

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 581

Mark walks down the hall with a heavy heart, his hands sunk deep in his pockets, a scowl across his lips. God, he just...can't seem to do anything right, can he?

He regrets it, of course. Immediately he regretted it, treating Rafe's news so lightly, laughing about it, not paying attention enough to realize that the door was open, not realizing – truly – the gravity of the situation. He's devastated at the effect on his brother but Maryam – seeing her face...

Truly, he acted horribly to the girl who should one day be his sister-in-law. Of course the news was hard on her – a human who doesn't even feel bonds, can't possibly understand them. She deserved to have the news broken to her in a much gentler way or, even better, to have Rafe...fucking befriend her first.

Mark's father and mother had explained all of this to him in both angry and gentle terms, but he'd understood it all from the start.

That he fucked up and it really hurt a lot of people.

God, he's always been...such a fuck up. When will he learn?

Mark sighs as he continues to wander through the hall, wanting to head outside, to run as his wolf in some of the parkland very close to the palace. But his mom told him not too – told him it's too late, and though things are better in the war that it's too dangerous for him to go out all alone. So, Mark wanders the halls of the palace instead, restless, needing the movement to settle his wolf, who likewise paces in his soul.

But even as Mark winds his way endlessly through the halls, his mind turns to his siblings. All of whom just seemed...

...well, to have grown up without him.

“When the fuck did that happen?” Mark murmurs, shaking his head. Less than a year ago they'd all been kids, but now Ariel and Rafe are both mated...Ariel three times, and now she has Jackson's mark, which means he has a new brother?

And Juniper, trial that she is, is off in some Underworld somewhere battling with some kind of God of Death for...the future of all souls?

What – why had he been left behind? Why did everyone else's adult life start, and he's just here...still a kid?

Mark sighs, shaking his head, wondering. Because that's what everyone has been saying to and about him – his dad, and Jesse, and uncle Roger. That he needs to grow up – that it's time to man up and step into his responsibility. And it's not that Mark doesn't want to do that, just...

Well, how does one do that?

“Oh!”

A surprised voice sounds down the hall and Mark stops in his tracks, lifting his head quickly up. Because...who the hell is awake, and in this relatively abandon part of the palace's guest halls?

Mark's eyes widen when he sees a very pregnant young woman at the end of the hall, her hands pressed tight to her stomach, her bare feet stilling in what looks like a repetitive trek back and forth on the hall carpet.

But Mark continues to just stare at her in surprise. Not because of her presence any longer, or the strange fact that she's alone in the hall in the middle of the night –

No Mark's shock is because she's...

She's so pretty. 1

His wolf suddenly goes wild in his soul, breaking into a reckless sprint, a garbled howl breaking from his mouth.

“I'm sorry,” the girl says, taking a step back towards her door. “I – I'm very uncomfortable,” she says, glancing down towards her stomach, “and my Alpha is sleeping, and I didn't want to wake him, and...”

But suddenly she goes still too, her own beautiful eyes flashing wide as she stares back at Mark.

Mark's wolf, wild and out of control in a way that he so rarely is these days, bites him hard, urging him viciously forward, and Mark takes a few stumbling steps towards the young woman, his eyes flashing hungrily over her, taking in every inch of her very fine robe, her silky hair braided demurely back, the soft curve of her cheek – such a creamy white, just barely flushed with pink-

And then her scent hits him, all pomegranate and ginger and autumn air, and Mark clenches his jaw against the moan that rises in his throat.

The girl's eyes flash wider if that's possible and she steps back and away, pressing herself against her door, her hand fumbling for the handle. Mark gasps, desperate for her to stay, doing his very best to reign his wolf back in-

But she gasps, and finds the handle, and quickly turns it and rushes inside, slamming the door shut behind her.

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Mark cries out, just slightly, as his wolf howls and scratches and begs him to go forward, to grab the door, to push it open, to find her, to grab her into his arms –

Mate mate mate mate mate – he snarls again and again, over and over in Mark's mind.

And Mark groans, because he knows – he knows his wolf does this, that he lets his impulses take control, and that he – Mark – knows better. Knows that this poor girl – she's just afraid. But –

God, who is she?

Who – whose baby is she carrying!?

Should be our baby, his wolf snarls, angry now. Go kill him, whoever took her, whoever took our Luna, it will be our baby – we will kill him, and then she will be ours –

Mark groans, putting his head in his hands, digging his fingers into his hair.

And then he does the only thing that he can think of the only thing that works when his wolf takes over like this, and he shifts.

Shifts into his wolf and then runs, runs as far and as fast as he can, letting the exercise wear his wolf down.

Mark runs through the mostly silent halls of the palace, mentally begging his mother's forgiveness as he disobeys her and dashes through the doors, past the guards who shout after him, out into the parkland beyond.

And the entire time – with every footfall – his mind turns over the same word.

Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit.

Because there's only so far and so fast that Mark can run before his life catches up to him. And right now, he has no idea how the hell he's going to face it.

