

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 591

“Still not going to take my magic?” Midnight asks, standing in the door to her yurt with her hands on her hips, dressed in a fairly fantastic collection of clothes that she clearly picked for herself with enthusiasm from the insanely large selection my mom bought for her.

I smile, taking in the three scarves that Midnight has stacked over a sundress, which she wears over a pair of jeans that she’s tucked into a pair of yellow rubber boots. A jaunty winter hat is pulled down over her curls, the fuzzy purple pompom on top wobbling back and forth whenever she moves.

“I promise,” I say, giving her a little salute, an offering of cake in my hands as I stand before her with Jackson at my side. ” Also, I love your outfit. You look great!”

“Thank you! You may enter,” she says, quite dramatic and smiling, bowing us into the yurt.

“Hey Mids,” Jacks says, giving her a little hug and a kiss on the cheek. “Good to see you.”

“Don’t kiss me,” she snaps, giving him a little shove away that doesn’t budge him an inch. “Jesse is my mate. You can’t seduce me away.”

Jackson sputters out a protest but I just laugh and take his hand, tugging him along with me to settle on the floor amongst the guests already inside.

“Hi! Hi!” I say, laughing and putting the cake down before giving both Benny and Elias big hugs. Jesse waves from his spot stretched out on the floor. “Where is Pippa?” I ask, looking around for her. “Is she all right?”

“She’s fine,” Elias says, leaning close to Ben and glancing at him with a little grimace. “She’s just...feeling very pregnant. And ...not as fond of me as she has been.”

“Why?” Jesse asks, curious, frowning between Ben and Elias.

Ben just smirks, shaking his head a little, and I roll my eyes, kind of irritated that Jesse is being this oblivious.

“We’ll have to send her down some cake,” I say with a sigh, looking around at the wide selection that Midnight has gathered for her little lunch party. Indeed, there seems to be very little lunch to speak of, beyond several varieties of cake. Which is probably precisely as Midnight wants it.

“No, she can get her own,” Mids snaps, even as she cuts a thick slice of sponge cake and lifts it onto a plate, handing it to Jackson.

I grin at Midnight and settle in next to Elias, though my heart still worries on Pippa. I saw her this morning but she was, indeed, oddly distracted and quietly asked me to leave after I’d only been there for about ten minutes, saying she wanted some time alone.

“Have her contractions kept bothering her?”

“She’s been having them for days,” Elias says with a sigh. “Ella’s checked her out and says she’s perfectly healthy, and the doctors say that that can happen, but...” he shrugs, looking at Ben, who looks at him sorrowfully. “She’s uncomfortable. I wish I could do more.”

“Why aren’t you with her?” Jackson asks, sounding kind of pissed off, like he wouldn’t be anywhere else if his Luna was having contractions no matter how long they went on.

“She kicked me out for a bit,” Elias says, stretching his legs out and looking worriedly around, even as Midnight hands him his own piece of cake. “Said she wanted some peace so she could try and nap. This all has...not been easy on her.”

“Well, it’s not going to be easier once she has a loud puppy,” Midnight says, handing me my own plate before popping down next to Jesse and digging into what’s left of the chocolate cake. “I don’t know why she decided to do a pregnancy. It seems very terrible.”

Ben and Elias smile at her a bit sadly, apparently deciding not to explain it to her. I don’t blame them, thinking that Midnight may never be convinced to see the more appealing aspects of motherhood.

“Um, did Rafe ever come back?” I ask, desperately curious. It’s been hours, most of which Jesse spent napping in my bed. I watched for him out the window and asked for updates from the guards, but...nothing.

“Yes, I did,” comes the dry answer from the door. My face breaks into a smile as I turn to see my brother standing there, his hands on his hips, looking very drawn and tired.

“Hi!” I call, laughing a bit. “What hap –

But Midnight gasps in horror the moment Rafe takes a step inside the yurt.

“Buddy, you’ve got to ask,” Jesse says, sitting up and wrapping his hands around his knees, grinning at Rafe. “Midnight takes boundaries very seriously and I support her in that.”

“Oh,” Rafe says, blinking in surprise as he steps back out of the yurt. “Um, Midnight, may I come inside?”

“Are you going to try to kiss me?” she asks, sending a glare Jackson’s way.

Jackson sputters in surprise. “Hey, I thought we were friends!?”

“We were,” she says, leaning forward to glare at him. “Until you tried to seduce me.”

“Oh my god,” Jackson murmurs, covering his face with his wide palm, making me laugh.

“Um, I definitely promise...not to kiss you,” Rafe says, looking with baffled surprise between Jacks and Mids.

“All right, you may enter. Though it was rude of you to not bring cake.” Midnight quite primly begins to eat her cake again, and I don’t miss the satisfaction on Jesse’s face as he watches her eat her fill.

“I apologize,” Rafe says, a bit dry, sitting down on the ground to Jackson’s right. “I’ve had...rather a rough start to the day.” He nods his greetings to everyone around the yurt, his eyes lingering on Ben and Elias for a moment as he frowns, clearly still not getting it.

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I bite my lip, fighting a smile, and Jackson sends me a nudge down the bond. When I look up at him and he frowns at me, clearly wanting to know what’s going on, I break into a laugh.

