” I grumble, tears springing to my eyes again and I wrap him again in a hug. “You’re so secretly sweet. I love you so much.”

“Yeah, well,” he sighs, patting my back. “Don’t give me too much credit.”

I hug him for a moment more while the pups set up a racket, barking at the flap that functions as a door to the front of the yurt. And even as I smile and laugh at the sight of them, my heart suddenly seizes as I remember that...

That I have a friend. Who I have spent far too little time thinking about in the past few days. A friend to whom Jesse was likewise just as secretly sweet, if, perhaps, in not so performative a way.

I push away from Jesse with a little gasp, looking at him, a little afraid to ask.

My cousin sees my face and immediately senses the direction of my thoughts. “Don’t, Ari,” he begs, his expression falling slack. “Not – not here, okay?” He nods his head towards Midnight’s yurt.

I immediately understand his complicated situation and force myself to tuck the question away, my emotions with it.

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But there wouldn't be time to ask anyway as a fairly feral cry sounds within the yurt. My head snaps towards it, shocked, as all five pups start barking with increased fervor, Chase even beginning to spin in eager circles at the sound.

"What is happening?" I whisper.

"Oh, just watch," Jesse murmurs, wicked and delighted.

I do as he says, my eyes trained on the yurt as Midnight suddenly appears, whipping the tent's flap back, her face furious. "You pups!" she shouts, holding out a toy gun with what looks like a thousand soft foam darts attached. "I told you to stay away from my yurt! You're worse than the whores!"

The pups yelp in delight as they dash for her, playing, pretending to leap at her and then dashing away as she sprays them with foam bullets, shouting at them to get away from her house, and to never come back again, that they'll rue the day they ever crossed her door and disturbed her solitude.

I burst into hysterical laughter, leaning against Jesse for support as the pups come again and again, clearly delighting in the game – although it becomes immediately aware, at least to me, that to Midnight? It is not a game.

"Jesse!" Midnight shouts, frowning desperately at him and waving the gun in the air. "You said this would make them go away!"

"No," Jesse calls over, laughing with me, his arms crossed as he beams at his funny little mate. "I said it would help. But you misinterpreted me, I meant it would help me have a great deal more fun."

Midnight scowls at him, narrowing her eyes, her shadows beginning to overtake her form. "You get these mongrels you call siblings away from my house!" she snaps, glaring at him hard. "No children allowed! No pups!"

Jesse Whistles, long and sharp, and the pups all go still before seeming to sigh and turn towards him, obeying even though they're sad that the game is over.

"Mids is tired," Jesse says to them all with a shrug. "You can come bother her again tomorrow. Go downstairs and make Aunt Ella give you chocolate, okay?"

The pups all glance at each other, clearly considering their options, and then Caleb barks and leaps for the door, all the rest of the pups following after him and flowing down the stairs, leaving the rooftop shockingly quiet.

"How come they don't listen to me when I tell them to go away?" Midnight sulks, pouting at Jesse, her toy gun still hanging from her hand.

“Because they just love you so much, Mids!” Jesse says, grinning at her and striding for the little wine fridge we keep up here, pulling out a bottle. “They don’t want to leave your side, but they don’t mind leaving mine, as I am both cruel and boring.”

“True,” Midnight says, cocking her head to the side as she considers this point. Then, perhaps for the first time tonight, she turns her eyes to me. “Hello, Blonde Rat. It is nice to see you.”

I perk up a little, curious. “Blonde rat?”

She just shrugs like it’s a fact, her eyes moving to my neck. “I like your new mark.”

“Thank you!” I say, cheerful and beaming.

“Is it from Jackson?” she asks, cocking her head. “Or the fancy one?”

“Both, actually,” I say, holding out my wrist so she can see my bandaged arm.

“Lucky,” she says, scowling and shifting her eyes to glare at Jesse as he comes over with three glasses and a cork screw.

He ignores her. “You going to invite us in, Mids?”

She narrows her eyes at me. “Are you going to use all your blue fire to take away my darkness and my magic?”