“All right, big boy,” Jesse says, laughing and giving Rafe a shove into his room. “You go sleep this off. We’ll figure it out tomorrow.”

Jackson and Ariel call their little goodnights as they continue down the hall, Jackson carrying the exhausted Ariel in his arms, her head on his shoulder. Jesse gives them a passive wave, his eyes still on the probably-too-drunk crown prince.

“Whattam I gonna do, Jess,” Rafe murmurs, turning and slumping in the door frame, not yet ready to turn towards his bed.

“We spent all night talking about that, cuz,” Jesse says, grinning at Rafe and giving him a friendly pat on the cheek. Indeed, the five of them had spent hours going over possibilities, coming up with a plan for how Rafe can talk Maryam down and get to know her more. “You’ll remember tomorrow. Just...go lay down. You need to rest.”

“Can’t rest,” Rafe sighs, petulant, his head dropping dramatically to the side. “She’s upset. I can’t rest when she’s upset. I should go...find her.”

“You are...not precisely the most eligible suitor right now,” Jesse laughs. “Trust me, you don’t want her to see you like this.” Rafe snarls, lifting his head up to glare. “Ima prince,” he mutters. “And I’m...cute. I’m eligab...eligible. Plenty eligible.”

Jesse bursts out laughing and gives Rafe a shove. “You’re a mess, not a prince. Go!”

Rafe finally takes the advice and stands, turning towards the bed. “You sleeping over?” he mutters, gesturing towards the other bed in the room, the one Jesse has slept in thousands of nights.

“Nah,” Jesse says, slipping his hands into his pockets, glancing at the clock on the wall. “Shit, when did it get that late? “Got something to do.”

Rafe gives Jesse a look like he’s crazy even as he flops into his bed. “You don’t have anything to do. Go to bed.”

“Oh, don’t I wish that were true,” Jesse sighs. But then he blows his cousin a kiss, making him laugh, and pulls the door shut behind him. Then, heaving another sigh, he turns on his heel and strides out of the family apartments, through the halls, up the stairs, and out onto the roof.

The pilot standing by the helicopter shakes his head at Jesse, giving him a sour look. “You’re late. Two hours late.”

“Sorry,” Jesse says, nodding to the pilot, genuinely meaning it. “Things...got complicated downstairs.”

The pilot smirks at him, shaking his head, aware enough of the Sinclair family's penchant for drama that he's fairly unphased by this. "You still want to go? It will be late in the morning by the time you get back if you still want to do a round trip."

"Yeah, let's go," Jesse says with a sigh, his wolf singing in his soul in desperation to get going.

The pilot nods and starts to climb into the tiny two-man helicopter, gesturing with this thumb for Jesse to take the co-pilot seat.

"All right," the pilot says, putting on his headphones and pressing the buttons that start the chopper's blades spinning. "One round-trip ticket to Alpha Academy, coming right up."

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A grumbling, groaning little half-sigh breaks from Daphne's lips as she stirs from her sleep. Because no, she does...not want to be awake right now.

Please, she begs her wolf, who is shaking out her fur, turning towards the door with interest. You're imagining it – you always are. It's not real – he's not here, he's not ever coming here again. Just...let's go back to sleep. It's better when we're not conscious.

But the little rap comes again and Daphne stills, realizing that...she didn't imagine it. That there is a knock at the door.

It's real, her wolf whispers, awed and a little afraid.

Daphne sniffs the air because...it's her boss, or one of her co-workers. Not...not...

But the scent on the air. She's not imagining that, is she? She can't. The hundred times she's tried to conjure it in her mind recently she's failed.

But there it is now in the air, undeniable.

"Daphne, please."

A squeaky little sob breaks from her as Daphne sits up and wraps her arms around her knees, staring at the door. Her shoulders start to tremble as she wars with herself, her gentle copper wolf whining and urging her forward, wanting desperately for her to open the door, to throw herself into his arms.

But...she knows better than to do that.

It's done. The whole thing is done, it's over.

And her life will be better if she just...lets it go. A clean break.

"Daphne, please!" he says, knocking hard on the door twice with his fist. His voice breaks on her name this time. "...please." Daphne looks down and to her right, to the little grey shadow cat curled against her pillow, looking up at her with big sad eyes. The kitten who hasn't left her side for a moment, who always sleeps curled beneath her chin.

She sighs, knowing it's no good. That no matter what she knows is most logical, and safe, and healthy...that she hasn't let him go. That she won't. Can't.

"It's open," she whispers, knowing he'll hear her, as she reaches out to stroke a hand over the cat's silky half-real fur.

Half real, like all his love for her could ever be. At least now, tied up as he is in a mating bond with another woman. There's silence and then the door's handle clicks and it swings open.

Jesse stands there in the doorway, leaning against the frame, silhouetted in darkness. He sighs. "Why are you sleeping with your door unlocked, Daphne?"

She just shrugs, her eyes on the cat. It wasn't something she'd planned. It just...doesn't seem to matter anymore, keeping everything in order, the way she always liked to. Following the rules, keeping life ship-shape, making sure everything was as it should be...