He just scowls and shakes his head, wanting to know but not pushing it, knowing I’m not giving him any secrets until he tells me what Jesse told him about the Underworld. So, we are, essentially, still at a stalemate.

“Did you ever find Maryam?” Jesse asks, leaning forward towards Rafe even as his hand snatches out, grabbing a piece of Midnight’s cake and making her squeak in protest as he quickly pops it in his mouth.

Ben and Elias perk up just as Jacks and I do, all of us turning towards Rafe.

“Yes,” Rafe sighs, leaning back against his hands, rolling his eyes up towards the roof of the yurt. “I found her. She’s...back.” “How’d you convince her to come back?” I ask, my voice a fascinated whisper.

“Um,” he says, looking down at his lap, grimacing. “I...kind of didn’t.”

“Rafe,” Jesse says, laughing and already shaking his head. “What’d you do, carry her?”

I laugh and turn back to Rafe, but when he doesn’t answer – his grimace deepening and his cheeks going red – we all burst out into laughter.

I whip a hand across Jackson, smacking my brother hard on the arm. “Rafe! Seriously!? You carried her back, kicking and screaming!?”

“Well, she didn’t kick and scream the whole time,” he mutters.

I lose it, falling onto Jackson’s side, who likewise laughs and wraps his arms around me, holding me close.

“Oh, come on, what was I supposed to do!” Rafe groans, looking around at all of us for some sign of pity. “She was at the fucking train station with nothing but a backpack and a one-way ticket to the North

”

“You’re supposed to let her go, Rafe!” Ben calls out, laughing. “She’s a grown ass woman – she can decide where she goes! What, is she like your, prisoner now!?”

“No, she’s not my prisoner,” Rafe growls.

“Is she locked in a room somewhere?” Jesse asks, leaning forward, fascinated.

“The door isn’t locked!” Rafe bites out, glaring at him.

“Is it guarded?” I ask, a sneaky smile spreading over my face.

Rafe just scowls and looks away again, making us all crack up.

“It’s not safe out there!” Rafe bites out, though he too starts laughing. “She’s my fucking mate, I can’t just let her go on a train all alone to –”

“Oh no, not on a train!” I say, overly dramatic. “Those death machines, notoriously prowled by gangs of villains eager to maim – ”

“That sounds very bad,” Midnight says, nodding slowly. “You were right to stop her, Rafe.”

“Thank you, Midnight,” Rafe says, sighing and not bothering to engage with my critique, realizing now that...he may have over-reacted. A little bit.

“Rafe, you have to let her go home if she wants to,” Ben says, laughing a little. “Her home isn’t dangerous – she’s lived there for years!”

“It’s not her home that’s dangerous, it’s...” Rafe mutters. But then he groans and lays back on the floor of the yurt, shaking his head. “Look, guys, don’t rub it in – I realize I’m being a complete idiot and a jackass. I just...can’t let her go until she... doesn’t hate me anymore...”

“I’m not sure kidnapping her and dragging her back to your houes is going to do you any favors there,” Jackson mutters.

“Worked wonders for us,” Midnight says, grinning over at Jesse.

Jesse laughs and winks at her. “Yes, but we’re a very unique pair, Midnight. Rafe and Maryam, they don’t have nearly as much of our verve and flavor.”

Midnight nods deeply, conceding this point, making me smile between them. God, as much as I love Jesse and Daphne together...this Midnight match, it does make sense on some level, doesn’t it?

“Oh, god, she’s going to hate me forever,” Rafe sighs, staring up at the roof of the yurt, resting his hands on his stomach. “She’ll come around,” Ben murmurs, taking another bite of his cake. “Who can resist you?”

Elias snarls a little, giving Ben a subtle nudge with his elbow. I smile but Jesse snaps his head to them, his mouth falling open a little, clearly wondering what the hell that was about.

“What am I gonna do,” Rafe sighs, all the words slurring together in his agony.

I pout, reaching over to pat a warm hand on his shoulder. “At least you only have one to deal with.”

He snaps his head back to me. “All of yours liked you, Ari.”

“Yes, but I am very beautiful,” I say, grinning at him. “Even dressed as a boy.”

Jacks hums his support, pulling me back to his side.

“Hey,” Jesse says, leaning forward and grinning a bit deviously at Rafe. “Want to blow of the rest of the day getting completely shitfaced at all of our favorite bars and completely avoiding all of our responsibilities and the big life questions that are haunting us?”

Rafe gasps, sitting up and looking directly at Jesse. “Yes,” he breathes, nodding eagerly. “Yes, that’s exactly what I want to do.”

Jesse Whoops, clapping his hands together, making me laugh.

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“All right, who’s in!?” Jesse asks, beaming around at our little circle with a laugh.

“Absolutely not,” Midnight says, slowly shaking her head and looking around at all her collected cake like she has no reason at all to leave. “Abandon this to go drink demon juice? With the ruffians and the whores? No thank you.”

Jesse laughs and narrows his eyes at her. “You don’t have ID anyway. And no one will believe you’re older than twelve.”

She nods sharply like it’s decided, quite pleased.

“Well, if Midnight isn’t coming then I’m calling it a boy’s night,” Rafe says, quite grave.

I gasp and turn to him, appalled.