“Oh!” I say, kind of shocked by this question – honestly, the thought never crossed my mind. “Um, no? Not if you don’t want me to?”

“Then yes!” Midnight says, breaking into a smile, quite pleased, gesturing grandly towards the inside of her yurt. “If you promise not to take my magic then you are more than welcome, Ariel. Please come in.”

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I laugh and happily move forward with Jesse, ducking into the yurt and looking around with curiosity at the surprisingly large, semi-shabby space. Some things were very obviously brought over from the Land of Darkness – like her bed and some of her pots and pans. But some things are very obviously new, and very obviously Ella additions.

“Oh, I like your tiny fridge,” I say with an admiring gasp, taking a seat on a pillow on the floor around what I assume is Midnight’s eating area. I lean close to admire the shiny black mini fridge in Midnight’s makeshift kitchen, which is only an arm’s length away.

“Thank you,” Midnight says, patting the fridge, very pleased as she sits down across from me. Jesse sits down next to both of us so that we form a little semi-circle and begins to open and pour the wine as I continue to look around at Midnight’s strange little home. The whole space speaks of so much deprivation and sadness but bizarrely also holds an adorable array of toys and supplies and books – even a little television in the corner with a DVD player attached and what looks like dozens of movies resting next to it on the floor.

“You’ve got a lot of good stuff here, Mids,” I murmur, still looking around.

“Yes,” Midnight says, confirming this with a steady nod. “Miss Ella has given me lots of Orange Soda and I like that very much once I stir it so all the bubbles come out. She says that I can have as I want any time I want and all I have to do is order up more.” Midnight leans over to tap on a little walkie-talkie that’s resting on the floor. ¹

“Well, that is very convenient,” I say, nodding appreciatively as I accept the glass of wine from Jesse and take a sip from it. He pours himself one too and then, to my delight, pulls a can of orange soda out of the fridge and empties it into the third wine glass, offering it to Midnight, who takes it very lightly and grabs a straw, beginning to stir out the carbonation.

“How are you liking it here, Mids?” I ask quietly, curious.

“I like it a lot. I like the bathroom,” Midnight says, gesturing out of the tent towards the corner of the roof where, indeed, my mom had a full bathroom put in a few years ago. “It is sometimes strange and scary here, with all the planes and helicopters going on overhead, but,” she shrugs. “I like it better here. There is more food and things to do and Jesse is here.”

She nods casually to him and Jesse raises his glass towards her in salute, which breaks my heart just a little bit.

“Plus, Miss Ella says I can start going to school and learn a lot more – she says I’m smart,” Midnight says, perking up quite a bit at that idea. “I would like to learn more. My brain...got very bored, all alone in the Darkness.”

I work very, very hard not to cry for this girl, instead swallowing and forcing a smile onto my face.

“That’s fantastic, Mids.” I say, forcing myself to be cheerful. Jesse smirks at me, knowing me well enough to tell precisely what’s going on in my heart and my mind. “Any downsides yet?”

She narrows her eyes at me. “The pups.”

I burst out laughing, grinning at her. “You don’t like Jesse’s siblings? But they’re so cute!”

“Did you know there were five of them, Ariel?” Midnight asks, looking at me with wide eyes like it’s an unbelievable number. ” And each louder than the next!”

“They’re a rambunctious group, for sure,” Jesse says with a casual shrug, smiling with pride at the thought of the ducklings. “I don’t know why anyone would want one of those,” she says, staring at the door, a little appalled as she leans back on one hand, shaking her head, her pretty curls bouncing. “Darkness told me that it was my job to have eighteen of Jesse’s pups and to raise them all in his honor but... Miss Cora told me that I get to decide how many pups I have. And that I can have none, if I don’t want any.”

I look in a bit of shock between Midnight and Jesse.

“Yes,” Jesse murmurs, a bit dry, taking a long sip of his drink. “Many of Midnight and my early conversations revolved around the many children she wished me to sire.”

“Jesse,” I breathe, shaking my head at him, appalled.

He bursts out laughing, giving a shrug. “Hey, I was always on team no pups,” he says, his shoulders shaking with it.