Doing that is just...stupid now.

"Daphne," he says again.

She doesn't look up.

Daphne hears it when Jesse slowly crosses the room. She presses her eyes shut at the sound of his boots, his weight, real and substantial, against her floor. Not a dream, not a dream – not like the thousands of dreams she had of him coming back.

This time real. And so...so much worse for it.

"Daph," he whispers, and she hears the soft shush of him kneeling down in front of her, feels the soft press of his palm against her cheek. A barely audible whine breaks from her throat and she leans into that hand, just slightly. "Daph, sweetheart, are you all right?"

She opens her eyes at that, staring into his pretty brown ones, just inches from her face. And her heart breaks again, and her face crumples, and she starts to cry.

“Oh, heavens, Daphne,” Jesse murmurs, immediately climbing onto the bed with her and wrapping his arms around her, pulling her in tight to his chest, tucking her head in beneath his chin. “I’m so sorry. I’m so, so fucking sorry.”

She continues to cry big heaving sobs, her wolf howling with joy at the sudden surprise closeness of him again – when she never expected it, never hoped for it. But then the agony of knowing that this is a goodbye – that she can’t keep him –

God, but it just makes her cry harder. And she hates herself for it.

Jesse holds Daphne for a long time, letting her cry herself out, stroking his hand long and slow up and down her back. He shushes her, and hums to her, and only once fails to resist the temptation to duck his head close and take a long, slow sniff of her scent. Because... he knows it’s not fair. That his wolf is thrilled, and joy pulses through him to have her close again, and that it’s...it’s just not even. It’s not fair.

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But eventually her tears subside, just a little. And she quiets and stills. And raises her head to look into his face.

His heart breaks to see the very real sadness there, and he lifts a hand, brushing at the tears on her cheek with his thumb, his eyes taking in the rough redness around her eyes, and the sweet, adorable freckles that dust her nose, and the lush, raw shape of her lips.

Jesse clenches his jaw as his wolf snarls, wanting her. Wanting her with a desperation that...

That is completely unfair. Inwardly Jesse snarls at his wolf, smacking him on his nose, forcing him to back down. His wolf grumbles but humbly obeys, working hard to deny his instinct to give Daphne the space she needs.

“Don’t look at me,” Daphne murmurs, embarrassed, raising an arm to wipe her nose and her cheeks on her sleeve.

“Please, don’t ever ask that of me,” Jesse whispers, running his hand over the tumbling auburn waves of her hair. “It would be the greatest regret of my life, to never look at you again.”

But she flinches away, and he sighs, thinking...well, that it was the truth, but perhaps not the kindest thing he could say. "I'm glad you're safe," she says softly, sitting straighter, putting some distance between them. "I was...worried about you. We all were."

"I'm fine," Jesse says, quiet. He reaches out, though, and takes her chin in his hand, turning her face to peer at her cheek where Midnight's claws cut her. "Ella patched you up?"

"Yes," Daphne says, straightening her shoulders and gently taking her chin from his hand. "Your whole family was very kind to me."

"Don't do that, Daph," Jesse whispers, shaking his head at her.

Her eyes flash a bit. "Do what?"

"Fall back on...politeness and courtesy," he says, giving a shrug. "We're – we're so much more than that. Please don't block me out."

She sets her jaw, moving back an inch or two, the little cat peeking out at Jesse from behind her. "Are we more than that, Jesse? I don't think we are. Not anymore."

"Of course we are –"

"I'm a seamstress at your school, Jess," Daphne snaps, saying the line she's rehearsed in case this day ever came. The thought she's said over and over to herself, to remind herself of her new place in his life. "You're a mated man. That is...our relationship now."

He huffs almost in disbelief. "Daphne," he says, leaning forward towards her. "That is...that is so not how I understand things."

She glares at him a little, her chin dimpling as her mouth turns down at the corners, and his wolf howls with regret to make her so sad, even for a moment – even though he knows she's endured so much more than moments of this.

"Stop," she demands, her shoulders set determinedly back. "It – a clean break is better, Jesse. Don't drag this out. It's impossible – however we felt before is impossible. And I don't think I can be your friend. I don't think I can...handle that. So. We can just end it there."

His wolf pants, desperate for that to not be true, and Jesse takes a deep breath, trying his best to stay cool.

"Daphne," he says quietly, anxious for her to hear him. "My situation is not what you think it is."

"Are you not mated?" she asks, tense and prim now, stern.

Jesse's wolf howls at how lovely she is when she's angry like that, but he works very hard and keeps his face completely serious.

"I have a mate," he says slowly. "But I have not accepted the bond."

She goes still, her eyes going wide. "Why not?"

"Because she's...it's very complicated Daphne. She's like a child – she's...a very traumatized person."

Daphne exhales slowly, closing her eyes. "So, does that mean you don't love her?"

He swallows hard, understanding that he's walking a very fine line here. "Midnight is very important to me. I care about her very, very much. But it is...not romantic."

Daphne stays still for a long moment and then nods once. "I think you should go."