“You’ll be the only girl, Ari,” Jesse says, screwing his face to the side. “It’s very clearly becoming a boys’ support club – a healing evening of debauchery with the ruffians and the whores. You’d hate it anyway – all whiskey, no wine. That’s a rule.” “This is sexist and horrible,” I snarl, crossing my arms over my chest even as I realize that honestly, I’m not sure I want to go anyway. My wolf nudges me, urging me to get in touch with Daphne and to spend a little more time with Pippa if I can – my friends who I really shouldn’t abandon for a day of drinking. Even Maryam, if she’ll see me, could probably use someone to talk to.

Besides, I don’t need a day of debauchery to run away from my problems. My life is...kind of coming together right now.

“I’m out too,” Elias says on a sigh, screwing his mouth to the side. “I’ve got a baby on the way, no leaving the palace for me.” Jesse and Rafe nod to him, understanding and supportive, and then turn their eyes to Ben. Ben looks at Elias with a grimace. “Oh, go!” Elias says, giving him a little shove on the shoulder. “You deserve it. Besides I think....” he glances around the tent and laughs a little. “I think you have kind of some news to break, don’t you?”

“What?” Rafe asks, looking around at all of us, trying to figure out what the news could be.

Ben laughs and shrugs. “All right, I’m in. Jacks?”

“What?” Jackson says, sitting up straight.

“Jacks is coming,” Jesse says, grinning and pointing at him.

“I am staying with Ariel,” Jackson says, pulling me first against and then slightly in front of him, almost like a shield. “Jackson!” I say, laughing and turning a bit to look up at him, “you should go!”

“What?” he asks, going tense. He glances around, bringing his mouth close to my ear. “Ariel, I want to stay with you – “Booo,” Rafe calls out, cupping his hands unnecessarily to his mouth. “Happy relationships are lame! Come out Jacks!” “Jackson, I am your best friend -” Jesse says, looking at him with wide, sincere eyes.

”

“You use that line too much,” Jackson says, narrowing his eyes at my cousin, making me laugh. “I’m starting to think you get more out of being my best friend than I do.”

“Then let me buy you twelve glasses of whiskey, my guy,” Jesse says, grinning at Jacks, a wicked flash in his smile. “Besides, you’re family now.”

“It is true, Jacks,” I say, pointing over at Rafe. “Your brother is sad.”

“He’s my brother?” Jacks asks, screwing up his face a little and turning to look at Rafe, who nods seriously.

“Yes, and I’m sad. I need you.’

“Oh my god,” Jackson groans, letting his head fall. “Fine, I’ll go.”

A shout goes out through the tent and I laugh, turning and wrapping my arms around Jackson’s neck, pulling myself close and giving him a few kisses on the cheek. “It’ll be good!” I whisper to him. “You need time with the boys.”

“I need time with you,” he grumbles.

Beaming, I lean back to look in his face, absolutely loving how much he genuinely likes my company and wants to hang out.

“Let’s go!” Jesse says, laughing and getting fast to his feet. “Boy’s night out!”

“Have fun!” Midnight calls, smiling around at her assorted cakes like a dragon in a very specific kind of treasure trove. Laughing, excited, our little group calls our thanks to her and spills out of the yurt, heading down the stairs.

“Are you going to see Pippa?” I ask Elias, moving to his side, Jackson coming with me. “Would you mind if I came?” “Sure,” Elias says, giving me a happy grin. “I think it will do her some good.”

I nod eagerly to him and we set off down the stairs, Jackson staying close to me until the last second before Jesse hauls him away to go find Mark.

The boys' night out is...fine.

Jackson sighs, sipping at his beer, and turns to look around the bar. He frowns a little when at least a dozen eyes – most of them women's – dart immediately away from him, blushes coloring cheeks. What...what was that about?

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His frown deepens as he puts the thought out of his mind, knowing that he's never going to get it right if he tries to venture a guess, so he turns his eyes back to his companions. Jesse and Mark stand close to each other, laughing about something, and Ben and Rafe sit quite close, whispering – probably about the great secret that Ben revealed at the beginning of the night, about liking men romantically, and being mated to Elias.

The others had been shocked by this but Jackson had been largely unphased. Honestly, when Ben had told them Jackson had kept waiting for the real secret to be revealed. It was only a few minutes in that he figured out that that's all it was. Ariel – she thought she had some great secret about Ben up her sleeve, but he'd kind of already known.

Ariel has known about Ben liking guys for a long time, after all, which means that on some level Jacks knew too – her thoughts and considerations of Ben trickling down the bond in little pieces. Plus, growing up in a barrack with a couple of dozen young men who were forbidden to talk to, touch, or even really think about girls...

Well, he'd never dabbled in the sexual assignations that some of the other boys had tried to be so discreet about. But it certainly wasn't uncommon. So Ben telling everyone that he likes men – it hadn't been nearly the shock to him as it had been to others.

But tonight, he's relieved to find that nobody is getting as drunk as Rafe and Jesse first implied back in the yurt. That it's not really a night of debauchery and instead a few good drinks to loosen everyone up. They seem to have done their job – Rafe and Jesse certainly do look more cheerful after their fairly dramatic experiences with their mates and girlfriends over the past twenty-four hours. And Jackson is happy about that – it's good to see them, his family, calmer, happier.

But...he has to admit it. He just wants to go home.