“I should have listened to you from the start,” Midnight says, reaching behind her to take a packet of my favorite cookies off of the shelf behind her. “But...Darkness said it was my destiny and no one told me otherwise. But pups are very loud and very messy and I don’t want any of them in my house ever.”

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“Wait till you meet an infant one,” I say, raising my eyebrows as Midnight offers me the packet of cookies and I take a few, popping one into my mouth. “They’re really loud.”

“Pippa has promised me that I can meet her pup when she is born,” Midnight says, nodding to me eagerly. “I’m excited to see if she will be as loud as everyone says.’

”

“Babies are also super cute,” I say, laughing and shaking my head at her. “It’s not all bad.”

“Don’t try to talk me into bearing Jesse’s pups, Ariel,” Midnight says, holding up a hand flat towards me. “The other Rat already gave me a book describing how they are made and I am not interested in any of that.”

I smile at Midnight in a bit of wonder, shifting my eyes to Jesse, having no idea what she’s talking about. But he just grins at me and leans forward. “So, what was up with Rafe?” he asks, eager and gossipy.

“Yes!” I gasp, dropping the cookies onto the floor as I whip my hand out to smack him on the knee. “What was up with him!? Why was he all silent and tense and weird!?”

“I don’t know,” Jesse says, equally baffled and eager to talk to me about it.

“What happened?” Midnight asks, curious, likewise leaning forward. I grin to see that even if she’s new and bizarrely out of touch with the world, she’s already caught the Sinclair flair for drama.

Jesse and I take a quick moment to fill Mids in on how weirdly quiet Rafe was tonight, and how much he was drinking, and how he would go all tense and turning towards Maryam whenever she would talk. And then how when she’d finish speaking he’d slump back into the pillows like he was at turns relieved or devastated or one of a thousand other emotions.

“I mean is he sick?” Jesse asks, peering at me. “Did he like...eat a bunch of psychedelic mushrooms in anticipation of the party?”

“Maybe food poisoning,” I say slowly, agreeing.

“Sounds like he just met his mate,” Midnight says, taking a casual sip of her orange soda.

We both go still and stare at her.

“What?” I ask, leaning forward towards her.

“All the things you’re saying,” Midnight says, reaching for one of the cookies I dropped. “It just sounds like the way people feel when they meet their mate. Fascinated, acting all strange. I mean, I followed Jesse around all googoo-eyed for days in the shadows, listening to his every word, watching him sleep, thinking he was the most fantastic thing ever.”

“You did?” Jesse asks, his eyes flying wide.

“Rafe just sounds like his wolf is adjusting,” Midnight says, putting her soda down as she ignores Jesse and keeps her eyes on me, stretching her arms above her head with a yawn. “And maybe he’s ashamed of her so he hasn’t told his whole family that she’s his mate yet.”

“But Mids,” I say, leaning forward and shaking my head at her. “She can’t be his mate – Maryam is a human.”

“I know,” Midnight says, rolling her eyes at me. “I met her. She is very weak and ineffectual, as most humans are, so if she is Rafe’s mate then I will feel sorry for him. But Darkness always used to grumble on about that – about how it was the Goddess’s first born grandchild’s destiny to unite the human and the wolf worlds, and what he could do to stop it -”

Jesse and I both freeze.

“I mean, I didn’t think the prophecy would be fulfilled so literally as having Rafe be mated to a human but,” Mids shrugs and takes a sip of her drink. “Who knows. Maybe the Goddess is dull and unimaginative.”

She looks between the pair of us, still staring at her shocked and frozen.

“What?” Midnight asks with a frown. “What’s wrong? What did I say?”

As one Jesse and I whip our heads to each other and then scamper to our feet.

“Did you know about this?” I gasp out.

“No, I fucking didn’t!” He snarls, storming for the tent door. “Rafe!” he shouts out into the night, even though there’s no chance that Rafe is going to hear him.

“Okay, bye!” Midnight calls after us, completely unperturbed by our abrupt departure, perhaps not fully understanding how rude we’re being. “Don’t let the children up! And bring me cake when you can!”