Jesse sits up straight, appalled. "What!?" he nearly shouts. "Why!?"

She opens her eyes again, glaring hard, anger now the singular expression on her face. "Because you're about to ask me to be your mistress, Jesse Sinclair. And I might be poor, and unconnected, and uneducated – but I will not be insulted like that. Not ever, but especially not by you."

Jesse's mouth hangs open as he stares at the love of his life, completely shocked.

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"Daphne, I am not asking you to be my mistress!" Jesse bites out, his teeth clenching.

"Did you come here with romantic intent?" she asks, prim and formal. "Desiring to continue, in some way, our relationship?"

"Yes," he says, working hard to reel his temper back in, ashamed at himself for losing it even for a moment. "I came to tell you that I love -"

"And do you still have a mate? With whom you have a relationship?"

He pauses, seeing the trap but knowing that she's got the truth on her side. "Yes," he says, short and cold.

“And you have no intention of rejecting that mate? Or she of you?”

Jesse takes a deep, long breath. “No, I have no intention of rejecting her.”

“Then what else am I to conclude, Jesse,” she says, low and angry, leaning forward towards him. “But that you’re asking me to be your mistress. So that you keep your mate as the priority in your life, but have me too? A bit on the side?”

He stares at her for a long moment in shock and then groans, trying to lay back on the bed but miscalculating the distance and banging his head against the wall, covering his face with his hands. Because she’s right.

She’s right.

He hadn’t thought of it in those terms – of course he didn’t. But she’s right. What he came here hoping for – for some way of having Daphne in his life while he maintains his relationship with Midnight...

Essentially, she’d be his mistress, wouldn’t she? Even if he loved Daphne dearly, while he still had his mate fully in his life, a part of the family? There’s no way in which, to the rest of the world, Daphne wouldn’t be his girl on the side.

“So yeah, Jesse,” Daphne says, cold and working hard to keep the tremble out of her voice. “I think you should go. And never speak to me again. I can’t...I can’t believe you came here tonight, after everything, and...asked me for that.”

Jesse sighs but makes no move to get up, slipping his hands down from his face and taking a few long, deep breaths, trying to get his mind in order. When he opens his eyes he looks over and up to see Daphne staring at him, furious.

“Can you...can you please give me like, one inch of space on this?” he asks, shaking his head, feeling utterly pathetic and at the end of a very dark road.

“No,” she says, cold, narrowing her eyes.

“Daphne,” he groans, sitting up and turning towards her on the bed, holding his hands out towards her, pleading. “I – I understand. And if I were any other jackass Alpha in any other situation, I would let you call me a jackass, and a pig, and a horrible, terrible misogynist. But could you please, please open your heart and remember that I am not a terrible person?”

He presses a hand to his heart, shaking his head at her, begging.

“I’m still me, and I’m in a really hard, terrible situation – and all I’m trying to do is see the girl I’m in love with after a long time apart, and tell her that I love her, and just...try to find a way through.”

Daphne stares at him for a moment, her mouth trembling, her chin held high. But then she breaks, and exhales all her breath at once in a gushing sob, and hangs her head, her shoulders shaking.

“Don’t ask too much of me, Jess,” she whispers. “Because...I’ll give it. I just...need to protect myself in all of this, protect my heart, as much as I can. And if you have a mate? There is...no room for me in your life. It’s not fair to her and it’s not fair to me.”

“Okay,” Jesse Whispers, steeling himself to the promise. “I won’t ask too much. But is it...can I tell you what happened? How I feel?”

Daphne takes a deep breath and raises her head and then nods once.

And Jesse begins.

The story takes a long time to get through, and Jesse is very, very careful with his words – which is difficult, considering that he hasn’t slept in nearly a day at this point. But he tells her everything, leaving nothing out. About Midnight, and how strange she is, and how funny too, and their time in Darkness and the Underworld. Their journey to find Ariel, and then the trip home.

By the time Jesse is finished he’s stretched out over Daphne’s bed, his booted feet hanging over the edge, and she’s curled up amongst her pillows with the kitten in her lap. They’re not touching, not even a hint of it – but the air in the room is...calmer. Easier.

“So, what do you think?” Jesse asks, sighing and looking over at his girl, letting his eyes soak in as much of the sight of her as they can.

“I think she sounds really cool,” Daphne murmurs, dry and bitter.

Jesse laughs a little. “She is. She...does not think the same of you.’

Daphne whips her head up, smirking at Jesse. “What does she think of me?”

“She thinks you’re a whore,” he answers, equally dry.

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And as he knew she would, Daphne tilts her head back and laughs – long and peeling. He smiles a little, watching her, relishing that. Daphne – she’s not easily offended, and she has enough self-confidence not to let herself be hurt by such a deeply untrue judgment.

“Oh, god,” Daphne says, still laughing and wiping a little beneath her eye. “Maybe...let’s not introduce this one to my mother.”

“No problem,” he sighs.

Daphne smiles over at him, soft. “You’ve had some serious adventures, your Grace.”

“You’re avoiding the question, seamstress,” he murmurs, his mouth turning up at the corners.