Jackson sighs, taking a long sip of his drink, wondering what Ariel is getting up to back at the palace. Whether or not she's alone in the room. If she's maybe wearing that slippy little night shirt he saw in her closet, and if the lace is sliding up her thigh. God damn it, her legs –

“Hey big boy,” a light voice says next to him. Jackson blinks and looks down at the pretty, dark-haired girl giving him a sultry smile. “Can I buy you a drink?”

“You want to buy me a drink?” Jackson says, smirking a bit, looking down at the girl, a little confused. “Why? I already have one.” (

“In the hopes that I can get you a couple more,” the girl says, stepping closer – close enough to wrap her hands around his forearm. “And in the time it takes you to drink them, convince you to take me to bed.”

Jackson blinks in surprise, staring at the girl. Because...damn. Well, at least she's not playing coy – he hates that. It takes him so long to figure out if they're just being nice or trying to date him.

Even if...well. Apparently, they're usually trying to date him.

“Sorry,” Jackson says, smiling a little and shaking his head at the girl. “I'm mated.” He lifts a hand and presses it over his chest where Ariel's mark is.

“Happily so?” she asks, raising an eyebrow.

Jackson laughs and nods, low and deep.

“To whom?” she says on a sigh, her apparent disappointment giving her the opportunity to lean closer. “I see the company you're with,” she says, flicking her eyes over to the pair of princes and the duke. “Those royal girls are always so stuck up and uptight. Not like me,” she wrinkles her nose at him. “I'll do whatever you want.”

Panicking a little, Jacks looks over at his friends and is relieved to find Rafe coming over to his rescue.

“He's mated to my sister,” Rafe says, smirking at the woman and then flicking his eyes pointedly down to where her arms are still wrapped around his forearm. “And trust me, no one describes her as uptight.”

“Juniper?” the woman asks, standing up a bit in surprise. “Damn, she's young. You royals get started early.”

“No, my other sister.” Rafe says, leaning on the bar next to Jackson. “Ariel.”

The woman goes still and then rolls her eyes, dropping her hands. Jackson exhales a small, relieved breath. “Look,” she says, crossing her arms over her chest, offended. “You don’t have to lie to get me to go away.”

“I’m not lying,” Rafe says, his face breaking out into his million-dollar smile.

The girl rolls her eyes. “Everyone knows Ariel Sinclair is mated to Luca Grant.”

Rafe and Jackson both smirk, turning their eyes to each other, thinking that this girl... has no idea what she’s talking about.

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The girl rolls her eyes again, waving a dismissive hand at the Prince and the super hot Alpha. “Whatever, lie all you want, I get the picture.” She turns and begins to walk away, giving them both a wink over her shoulder as she goes. “Come find me if you ever change your mind!”

“Damn, you really pull them in,” Rafe says, standing straight and grinning at Jackson. “You’d have made a good wingman in high school.”

“Trust me,” Jackson says, dry. “I wouldn’t have.”

“Hey, so, are we done here?” Mark asks, looking anxiously towards the door. Jackson frowns at him because...what does Mark have to be worried about?

“Yeah,” Jesse says, coming over with Ben, slipping his hands guiltily in his pockets. “I thought I’d be more fun tonight but...I can’t stop thinking about Mids all alone in that yurt. You guys want to head back? We could continue drinking there if -”

“Nah, I gotta go...find Maryam,” Rafe says on a sigh. “Try to apologize even if...god, even if she’s probably going to make me flip out again. Let’s go!”

Rafe slaps some cash on the bar for the drinks, including a generous tip, and then the group heads out. The car ride home is nice, cheerful and chatty, full of jokes. But Jackson mostly sits quietly, his mind on the girl who he hopes is waiting for him in their room. He can’t decide, honestly, if he wants to hear all about her day first or...

Just tear all her clothes off.

When they disembark at the palace steps a little later, Jackson has to admit that he's leaning towards the latter.

The group starts up the steps together, laughing at one of Jesse's jokes.

But Jackson turns suddenly, towards where his name is shouted behind him. His wolf immediately leaps to his feet because – Jackson knows that voice. Would know it anywhere – heard it every day for the first twenty-three years of his life –

Jackson's eyes immediately fasten on the figure standing next to a beat-up junker of a car parked right out front of the palace, his shoulders tense, his face panicked.

"Cr-Cristof?" Jackson gasps, stunned still in his awe.

"Do you know this guy?" Ben asks, stepping close to Jacks and staring at the fairly ragged young man standing at the base of the palace steps, an expression on his face that can only be described as....well, devastated.

Jackson doesn't answer and instead moves, bounding down the palace steps, taking them three at a time. "Cris!" he shouts. "Cris, what the fuck!?" Jackson laughs with joy as he races for his true best friend.

Jesse and Rafe glance at each other, not knowing how to feel. They recognize the name, of course, as one of Jackson's best friends from the Community.

But what the hell is the Community showing up at the palace for?

"Cris, I can't believe it's you!" Jackson roars, grabbing his smaller friend into a huge hug, lifting him off the ground.

A smile comes to the young man's face – he can't help it. "All right, all right, put me down!" Cristof says, laughing, even as he wraps his friend in a hug of his own, pressing his face tight to Jackson's shoulder. "God, I missed you."

"How did you find me!?"

"I saw you – on a god damn magazine –" Cristof says, laughing a little. "We all did, you fancy fuck."

Jackson laughs a little but shakes his head, awed. "What are you doing here!?"