I wave to Midnight over my shoulder as I begin to sprint after Jesse down the stairs.

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Rafe takes a deep breath after he swallows another gulp of whiskey, looking around at his family and friends who are mingling around the room on Ella’s little drink break. God, but he was grateful for that. Every time Maryam opens her mouth he’s terrified and his wolf is thrilled – just trying to balance the two conflicting states takes absolutely every ounce of his energy. He can hardly pay attention to anything else.

He glances down at his glass, thinking that the whiskey certainly is helping, the fuzz in his mind likewise keeping his wolf fuzzy. But he can't stay drunk his entire damn life. His eyes stray – as they keep doing – to where Maryam is standing with her father, chatting casually with Cora.

“You good?” Jackson asks, stepping close, sipping at his own glass of whiskey, half a sandwich in his hand.

Rafe smirks, looking between Jackson and the food. “How much do you have to eat?” he asks, laughing a little. “To get back to where you were, weight-wise?”

“Way more than this,” Jackson murmurs, taking another big bite of the sandwich and seeming to swallow it whole. Rafe laughs. “But seriously, are you good?” Jackson repeats, his brows knitting together just slightly as he looks Rafe up and down. Rafe frowns. “I’m fine. What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the fact that Jesse and Ariel scampered out of here a little bit ago to talk about how weird you’re being,” Jackson murmurs, finishing his sandwich in one more big bite.

Rafe’s mouth falls open and then he snaps his head to the side, his eyes flashing around the room to see...god, to see everyone looking at him a bit askance. His mom quickly draws her gaze away, looking up at the ceiling, pretending she wasn’t just staring worriedly at him. She smacks Dominic on the arm and he, too, stops staring at his son a moment later.

“Oh my god,” Rafe breathes, returning his attention to the big Alpha next to him. “Does...does everyone think I’m being weird!?”

“Yes,” Jackson replies, completely casual, scanning the room for another tray of sandwiches. “But only because you’re being weird so...it’s not really their fault.” 1

Rafe groans and grabs Jackson by the wrist, hauling him towards the closest door, which just happens to be the entrance to his parents’ bedroom.

“Where are we going!?” Jackson gasps. “Rafe, the food is in here -”

Rafe just snarls, pissed at himself for thinking he could handle this. He pulls Jackson inside and then slams the door behind him. “What did you notice!?” he barks out, leaning close to Jackson and baring his teeth. “Did – did she notice!?”

God, he’s been such a fool – if Maryam –

If Maryam was like everyone else and noticed that he was being weird... God, she already hates him, how much worse is it going to be if he’s also acting like a complete jackass all night?

“Who!?” Jackson asks, freaked out, taking a step back and guarding his glass of whiskey like Rafe might knock it out of his hand.

“Mary -” Rafe nearly shouts but then he catches himself, standing up straight, realizing that Jackson...

Jackson doesn’t know what’s going on beyond the fact that Rafe was acting strange. Or at least he didn’t know. Rafe groans as he realizes his mistake.

“Maryam?” Jackson asks, looking at Rafe with wide eyes. “This is about Maryam? That...that human girl? Dr. Hank’s daughter!?”

Rafe clenches his teeth, his mind whirling for some sort of excuse, but god – his mind is just too fuzzy – he should have gone easier on the drinks –

“Are you like...” Jackson turns his head and laughs a little. “Are you into her, Rafe?”

Rafe doesn’t say anything, looking away.

...”

“Rafe,” Jackson says, pity in his voice as he reaches out to put a hand on the prince’s shoulder. “You should...rethink that. She’s really pretty, but as a human she is very delicate – I’m a little worried you would like...kill her, if you – “Would you shut up?” Rafe snarls, whipping his head back to glare at Jacks. “Of course I wouldn’t hurt her – I would never hurt her she’s ”

Jackson goes still, staring at Rafe, realizing that the Prince’s language is a great deal like that he uses to talk about Ariel. And the way that Rafe is acting...god, when his wolf had first smelled Ariel in the academy? He had been just as erratic and frantic.