She raises an eyebrow in challenge.

“What do you think?” he asks, wanting to know her true opinion on the whole situation – all of it.

“I think,” she says with a little sigh, looking down at the kitten, understanding it all. “That...we had a good run, Jess. But I can’t keep loving you if you have a mate, bond accepted or no.”

“Are you in love with me now?” he asks, quietly.

She raises her eyes to his. “Please don’t make me answer that.”

He swallows rough around the lump in his throat. “But, given time -”

She shakes her head. “Jesse, given time, your strange traumatized little mate is going to become accustomed to the world. And she’s going to want you, and you’re going to want her. Even though you’re not in love with her now, given time? You will be. And then where will I be?”

“Midnight is...never going to be normal in this world,” Jesse murmurs, covering his eyes with one hand.

“Do you think she’s pretty?” Daphne asks, her voice deceptively calm.

He moves his hands from his eyes to look at her. “What?”

“Don’t pretend you didn’t hear me, Sinclair,” she says, narrowing her eyes at him, making him smile.

He laughs a little but then sighs. “Yes, Midnight is pretty, Daphne.”

“The Goddess picked her for you, Jess,” Daphne whispers, leaning forward towards him with a smile, acting her heart out, pretending to be happy and peaceful and beatific about it all, while inside her wolf howls in agony to be letting him go. “She’s your mate. It’s going to happen someday – you’ll love each other. I don’t...want to be drug along for weeks or months or years just to be left at the end. Leave me now, in peace and...we’ll have had a good run.”

Jesse’s heart breaks a thousand times as he stares at her, unable to believe it. Unable to accept it. He sits up, leaning close, looking steadily into her eyes. “You know that there’s more to us than that, Daphne – than just a good run. That we have a connection that is deeper and that neither of us fully understand.”

“You have a mate, Jesse,” Daphne whispers, reaching out and cupping his cheek in her palm. “I can never, ever live up to that.” He closes his eyes and leans into her hand. “But I want you.”

She rushes her thumb once over his cheek and slides her hand down and away, her fingertips brushing the stubble that starts on his jaw. “You won’t forever.”

He opens his eyes, staring at her, thinking that she’s wrong about that.

But also that...that there’s no logic in the world that would support his conviction that Daphne is the girl he wants. Mates are it – end game. No other girl should be able to live up to it.

And Midnight...she deserves more than that. More than this even, him visiting another girl, telling her that he loves her, that he wants her more.

Guilt sweeps through Jesse on both ends – for how he’s treating Daphne and Midnight alike.

God, fuck, did he claim to be a good guy earlier tonight?

What a bald-faced lie. Selfish. He’s being selfish, on both accounts.

“You should go,” Daphne whispers, her voice trembling. When he lifts his head again he sees her working hard to put on a brave face. “Home to your girl, Jesse.”

He clenches his jaw but he stands. His hand moves forward for a moment, wanting to pull her up and into a hug but...he pulls it back, knowing it’s asking too much.

“I’ll see you soon?” he asks, his heart aching. “Back at school, for the rest of the spring term?”

“Sure,” Daphne says, giving him a smile. “Um, tell Ariel I said hi, please. And Rafe and Ben and...” she wrinkles her nose a bit and his wolf howls, falling hard to the ground of his soul. “Luca, I guess, if you see him.

Jesse smiles at her and nods, slipping his hands into his pockets. And then he turns, without a word, and walks out of the room, closing the door behind him.

In the darkness, Daphne reaches out a hand and strokes it over the little shadow kitten’s head again and again. He purrs, pressing his face against her palm.

“I guess this is goodbye, Mittens,” she whispers, tears streaking down her face, waiting for him to disappear.

But he doesn’t.

And Daphne cries harder, laying herself down on the bed, gathering the precious little shard of Jesse’s soul to her chest, stroking her fingers over the kitten’s fur until she again falls asleep.

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I wake up to the feeling of Jackson’s broad hand stroking over my hair and I squeak, petulant, turning my face so that my other cheek is pressed to his chest. Then I nuzzle close, my eyes pressed determinedly shut, refusing to wake up.

“Ariel, it’s nearly noon,” Jackson murmurs, laughing a little.

“No, it’s not, the clock is a filthy liar,” I murmur, shaking my head, laying my hands flat on his lovely warm skin.

“Lazy wolf,” he whispers, far too cheerful and awake for my tastes. “What, you think just because you’re all done saving the world that you can sleep all day?”

I just snarl and turn my head a bit to press my teeth to his skin, mock warning. “Shush or I will bite.”

He snarls in return, his pleasure at the idea evident in the swell of desire that comes down the bond, and I can’t help but laugh as he quickly shifts, snatching me up in his arms and rolling me to the side, pulling me up closer so that we’re face-to-face and he can press a warm kiss to my mouth.