"Are you okay?" Cristof asks, avoiding the question. Jackson puts him back on his feet but doesn't let him go, keeping his hands on his shoulders as he steps back, looking Cristof up and down.

"Are you?" Jackson asks, his face falling a bit. "God, Cris, you're so thin –"

“Look who’s talking, you asshole,” Cristof growls, even as he smiles. “But I’m serious, man,” he glances up towards the palace, at the set of Alphas still standing on the steps, carefully watching and ready to intercede if Jackson needs it. “Are you like good here? Are you safe and stuff?”

“Yeah,” Jackson says, nodding, his own face falling as he realizes that...Cristof isn’t here just to visit. That there’s an anxiety in the set of his shoulders, the way he keeps looking around. “I’m fine, Cris – I’m...I’m great. I found my mate.”

Cristof whips his face back to his friend. “No shit,” he whispers. “True not kid?”

“True not kid,” Jackson says, nodding seriously, using their old Community shorthand. “She’s amazing – come in side, she’ll love to meet you -”

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“I can’t, man,” Cristof says, shaking his head, his face breaking a bit to show the true sorrow that’s running through him. “I have to get back.”

“Back?” Jackson asks, going still. His hands tighten on Cristof’s shoulders. “Cris, don’t go back – it’s fucking awful there, it’s so much better here – there’s so much you don’t know -”

“There’s so much you don’t know,” Cristof snarls, stepping towards Jackson and baring his teeth. His eyes flick to the Alphas standing on the steps, all who move forward towards them. But Jackson flashes up a hand towards Jesse and Rafe and the others. They pause, tense.

“What’s going on?” Jackson asks, his voice low and serious, finally realizing that... that something really is wrong. “Why can’t you stay? We – we’ll build a life for you, Cris. We can do that, we really can -”

But Cristof just shakes his head, his throat working. “I have to get back. Zachary -” his voice breaks on the name and he hangs his head.

Jackson’s hands tighten. “What’s wrong with Zachary?” he growls.

“He’s...in fucking deep, Jackson. They...” Cristof taps his temple with a finger. “They got into his head, or whatever. He’s – it’s fucking awful, okay? And the command is getting really cruel, way worse than it was when you left – they’re...hurting people...” Cristof’s

words come out thin and choked towards the end and he looks away, working very hard to avoid crying.

“Come inside,” Jackson says, his hands tightening on Cristof’s shoulders. “We’ll tell the King – there are people who want to help – ”

“I’m not talking to that jackass King,” Cristof snarls, stepping away from Jackson and jerking himself out of Jackson’s grasp. “He’s not like that – everything they told us in the Community were fucking lies Cristof -”

“Did they get into your head, Jackson?” Cristof asks, again looking up at the palace, worried. “You’re all fucking...fancy now? And turned your back on your people? Just...left us?”

“Cristof,” Jackson says, holding a hand out towards his friend, guilt running through him because...well, because the accusation hits hard. And it’s not completely untrue.

“I’m...trying. I’m working with a doctor to get aid – to get people in -” “Well, it’s not working, Jackson!” Cristof bites out, tears starting from his eyes now. He snarls, wiping hard at his face with his sleeve, desperately unhappy that his emotions have worked their way to the surface. “They’re fucking hurting us, Jacks! And the ones who run away, they get fucking killed if they don’t starve to death – they’re – ”

“Who gets killed?” Jackson whispers, grabbing Cristof’s arm again.

“Jacks, do you need help?” Rafe asks, and Jackson whips his head to the side to see his friends all standing close. But Jackson snarls, telling them wordlessly to stay back, and Rafe holds up his hands, letting Jacks know that he’ll obey.

“Who. Gets. Killed,” Jackson snarls, turning back to Cristof, his hand tightening on his arm.

“Your fucking Tasha girl, for one,” Cristof growls back, anger and jealousy and rage and terror all plain on his face.

All the blood drains from Jackson’s face and he just stares at his friend, who glances over at the Princes and the duke and the ambassador and wipes again at his face, at the tears streaking down his cheeks.

Jackson just stares at Cristof, hardly breathing. “How do you know about Tasha?”

Because never – not once – did he tell anyone about her. Ariel – and Hank and Ella – they’re the only ones on earth who have heard her name from his lips.

“Because she found me, Jackson,” Cristof says, freely crying now even despite his efforts to stop. “She ran when she got big- bellied – and she was starving – her and the pup both

– and she needed help, and she begged me for anything – I helped them, I did everything I could in secret, but it wasn’t enough –”

Jackson’s heart pounds in his chest. The pup.

A pup.

Tasha – and...

Tasha and a pup.

“They died?” he whispers, shaking Cristof hard, needing an answer now.

Cristof just stares at him for a too-long moment. Jackson’s entire life, his reality, hangs in the balance and he waits, desperate, not breathing.

“Tasha died,” Cristof whispers.

Then he turns, his arm slipping out of Jackson’s hand, and reaches for the handle to the door on the back seat of the car. Jackson’s heart seizes in his chest.

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Cristof seems to move in slow motion, grasping the handle to the car door, pulling it open. Jackson’s body moves without him, stumbling after Cristof, bending low to see inside as the door swings wide.

Jackson blinks into the darkness, his eyes adjusting.

And then he sees her, the little girl.

