

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 601

“Markie, I need you to go downstairs,” Ella says, speaking swiftly and softly, her voice calm and cheerful. “Make all of the chefs leave the kitchen, no questions. And then start to pull out everything that’s good.”

Mark nods and jumps up, disappearing out the door on his task.

“What are...we going to do?” Rafe asks, gesturing between the three adults left.

“That depends,” Ella says, shifting her gaze to Jackson now. “On whether or not Jackson wants you to go get Ariel? Or if he would like to take...a little bit of time to adjust to this so that he can get his mind in order before telling his mate about this incredible new development in his life.”

Jackson raises his eyes to Ella for a moment and then nods, clearing his throat. “Maybe....maybe some time? To get my mind in order?”

Ella nods seriously back to him, giving him a little smile.

“Is that...horrible?” Jackson whispers, looking back down at Marigold. “She – Ariel deserves to know...maybe we should go get her...”

“You can take an hour, Jacks,” Ella says, reaching out to pat him on the knee. “You’ve had a shock. You can take some time. She will understand.”

“She will,” Rafe says, nodding and putting a supportive hand on Jackson’s shoulder.

“So, are we just going to...sit here?” Jackson whispers, still staring at Marigold, who stares back at him from her spot curled up in Ella’s lap. “And let me process this?”

“Oh no,” Ella says, beaming down at the little girl. “We’ve got a hungry child on our hands! That’s my catnip.”

“How do you know she’s hungry?” Jackson asks, leaning closer, studying the girl like there will be some physical sign.

“Because she’s a skinny little muffin, and it’s nighttime, and kids always want to eat. What do you say, little Goldie Girl? Want to get some supper?”

Marigold’s head snaps up at the word and her eyes flash.

Ella laughs. “Does that sound good? Do you want a taco?”

Marigold's face scrunches in confusion.

"She...won't know what a taco is," Jackson murmurs. "Maybe...some apple?" he tries. The little girl's head spins eagerly to him. "And some cheese?"

Her eyes go wide and she nods, just barely, just once.

"Cheese!" Ella says, laughing and getting to her feet and hoisting the little girl with her, settling her on her hip. "I knew she was a girl with good taste. I love cheese too. Come on, everyone. Let's go down to the kitchen and get some cheese."

Heaving a little happy sigh, Ella heads for the door with the little girl bundled in her arms. Baffled but pleased to have someone to lead the way, Rafe and Jackson follow in silence.

Outside the office, Rafe remembers himself and strides down the hall ahead of Jackson and Ella, ensuring that the way is clear, that there are no prying eyes to spread the news throughout the halls. Ella talks quietly to Marigold, explaining all the different parts of the palace they walk through and where they're going, but Jackson just stares at the little girl, who stares right back at him.

Because he can feel it now that his panic has subsided slightly – the bond between them. He doesn't remember it making its presence known, or snapping into place, or accepting it. It's just there – vivid and real, between him and this little girl. God has it...has it always been there?

Was it there the moment she was born, or earlier? And he just never noticed? Or...

He shakes his head, not understanding, as the little girl peers at him.

Jackson forgets to breathe and blink, his feet carrying him alongside Ella without him truly intending them to. Instead, his entire concentration is fixed on this little girl, on Marigold, his little daughter.

Because god – she's so...she's so cute –

With that little tiny adorable face, and those big blue eyes –

But she's also so thin – skinny in the way that Midnight is, in a way that speaks of years of deprivation. And her little torn dress, which he now realizes is just a man's shirt with the sleeves torn off, a scrap of fabric sinching it together at her waist. Jackson's eyes dart down and he clenches his teeth at the sight of her shoes, which are covered in holes. The sole of one shoe flaps open at the front, and he can actually see her little toes hanging out.

Jackson inhales sharply, pressing his eyes shut against the guilt and the sadness that runs through him because...

He should have been there. He should have known about her – he should have been there to help her, to take care of her –

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Jackson nearly trips over his own feet when he feels it.

“Are you all right?” Ella asks, pausing in her steps to turn and look up at Jackson, frowning slightly.

He just goes still, ignoring Ella, staring at the little girl because...

Was that...a question? He felt? Down...down the bond?

The little girl shrinks away from him, her mouth pulling into a thin line, and he groans a little – realizing that he’s frightening her, just staring at her with the ferocity and intensity of a lion. Jackson immediately turns to the bond, very carefully passing assurance and calm down it, hoping that it’s...right. That it’s okay. That she can feel it and it’s...normal to do that.

The little girl goes still for a second and then perks up, smiling at her father.

Smiling.

Jackson groans aloud, his heart breaking at the sight of his little girl smiling at him for the first time. He reaches out a hand and strokes it over her dark hair, marveling at the silky softness of it.