“Nooo,” I moan, breaking the kiss and pretending to wriggle away. “Take me back – I want my pillow -”

“It’s my body, Ariel, not your pillow – ”

“Yes it is!” I whine, going limp in his arms like a kid having a temper tantrum. Jackson laughs harder, gathering me close and pressing kiss after kiss to my cheeks and neck and shoulder until I’m laughing too, and kissing him back, my fingers curling in his hair and over his soft beard, which he kept at my request.

“Mean to me,” I murmur, opening my eyes a little, peering at his beautiful face as I press my belly to his.

He just snarls, hungry, letting me know that he can be a bit meaner to me if I want him to. I bite my lip, quite liking that idea, but a quiet knock comes at the door.

Jackson gasps, sitting up straight, spinning towards the door like he’s getting caught doing something bad.

I laugh, looking up at him. “What?” I ask.

“Ariel, someone is here – ”

“Duh,” I say, rolling my eyes and sitting up with a sigh, snatching at the discarded pieces of the pajamas I barely wore last night. “I have a gigantic family packed into six tiny rooms in this royal suite. There’s always someone here.”

“But I’m -” Jackson panics, looking down at his naked body, only covered by the blankets.

“So put something on!” I laugh, pulling my pajama pants up before I grab my top, tugging it on as I head for the door. ” You’ve got like, eight seconds -”

Jackson gasps, grabbing for his pants as I laugh and reach for the door handle. I only open it a little bit, enjoying Jackson’s panicked cursing as I peek outside. I grin to see my mom standing there.

“Hi, baby,” she says, smiling at me, her eyes flicking towards the room. “Enjoying torturing your mate?”

“Yes, mommy,” I say, leaning against the door frame and continuing to block her view as I hear Jackson hastily putting on his clothes. My eyes flash to the tray in her hand and the three wheeled trollies behind her, all stacked with covered dishes. “What did you bring us?”

“Sustenance!” mom says with a happy sigh. “Jackson is too skinny.”

I burst out laughing. “He’s huge!”

“He lost a great deal of weight being all magical and pining for you,” mom says, laughing even as she narrows her eyes at me.

“Come on, let me fatten him up.”

“Be my guest,” I say, opening the door wide once I hear Jackson finish finding his clothes. When I turn I see him glaring at me, well aware of my tricks, but when he turns his eyes to my mom he smiles – because she’s a great favorite of his, we’re all well aware. And even if he’s annoyed at me, he can’t help but beam at her.

“Did you bring that for me?” Jackson asks, eager, looking at the tray in her hands.

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“Yes!” mom says, happily walking over to him and holding out the tray. Jackson lifts off the lid and groans when he sees the stacks of pancakes and eggs and sausage and bacon.

“You’re my favorite, Ella,” Jackson murmurs, eagerly taking the tray and sitting down on the bed, settling it onto his lap and digging into the bacon with his hands.

“Jackson, there are utensils!” I call, scolding, as I wheel in the first trolley from the hall. His eyes go wide when he sees it.

“All of that?” he gasps.

“You said you were hungry,” Ella says with a happy sigh. I just laugh and shake my head, settling the trolley against the wall and going out for the next one.

“Some of this is for me,” I say, eyeing the big pot of coffee with particular interest.

“Fight me for it,” Jackson murmurs, a little growl in his voice, making us both laugh.

But Jackson shares much more willingly than he pretends, which is easy considering that my mother has brought a ridiculous amount of food. Jackson does fairly impressive damage to the supply and mom and I mostly just watch in fascination as he eats way more than we thought he could.

“Damn,” I murmur, when Jackson goes back for fourths. The three of us sit comfortably on my bed and I sip at my coffee, my own finished plate of waffles set in the blankets before me.

“He’s so cute,” mom says on a sigh, sipping at her own coffee, watching him. I laugh at her, because only mom would think a voracious Alpha restoring his magical body weight is adorable. Well, her and me. Jacks ignores us, reloading his plate with another stack of pancakes.

A creaking sound brings my attention to the door and I burst into a smile when I see Rafe shuffling forward, his eyes half closed, his nose lifted in the air sniffing.

“Help,” my brother mutters, leaning hard against my doorframe. “I need sustenance.”

Jackson snarls from his place at the tolly, possessive, but we just laugh and ignore him.

“Poor baby, did you let your wicked cousin get you all drunk?” mom says, reaching for Rafe, who shuffles into the room and collapses onto the bed, his head landing in her lap. Miraculously, mom and I manage not to spill our coffee everywhere.

“No this is all my fault,” Rafe murmurs. “I can’t blame Jesse, unfortunately. The only way to get my wolf to shut the hell up last night was to drown him in whiskey.”

Mom coos consideringly, softly stroking Rafe’s hair as Jackson comes over with two plates and generously lays one before Rafe’s prone body. I send a swell of gratitude down the bond to Jacks, realizing perhaps more than the others that it is a mark of great esteem to share the food he needs to refill his body weight and magical storehouse after basically starving for a week.

Jackson brushes off my gratitude and comes around the bed to sit next to me, leaning close and offering me a strawberry which I happily take, popping it into my mouth.

“You’ve certainly got a challenge in front of you, meatball, when it comes to our spicy little Maryam,” mom says, her voice sorry but not truly full of pity. “How are you feeling about it?”