Asleep, curled up in some ragged towels and blankets, her dark hair spread all around her in a wild tangle.

Jackson’s wolf howls as soon as he sees her.

Ours, Jackson’s wolf snarls. Grab her, take her – she is ours –

But Jackson can’t move, not...not believing it.

A child.

Hank said – Hank said that there were no children born that autumn in the Community –

She she would have been on the record –

But, if Tasha had run away...

Jackson groans, stepping towards the open door, and he trips over his own feet, falling hard against the side of the car as soon as her tiny little girl scent hits him. Because even if his wolf knew it upon sight, her scent –

Pine and winter, and flowers and sun – half him – his.

His child. His...daughter.

Jackson just stares into the car, his entire world unraveling around him, with this new tiny creature at the center of it all. “How...” he whispers, unable to take his eyes away.

“Her name is Marigold,” Cristof whispers, his voice thick with tears.

“What the fuck...”

Jackson half hears Rafe’s awed whisper, but he can’t take his eyes away from the little girl in the back seat of the car. His little girl in the back seat of the car. Marigold.

“She’s a good kid,” Cristof says, starting forward suddenly, his brisk movement surprising Jackson into sucking in a deep breath. “You’ll like her – and she’s easy – she won’t give you any trouble -”

“Wait, what?” Jackson whispers, his entire body starting to shake as Cristof bends into the car, gathering the tiny little girl into his arms. Her face scrunches and Jackson watches in awe as she moves – as her eyes open, bleary and looking around.

He stills again, his heart stopping when he realizes that her eyes are...blue.

A dark, pretty blue.

God, they’re just like his.

“She doesn’t talk much,” Cristof says, straightening with the girl in his arms, frowning at her a bit and pushing her hair back. “But – I haven’t been able to figure out if that’s because she’s...stupid. Or if just doesn’t like to.”

“She’s not stupid,” Jackson growls.

Cristof looks over at him with a shrug, talking fast. “I didn’t think she was, honestly. She watches everything, all quiet, and she listens a lot – she understands everything I say. It

could just be that she was alone with her dead mother for like, days, Jacks that probably does weird shit to a kid -”

Jackson groans, his arms reaching for the girl without him realizing what he’s doing.

“But I think if you feed her up, she’ll be fine,” Cristof says, passing the child over into her father’s arms.

Jackson stares down at the girl, shocked by the sudden weight and reality of her in her arms. He stops breathing again as the little girl looks up into his face and just...stares back at him.

The pair look at each other in complete silence for a long, long moment before the little girl’s face crumples, and she tilts her head back, and bursts into screaming tears.

“Oh, yeah. And she does...that.” Cristof says, putting his hands on his hips and grimacing a little. “More regularly than I’d like.”

The little girl shouts wordlessly, her voice somehow at once tiny and light and maddeningly loud as she turns in Jackson’s arms and reaches for the man she knows. Jackson gasps, nearly dropping her, snapping his gaze to his friend.

“It’s all right, Marigold!” Cristof says, stepping forward and smiling at the girl, stroking a hand over her hair. “You’re with your father now! This is where you should be! He’s – he’s going to be nice to you!”

She screams louder, reaching for Cristof, wriggling harder in Jackson’s arms. He curses lightly, working hard to keep hold of her.

“You’re going to be nice to her, right?” Cristof asks, snapping his eyes up to Jackson’s with a frown.

“Of course I’m going to be fucking nice to her, Cristof,” Jackson growls, his eyes darting between the wriggling child and his friend. He hoists the little girl up, pressing her to his chest, one hand flat on her back while the other supports her little rump. She continues to wail, panicked, her head tilting back so that the sound rings out to the sky.

Jackson stares at her for a moment, shocked that such a little person can make that much noise.

Then his eyes flash to Cristof as he moves for the front of the car.

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going,” Jackson snarls, closing the distance between them as Cristof slams the back door and reaches for the driver’s handle, yanking it open.

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 598

“I’m going back -” Cristof shouts, throwing a hand out towards the North. “I can’t just leave them, Jackson - ”

“You can’t - you can’t -” Jackson looks frantically down at his sobbing daughter and then back at his friend. “You’re just leaving me like this!?”

“It’s what you did,” Cristof says, bitter, his lips turning down in a horrible frown.

Jackson’s face falls, devastated, and he just stares at his friend, knowing that he’s right.

“I’m sorry,” Cristof says, dropping his gaze to the ground. “I - I love you, Jackson, and I missed you, and I wanted you to be there. We’re all alone, and it’s so crazy, and I - I think I hated you? For getting a better life and not even thinking of us?”

“I thought about you every day,” Jackson whispers, shaking his head.

“I know,” Cristof says, nodding, still looking down. “I just...I was jealous, all right? But - she’s going to have a better life here.” He points to the little girl, his head flashing up. “You’d better give her a good life, Jackson! She’s...she’s a good kid! She’s really cute, and she tries, and she’s good. And...Tasha tried really hard to get her out! So you get her out, all right? For Tasha and for Marigold! And for me!”

“Stay,” Jackson begs, stepping closer to Cristof, his voice breaking alongside his heart. “Just stay, Cristof - we can help you, you can have a good life too -”

“I gotta go back for Zachary,” Cristof murmurs, looking again to the north. “I can’t...leave him there.”