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“No way,” Jackson breathes, shaking his head, his eyes moving down to Rafe’s chest, where his wolf lives. “There’s...there’s no way – ”

“Jacks,” Rafe groans, leaning into his friend’s hand a little bit. “Please, don’t tell anyone, I’m so confused – I have no idea what’s going on -”

“No way,” Jackson whispers again, fascinated. “I mean, Rafe, are you sure? It – it’s not possible – ”

“Are you sure?” Rafe growls, snapping his eyes up to meet Jackson’s. “If I tried to tell you that Ariel wasn’t yours, what would you say?”

Jackson rankles at even the hypothetical. But still, he pushes. “She doesn’t even have a wolf, Rafe. How can there...how can there be a bond?”

“I don’t know,” Rafe growls, closing his eyes and shaking his head. “But...my wolf is sure. And he’s been flipping out – it’s so fucking annoying – he’s so excited every time she opens her mouth to say anything and he keeps urging me to do all this stupid stuff – ”

“Yup,” Jackson says, laughing a little and squeezing Rafe’s shoulder. “That’s...that’s a mate, all right.”

“You went through this?” Rafe asks, his eyes opening with a bit of hope.

“Oh my god,” Jackson says, nodding eagerly. “The insane shit my wolf told me to do when we figured out it was Ariel, not Ari. He wanted me to rip off -” but Jackson cuts his words off abruptly, standing straighter, clearing his throat, remembering that this is Ariel’s brother he’s talking to. “It was intense, yes.”

Rafe opens his mouth to ask another question but he’s interrupted by a hysterical, disbelieving laugh from across the room. Both Rafe and Jackson spin their heads towards the closet, where there’s suddenly a figure standing there, silhouetted against the light.

“You’ve got to be kidding here,” Mark breathes, fascinated and delighted. “Are you – are you serious, Rafe!? Maryam is your mate!?”

“Mark!” Rafe barks out, his head clearing slightly in his panic. “Get your ass over here!”

“No way!” Mark laughs, taking it all as a joke – as he always does. Rafe snarls as Mark begins to stride for the door to the living room, his face lit with a wicked glee. Inwardly Rafe’s wolf howls in desperation – because Mark – he’s so fucking immature, and he’s the worst secret keeper in the family, one little nudge from Ariel and Mark will tell her everything – “I’m serious, Mark!” Rafe snaps, striding for his little brother, grabbing for his arm. “You have to keep this to yourself! This is serious -”

“I have to go find Ariel!” Mark snaps back, laughing and pulling his arm out of Rafe’s reach. “She’s going to die – this is going to be so great -”

Rafe snarls, true violence in his tone now as his heart begins to pound. He snatches again for his brother, whiskey sloshing out of his glass and all over the floor.

“Mark!”

“If you think I’m keeping this to myself, you’re insane! It’s way too fucking good, even the idea that you

The door to the living room creeks open –

“Boys?” Ella calls, soft, curious.

“Could be mated!” Mark continues, loud, laughing, not noticing his mother standing in the open door. “To fucking Maryam!

That she would be our future Queen!”

Rafe and Ella go still.

Jackson groans, ducking his head into his hand.

Beyond Ella, every single person gathered for the party in the room beyond goes still too.

Except for Ariel and Jesse, who burst through the door that opens to the rest of the palace, gasping for air.

“Rafe!” Jesse calls, desperate, but then he and the Princess go still when they realize that everyone else at the party has frozen in shock.

“Oh, shit,” Mark whispers, going pale as his mother looks at him with wide eyes, disappointment all over her face.

Silence rings out in the room for three long, desperate heartbeats.

And then a single hissed word breaks through the air.

“What?”

Slowly, everyone turns to where Maryam stands, livid at father’s side, her hands clenched into fists.

“What did you just say?”

Her voice is a growl, low and vicious enough to match any Alpha.

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Rafe's stomach sinks to his feet and he ducks his head, clenching his empty whiskey glass in his hand. Because this is...this is the worst possible way he could ever imagine Maryam finding out about their bond.

"Mark!" Dominic barks, pointing solidly to his side, demanding that his son come to heel. Mark ducks his shoulders, glancing apology at Rafe as he does as he's told, moving to stand next to his father.