“I don’t know,” Rafe sighs, opening his eyes a little to peer at the food and then seeming to turn slightly green at the sight of it, perhaps changing his mind about what he needs. “I need to talk to her. But I have a feeling she’s not going to let me get close.”

“She will, Rafe,” mom says quietly, continuing to stroke her favorite’s hair, smiling softly at him. “You just have to be patient with her. Let her get to know you. She’ll come around.”

“Just let her see you with your shirt off,” a voice says from the door, and all of our heads turn to see Jesse standing there,

looking utterly exhausted, rubbing his eyes with one hand. “That was your tactic with all of your other conquests, wasn’t it?”

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Rafe snarls half-heartedly at Jess, not opening his eyes, as I burst out laughing.

“Is that...did that work?” Jackson asks, looking between Jesse and Rafe curiously. “He’d take off his shirt and...what would happen?”

“He’d take off his shirt and the panties would drop,” Jesse says, dropping his hand demonstratively. Jackson’s mouth falls open as mom and I burst out laughing and Rafe groans, embarrassed. Jesse grins, still tired but I think a little happier here with all of us. He gives Jackson a wink. “You should try it sometime, Jacks. See how many of the nations’ citizenry fall for you when they get a sight of you bare-chested.” (

I snarl at my cousin, even as I continue to laugh a little bit. Then I glare at my mate, daring him to try it. He smirks at me and shrugs and I laugh, bumping my shoulder into him.

“Where did you sleep, Jess?” Rafe asks, sighing as he sits up and moves closer to my mom, making room for Jesse on my tiny little girl bed. I grin as Jesse comes and joins us, very pleased to have everyone close and happy again. My wolf gives one anxious turn, thinking of Juniper, but I run a hand over her fur, reminding myself that there’s nothing I can do but trust my little sister to keep herself safe and strong.

“What do you mean, where did he sleep?” mom asks, sitting up a little straighter, her coffee cup pressed between her hands. ” He didn’t sleep in your room?”

“No, he went on some weird adventure,” Rafe murmurs, flicking a hand dismissively at the profligate duke. “I thought maybe it was a dream but he wasn’t there when I woke up.”

“I stole a helicopter and went to the Academy,” Jesse sighs, laying himself out along the edge of the bed and covering his face with his hands. “To see Daphne.”

We all go very still and very quiet.

“Please don’t tell Midnight,” Jesse says, his words slightly muffled against his palms. “It’s...not a secret but...maybe if she didn’t know it would be better. She does...not like the idea of me seeing Daphne, especially not alone. But I couldn’t not see her, especially after

mom told me she was there and I was an idiot and just left the Academy a few days ago without popping downstairs to say hi.”

“How’d it...go?” Rafe asks, quiet and awkward.

“Horribly,” Jesse sighs, letting his hands slide away, his face turning to the side, his expression miserable. My heart aches for him very suddenly and he shifts his eyes to mine. “She’s not doing well, Ari. Could you...would you reach out to her? I’m worried about her but...she kind of asked me to leave her alone.”

“Of course,” I say, nodding seriously to my cousin, guilt running through me when I realize that I should have done this before.

“What is like... happening there, Jess?” Rafe asks, rubbing his head a little. “Do you still have feelings for her?”

“Of course I do,” Jesse says, turning to Rafe with a frown.

A little anxiety stirs in me as I look between my brother and my cousin, remembering that the last time they were together at the Academy they fought like dogs on the subject of Daphne. Obviously they’re friends again but...has that issue resolved itself?

“My feelings for Daphne were never shallow, Rafe,” Jesse says, sitting up a little to glare at my brother. “I was in love with her. I’m still in love with her.”

“But how is that even possible?” Rafe asks, leaning forward, more curious than anxious.

Mom just sits quietly sipping her coffee, looking between the pair of them, clearly worried but willing to let them sort it out. “What are you talking about,” Jesse replies, snapping a little. “You know how great she is, Rafe, I don’t know why you think that I’d -”

“No, you’re misunderstanding me, Jess, I’m sorry,” Rafe says, holding out a hand to him and closing his eyes, clearly still suffering from his hangover and trying to put his thoughts together.

Jesse slowly closes his mouth, letting Rafe have the time to think.

“I mean...” Rafe continues, “that the moment I saw Maryam, all thoughts of any other girl went right out of my head. I actually feel really guilty about it – I was so mad at you about Daphne and now... I mean, now it feels like I picked a fight over nothing.”

Jesse snarls at the implication that Daphne might be nothing.

Rafe narrows his eyes. “You know that’s not what I mean, Jesse. I’m talking about me, about my feelings. It’s no reflection on Daphne – she’s fantastic.”

Jesse settles a little, frowning. “Your feelings for other girls...just got wiped away?”

“Yours didn’t?” Rafe asks, his face screwing up with confusion. “When you met Mids?”

Jesse turns to the rest of us. “What happened with you all? Did you stop having feelings for other people?”

“I had unique circumstances,” I say, raising my hand a little.