“We’ll send for him - ”

“I gotta go,” Cristof says, sitting down hard in the driver’s seat. Marigold wails anew, seeing her friend leaving, realizing that she’s being abandoned here with strangers.

“Cristof!” Jackson barks out, grabbing the door, trying to hold it open, desperate for his friend to stay.

“God damn it, Jackson,” Cristof says, starting the car and glaring hard at the bigger Alpha. “You let me go now, or I’ll run you the fuck over. I have to go - if they find out I’m here, if there are - are pictures of me in one of your magazines - they watch the media, man! If they know what I did they’ll - they’ll kill Zachary - they’ll -”

“Cristof!” Jackson barks out, seeing that it’s happening – that his friend really is going –

But Cristof just snarls and grabs the door, yanking it, trying hard to pull it shut. Jackson gasps, pulled off balance by his grip on the door, and he only flashes his hand out of the way at the last moment before his fingers get slammed between the metal.

“I love you,” Cristof says, between his teeth, glaring at Jackson from inside the car, his hands gripping the wheel. “You give that girl a good life. And fucking don’t come back, Jacks – they’ll suck you back in. Just...live a good life.”

He turns then, slamming his foot on the gas pedal and peeling away.

Jackson stares after his friend as guards rush down the palace steps, sensing the disturbance.

“Highness!” one of the guards calls out. “What’s happening!? Do you want that car pursued?”

Rafe holds up a hand, stopping the guards in their tracks, and Jackson slowly turns his head to face the Prince. He shakes it, ever so subtly, as the little girl continues to scream in his arms.

“No,” Rafe says, turning to the guard, Alpha authority in his voice. “Let him go. It’s...just let him go, okay? Don’t tell anyone about this. No report. This is an internal matter that we have to address as a family.”

“As you wish, sir,” the guard says, bowing slightly and looking anxiously at Jackson and the little girl before moving back up the steps.

Everyone – except Marigold – is incredibly quiet for a long few moments, just...staring at each other.

Rafe and Jesse watch Jackson closely – watch the shock pass again and again over his face, watch his eyes glaze over as he panics, trying to come up with a plan. Watch as he blinks back to the moment, and raises his eyes to his friends.

Watch as he swallows hard, moving his eyes again to the little girl wailing in his arms.

“Um,” Jackson says, quiet, still looking at the girl – at his daughter. “I think...I think we need...Ella.”

“Yeah,” Rafe says on a whisper. And then he shakes himself, moving close to Jackson’s side. “Yeah, let’s...let’s go get mom. She’ll know what to do.”

The other boys move as Rafe slips an arm around Jackson’s shoulders and turns him towards the palace entrance. Jesse moves to Jackson’s other side while Ben moves ahead

towards the door. Mark falls behind, looking around for any surprises, his wolf instincts on high alert.

As a group, the five Alphas escort the sobbing little girl into the place, held high on her father's arm.

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 599

Ella's ears perk and her head snaps up, her eyes immediately moving towards the door of her cozy little office because...

That's a child crying somewhere down the hall.

She tilts her head to the side, assessing, realizing that...

That she doesn't know this one. She knows the sounds of all her nieces and nephews crying. This one is young – older than an infant but not yet a proper kid – and the only child she knows of that age is Seraphina. But Sera – that's not her...

Ella stands quickly, heading for her door, her ears collecting more information as she goes. That the child isn't in pain, but is instead scared – freaked out, really. And that with every moment, the child is coming closer. Ella whips open the door, her eyes already wide and going wider when she sees the group of boys standing just outside.

Her boys – Rafe and Jesse, and Jackson at their center, and Mark and Ben flanking on either side –

And held in Jackson's arms, a tiny little girl, her head tilted back as she screams to the ceiling.

"Help," Jackson says, looking between the girl and Ella in panic. "Please – please I need your help -"

Ella gasps and waves all of the boys into her office, glancing down the hall with a snarled warning at anyone who might be coming close. But there's no one there, so she slams the door shut and spins back towards the room, her eyes moving immediately for the crying child.

"What..." Ella whispers, taking a few steps closer before pausing in her shock in her confusion. "What – who..."

But then she stills as she looks between Jackson and the little girl, the connection between them immediately obvious. Because even if the little girl's face is red with emotion and covered in tears...

That dark hair, and her coloring, and that strong turn to her jaw? And her scent, piney and crisp?

God, but it's obvious. Immediately it's obvious who her father is – unquestionable.

"Well," Ella breathes, putting her hands on her hips, unable to help the little smile that comes to her mouth. "This is...this is a surprise, isn't it?"

All of the young men just stare at her, completely freaked out.

"Oh, come on," Ella says, flashing a hand out at Rafe and Jesse. "You're both big brothers who a whole hoard of children, and you're going to let that little girl cry like that?"

Both Jesse and Rafe spin their heads to stare at Marigold, shame taking its rightful place on their features.

"All right, let's get this sorted," Ella says, joy flashing through her alongside her worry and her surprise and quite a bit of panic.

But Ella tucks all of that panic away, her motherly instincts kicking in as she moves quickly towards Jackson, reaching for the little girl. Because even if his life just got complicated as hell, a child is always a blessing, isn't it?

"Oh, my goodness, young lady," Ella says, laughing a bit and smiling at the girl. "You are making a racket!"