Slowly, Maryam starts through the room, advancing towards Rafe. He hears every one of her footsteps and sighs, lifting his head, meeting her eyes as she stops ten feet from him, hatred radiating off of her in waves.

"What did he just say?" she snarls, pointing at Mark, her words slipping from between clenched teeth.

Rafe sighs and stands straight, meeting his mate's gaze, knowing that she deserves more than for him to cower right now. "He said that you're my mate, Maryam."

A stir goes through the room but Rafe doesn't look at anyone but her, at this...fairly magnificent creature standing before him, powerful and delicate and vicious. Even as anxiety and regret turns in him, Rafe's wolf howls his pleasure. Rafe's mental hands snaps out, wrapping around his wolf's muzzle because...this is not the time for that.

A laugh, thick with derision, slips from Maryam's lips as she leans forward to stare at Rafe in disbelief. "Tell me this is a joke," she demands, her voice harsh. "A stupid, very poorly conceived joke – the kind of bullshit trick you Alphas play on your human guests just to embarrass them."

"It's not a joke, Maryam," Rafe responds, his voice low and serious. "I wouldn't do that to you."

She guffaws again, disbelief all over her face for a moment until...until something shifts, and she stands straight, suddenly realizing that...

That he's telling the truth. That he fucking means this – that he actually believes that he is her mate.

Maryam's mouth falls slack and she just...stares. Stares into the prince's impossibly handsome face, her eyes flashing all over him, his form, judging him. Rafe stands true and steady, ready to be judged, letting her see that he is unwavering in his conviction that she's his. Utterly his, forever, his mate.

And as he watches, Maryam rankles under this silent claiming.

“Bullshit,” she snarls, leaning forward towards him, her hands tightening at her sides, her teeth flashing in – well, in rather a wolfish way. Rafe’s wolf dances from paw to paw, loving it, loving the strength in her, the defiance.

“Maryam, I’m very sorry,” Rafe says, taking a step towards her with a hand out, sending his little brother a hearty glare from the corner of his eye. “This is not the way I wanted you to find out -”

“Find out!” She spits back, laughing a little at the ridiculousness of it all. “Find out what that you – that you just...fucking claim me!? That I’m yours all of a sudden, your fucking mate – that you own me!? And what – I – I have no choice in this or whatever!?”

She spins to stare at everyone else in the room, appalled and shocked.

“And all of you are just – just going to stand there!? And let him make this ridiculous claim!?”

“Maryam,” Hank says, his voice quite gentle as he begins to cross the room to his daughter, his eyes full of worry and sympathy for his daughter. “It’s not...like that – ”

“Even you won’t stand by me on this!?” Maryam gasps, stumbling back a step away from her father. But she quickly turns again, realizing that the step takes her closer to Rafe and moving hastily away, pressing her hands out to the side like she wants to keep everyone away – wants to stand completely apart.

“Maryam,” Hank snaps, drawing her eyes back to him. “Of course I’m on your side,” he says, arriving next to her and holding out his hand, begging her to take it. “But, please, love you...you are vastly misunderstanding if you think that any wolf – and especially any Sinclair – would make this kind of statement as a joke.”

Maryam begins to pant in her panic, staring at her father in disbelief. Then she snarls again, her eyes moving around the room, hate in the set of her jaw, in her eyes.

“No,” she snarls, roughly shaking her head, standing up tall and proud. “No. I am – I am not going to be claimed – claimed just because you,” she spins to Rafe here, “you like me or something. Absolutely not! I fucking refuse!”

Rafe’s wolf howls in regret and his face falls in sorrow and horror to see her so upset, to see her panic like this. God, he couldn’t imagine this going any worse –

“Maryam, please,” Rafe begs, taking another step towards her. “Please just talk to me – it’s not like that, not at all -”

“You stay the fuck away from me,” she snarls, taking a vicious step towards him, stopping him in his tracks. She holds out a hand towards him, palm out. “I – I refuse this. Or what – whatever fucking thing it is that you say. What is it?”