“No other girls to speak of,” Jackson says with a tiny shrug.

Mom just sighs, sipping at her coffee. “And I didn’t know I had a wolf and a mate until after your dad and I were pregnant and pretty heavily involved. So, I also don’t know. You should probably ask dad about it, he’d know. Or Roger.”

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“About what?” another voice says at the door, and my face bursts into a grin when I realize that it’s my Mark.

“Markie!” I call, thrilled, patting the bed beside me.

Mark starts to smile at me but then looks around the room, guilt washing it away. “Rafe, I’m really sorry – ”

“We’re good, Mark,” Rafe murmurs, nodding to our brother and jerking his chin to the spot on the bed next to me. “Don’t kill yourself over it. I know you didn’t do anything just to be cruel.”

Mark sighs but nods and then comes over to sit with me. “But seriously, what were you talking about when I came in?”

“About whether or not you stop having feelings for previous crushes when you meet your mate,” Jesse says as I lean close to Mark when he sits, wrapping him in a one-armed hug.

To my surprise, Mark goes a bit stiff beneath my arm. I frown up at him, wondering what could be off.

“Um,” Mark says, looking awkwardly down at the blanket. “Do they?”

“I’m inclined to think that they do,” Mom says quietly. “It makes sense, right? You’ve met what is supposed to be the one person who checks all of your boxes. How could someone else live up?”

“Well, Daphne lives up,” Jesse murmurs, a little angry and defensive, likewise looking down at the bed covers. “I didn’t stop having feelings for her. Not at all.”

“And Midnight?” mom asks, gentle, the softness in her voice clearly indicating that he doesn’t have to answer if he doesn’t

want to.

“Mids is amazing too,” Jesse sighs, his head hanging. “I...don’t know what’s going on.”

Mom hums consideringly and nods. “Maybe we need Cora to give the Goddess another call. Though she’s a bit pissed at us lately – the Goddess. Cora...had some wine and called her up a few times just to give her a damn piece of her mind about allowing so many of her grandkids to be kidnapped by our enemies. They...are not on the very best of mother/daughter terms at the moment.”

I laugh at this, thinking that only my auntie Cora would have the balls to argue with a goddess like that. But hey, it’s her mother, and now that two of the three kidnapped kids are back perhaps they can reach more even ground.

“Oh, my little chickens,” mom sighs, looking around at us with a mix of joy and pity on her faces. Rafe leans against her, closing his eyes. “I’m so glad to have you all back together and here in my little coop, where I can take care of you.”

“I’m not sure that a palace fully qualifies as a coop, auntie,” Jesse murmurs, laying back down on the bed, giving into his exhaustion.

“And we still need our June back,” Mark sighs. “And Maryam, too.”

Everyone goes still. Rafe’s eyes flash open.

“What?” Rafe snarls, low and threatening.

Mark’s eyes flash wide. “Wait, what?”

“Mark, I’m going to murder you,” Rafe growls, leaning forward towards our little brother. “Did you just imply, ever so casually, that Maryam is gone?”

“You don’t know!?” Mark nearly shouts, likewise leaning forward towards our brother.

“Mark!” Rafe shouts, clenching a fist between them. “Right now! Everything you know, right fucking now!”

“I – I saw her!” Mark sputters out, casting a hand towards the windows. “In the park! I went running last night –” he sends a guilty look towards our mom, who scowls at him, “– and she was out there –“

“Why the fuck didn’t you bring her home!?” Rafe shouts.

“I didn’t know I was supposed to!” Mark shouts back, going pale. “I thought – I don’t know! She had a backpack! I figured she was going somewhere! She was...walking with a purpose!”

Rafe just roars in frustration at our brother before hurling himself off the bed and striding out the door. We all watch him go, open-mouthed.

“Oh my god,” Mark groans, ducking his face into his hands, his shoulders twitching with what must be frustration and shame. “Should we...help him?” Jackson asks, starting to get up.

“No no,” mom says quietly, reaching out a hand to place on his arm, stopping him. “This feels...like Rafe’s business now. He’s perfectly capable of handling this.”

“See?” I say, snuggling against Jacks. “You complain about how troublesome I am, but at least I never ran away from you.” “There’s still time,” he murmurs, wrapping an arm around me and pulling me close, pressing a kiss to my head. Mark sighs and lays down, resting his head in my lap. “Pet me,” he begs, and I comply. “Am I ever going to do anything right?”

“Of course you are, baby,” I coo, stroking his hair. “You’re just...taking your time.”

“Is this a bad time to invite everyone to lunch in the yurt?” Jesse murmurs, pulling my blankets up over him with a yawn. “I want a nap first but...then we should go check on Mids.”

“We’ll come,” I say casually, easily, even though my heart wonders after Rafe, who is probably dashing all over the city now looking for his mate, worried for her.

“Chaos,” mom sighs, resting back against my headboard and taking a peaceful sip of her coffee. “Good ole Sinclair chaos. I missed this.”

I grin at her, shaking my head a bit. But she just grins back, wrinkling her nose.