Marigold pauses for a second, surprised, turning towards Ella's calm and sweet voice. But when she sees Ella's hands reaching for her she shrieks, scrabbling, her hands grabbing at Jackson's shirt as she tucks her face close against him. Ella's heart absolutely swells as she moves her eyes to Jackson's face, sees his heart break in a moment to see the little girl scared and clinging to him – either because her instincts are telling her to trust him because of their genetic connection, or because he's just been the only one carrying her and she doesn't want or trust anyone new.

"All right," Ella says, gesturing towards the floor. "Down, please. Everyone sit down. We're all far too tense."

Jackson hesitates for a second but when the rest of the boys obey and sit on the floor in a semicircle around him and Ella, he bends too, taking Marigold along with him.

"Ella, she won't stop crying," Jackson says, his voice shaking.

“Well, I don’t blame her, it seems like she’s had a tough night,” Ella says, moving close to Jacks to stroke a warm and loving hand over the girl’s head and then her back. “What’s her name?”

“Marigold,” Jackson whispers, sounding like his heart breaks as he says it.

“Marigold,” Ella repeats, beaming at Jackson, doing her very best to keep all sadness out of her face. Because she intuitively it all – remembers his stories of his time in the Community. Remembers Hank’s theories about how very much that horrible place would have valued Jackson’s physical prowess and his magic, would have wanted to see them passed on to more children.

Jackson just looks back at Ella, his face grim, a little terrified.

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 600

Ella shifts her hand, stroking her palm down Jackson’s cheek, loving him a great deal. “It’s all going to be okay, Jackson,” she whispers.

Jackson’s face crumples at these words, his eyes pressing shut, his mouth trembling like he can’t believe that that’s true-like it’s not possible that anything will be all right again.

“One step at a time,” Ella says, calm and patient, taking control of the situation and looking around at all of the boys, who are all so clearly freaked out. “First of which is...Marigold?” she pitches her voice higher here, authority coming into it.

Marigold, surprised to hear her name on this strange woman’s lips, quiets slightly and turns towards her, her eyes wide.

“You’re very scared, Marigold,” Ella murmurs, shifting her hand again to stroke over the little girl’s hair. “And probably tired and confused. I understand. But you’re hurting my ears. Do you think you could be a little quieter?”

To Jackson’s surprise the little girl calms, still crying, hiccupping softly in his arms as she leans her head against his chest and just stares at the queen.

“See, that’s already better,” Ella coos, continuing to stroke the little girl’s hair. “I bet you were getting tired of shouting, too.” Marigold just continues to stare, quieting further, still frightened but not screaming her head off anymore in shock and terror. Jackson looks with surprise between the little girl and the queen like he can’t believe how easily she accomplished that – like it may very well have been magic.

“I know you like your daddy, Marigold,” Ella says quietly, smiling at the little girl and leaning close like it’s a secret. “But his arms are getting tired. Do you think you’d like to come to me?” she opens her arms up for a hug and gives the girl the most beautiful, friendly smile.

Marigold hesitates for a second, looking up into Jackson’s face, and then returns her gaze to Ella. After a moment, quite subtly she nods.

“Oh, what a nice little girl,” Ella says with a little laugh, reaching for her. “I think we’re going to be really good friends.”

To Jackson’s shock, Marigold loosens her grip on him and goes right into Ella’s arms, curling up in her lap and resting her head on Ella’s breast as the queen gives her a big hug and a squeeze.

“We’re going to take such good care of you, Marigold,” Ella says, beaming down at the little girl like she already loves her a great deal. “You don’t have to worry about a thing. We’re going to keep you warm and cozy, all right?”

Marigold nods once, hesitant, and then starts to look around the room, starting with all the big Alphas surrounding her like she’s memorizing their faces.

“Mom, are you like...a kid wizard, or something...?” Rafe murmurs, looking between Ella and Marigold, baffled at the incredible change she made in the little girl’s in less than a minute.

“No, I just like babies a lot,” Ella says, sighing with happiness and continuing to rock the little girl. She beams at her son. “You were a crybaby too, where do you think I learned all these methods?”

Ella grins at Rafe, who rolls his eyes.

“Now,” Ella says, looking around the room, “we have a great deal to do, and I need you all to help me. You’ll all help me, right?”

She smirks a little, realizing that she’s speaking to all of these big men like they’re toddlers, but considering the shock and fear on their faces...well, it feels apt, doesn’t it? Eagerly, all of the young men nod, except for Jackson, who just stares at his little girl.

“All right,” Ella says on a happy sigh. “Jesse, I need you to go to your house and get a couple of bags of Seraphina’s things. Clothes, pajamas, toys, blankets – anything that seems nice. And don’t forget underwear, okay? Socks and shoes too – soft, comfortable things. Maybe Ben can go with you to help?”

Ben and Jesse nod eagerly, getting to their feet and heading for the door.

Jackson watches them go, his body and his mind emptying of emotion, completely baffled about what is happening and what is going to happen next.

All he knows now is that Ella is in charge.

And that he trusts her, completely, to help him sort this out.

This...this new life that fate has thrust into his hands.

He turns his head to stare at Marigold in Ella's lap, trying to force himself to adjust to the sight of her, the reality of this little girl.

His daughter.

Which means that he's...a father.

And that nothing is ever, ever going to be the same ever again.