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She pants a little in her panic, looking around the room again for some help. But everyone's face – everyone's, her father's included – is rich with a great depth of sadness and pity. Maryam, finding no recourse there, turns her vicious gaze back to Rafe.

It cuts him in his soul, the hatred in her gaze. Deep, like a knife.

"I reject you, Rafe Sinclair – or whatever the fuck it is they say to make this end. Categorically, unequivocally – no. I – I will not have this – I will not have you. You have absolutely no claim on me, ever!"

She stands to her full height then, rage pulsing through her, and then turns striding for the door. She shoves past Jesse and Ariel who stumble out of her way, yanking the door open and striding out into the hall.

The sound of the door slamming behind her echoes through the silent room.

Rafe...doesn't breathe.

He just...stares. Stares after her. Wondering what the fuck he's supposed to do now.

The party breaks up awkwardly, with Cora and Roger quietly gathering their kids together and ushering them out the door. I watch them go without protest for once, their eyes wide as they realize the gravity of the moment, even if they don't realize what happened.

I stand between Jesse and Jackson as the people not staying in the palace tonight pack up their things and say their quiet goodnights. Mom is at Rafe's side, of course – she was the first to move after poor Maryam left. Hank quickly gave his apologies and followed after his daughter, eager to comfort her in whatever way he could.

And even though I know in my heart that he doesn't deserve it, pity swells in me for Mark, who is getting the scolding of a lifetime from our dad in the corner of the room. 2

My mouth turns down in a deep frown as I look over at the pair of them – dad laying into Mark about responsibility and needing to realize the gravity of certain issues, of considering the consequences of his actions before he makes any moves. But my poor baby Mark – he's all pale, and his head is hanging, and he just looks so ashamed.

“Don’t you dare, you big softie,” Jesse murmurs to me, glancing over at me with a tiny smile. “Mark deserves every bit of that.”

“He’s just a little guy,” I whisper, my hands pressing to my cheeks as I glance at Jesse and then back at Mark. “He didn’t know what he was doing.”

“You baby him, Ari,” Jacks murmurs at my side. I look up at him with a very, very small snarl. But he just shrugs, standing by his words. “He’s older than June, and yet you hold him to a much lower standard.”

“It’s true,” Jesse murmurs. “If June did this, you’d be flipping out at her.”

I sigh, snapping my hands to my hips, realizing that they’re right and totally hating it. “Fine. I will now redirect all pity to Rafe.”

“Good choice,” Jesse says, smirking at me. “Come on, let’s go get our boy. He’s going to need some council and cheering up from all of us, who are wise and mated and can give him the guidance he needs.”

“Oh, you just want to drink more and make him tell you the whole story,” I sigh, following along after Jesse as he starts to move towards mom and Rafe, grabbing Jackson’s hand and towing him along with me as we go.

“That too!” Jesse calls over his shoulder, forcing himself to be more cheerful than I think he feels. “All right, Auntie Ells,” he says, interrupting her as we all arrive at Rafe’s side. “We’re taking over from here.”

Mom hesitates for a moment, wrapping her arm around Rafe’s and looking around at us for a second. But then she sighs and lets him go. Rafe’s head hangs and he loses his balance a little, leaning on mom physically and emotionally as he was. “All right, but you be nice to my meatball,” she says, narrowing her eyes around at all of us. “He’s had a hard night.”

“We promise,” Jesse says, slinging an arm around Rafe’s shoulders and grinning at him. “Kindness and whiskey. Come on, we’ll go up to the yurt, let Midnight feed you cookies.”

Rafe sighs and glances at mom for one more moment before nodding and shifting his weight to lean on Jesse. “Cookies sound good. Yurt sounds good. Let’s do it.”

“Let’s go!” Jesse calls out, striding out the door with Rafe pressed close to his side.

I pause only a moment to step close to my mom and press a kiss to her cheek. “Tell dad to go easy on Mark, okay?” I whisper. Mom grins at me and nods and then gives me a little swat on my rump as Jackson wraps an arm warm around my waist and the two of us likewise head towards the door.