His little girl. His. Absolutely his.

And she smiles.

Jackson reaches for Marigold as she reaches for him, and suddenly she’s up in his arms, clasped tight against his chest, and he closes his eyes, tucking his head down next to hers.

“There,” Ella says with a happy sigh. “That’s better. That’s nice, isn’t it?”

Jackson opens his eyes a little to peek at Ella, a tiny smile on his lips.

Ella beams at him, her hands clasped beneath her chin. “Daughters are amazing,” she whispers.

Jackson nods once and then starts forward again, eager to keep going, to get Marigold something to eat. Because he can feel it now, down the bond, the gnawing hunger that is perhaps so ever-constant that she doesn't know any different.

Jackson sends a mental image of cheese down the bond and feels her respond with eager happiness. His face bursts into a smile.

Ella laughs and hurries to keep up. When they reach the kitchen Rafe smiles at the three of them and pushes open the door. "Supper awaits!"

They step inside and Rafe laughs a bit to see that Mark did his job – that the big industrial kitchen is empty of people, and that the simple wood table in the corner is absolutely covered in food.

"Um, I got everything I thought was good," Mark says, gesturing towards it and anxiously running a hand through his hair as he stands at the stove with an apron tied around his waist. "And I'm making macaroni and cheese. Do you think it will be enough?"

Ella laughs as she looks over at Marigold, who stares wide-eyed at the incredible amount of food on the table.

"Oh, I think it will be enough, Markie," Ella says, laughing and going to a closet, pulling out a booster seat for Marigold. "You did good!"

Things come together almost simply then, the entire group falling into the familiar routines of mealtime. Jackson settles Marigold onto the chair and ensures that she's comfortable as Mark and Rafe begin sorting through all the food, wondering quietly about what Marigold might like. Ella finds some cheese and begins to slice it along with an apple, murmuring to Mark that he might want to check on his steaming pot of pasta. Mark gasps and rushes over to it.

Jackson watches, fascinated, as Ella slides the plate of apple and cheese before Marigold, who looks at it in shock like she's never been offered so much food in her life. She stares at it, and then looks around in wonder.

"Go ahead, Goldie," Ella says, smiling at her and cutting herself a piece of cheese. "That's all for you. And you can have more if you want it, or something else. Whatever you'd like, baby."

Marigold's face bursts into a smile as she grabs at the food with both hands, starting eagerly to eat.

Jackson's heart breaks again, for about the thousandth time in the past hour, as he realizes that she...probably never has had a plate like this, all to herself. He sits back hard in his chair, just...watching his daughter eat. Fascinated and devastated all at

once.

“So, what are you going to do now, Jackie?” Ella asks quietly, nibbling on a piece of cheese.

Rafe opens a pack of crackers and sets a stack on Marigold’s plate, quietly pretending that he’s not paying rapt attention.

“What do you mean?” Jackson asks, turning to Ella in surprise.

“Well, are you keeping her?”

Jackson stiffens at the question. “What?”

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“Adoption is always an option, Jackson,” Ella says, a bit too casual, quietly cutting another piece of cheese from the block. “If you don’t think you’re up for being a father. We could have her placed with a very nice family -”

A rough snarl breaks from Jackson’s throat and Marigold goes still, turning towards her father in surprise. He works hard to reign himself in, passing the little girl a bit of comfort down their bond, letting her know that the snarl was not for her – never for her.

Marigold hesitates for a second but then turns back to the apples, continuing to eat.

“Good answer,” Ella says, flicking her eyes up to Jackson and smirking at him.

“Was that a joke?” he growls.

“No,” Ella says with a happy sigh, putting the knife down and taking a sharp little bite of her cheese. “But it was a way to get you to realize that even if this is a surprise, and you may not have thought you wanted it before, that you want it now.”

Ella nods towards Marigold, who Jackson can tell is listening, even if she keeps her eyes on her food.

“That’s your daughter, yes?” Ella asks, pride already ringing in her voice.

“Yes, she’s mine,” Jackson says, his voice deep and serious.

“And...no one else’s?” Ella’s eyes flick up to Jackson’s and he knows immediately what she means. He shakes his head, because Tasha...she’s gone. He presses away, for a moment, the mental image of Marigold alone in the house with her mother’s body...

Because it’s just too horrible to imagine.

“Marigold is mine,” Jackson murmurs, running a hand over the little girl’s hair, cupping the sweet curve of the back of her head.

“Wonderful,” Ella says, giving him a sweet, loving smile so deep that her eyes crinkle up at the corners. “Then you’re going to have to learn how to become a dad.”

Jackson sighs, long and slow, as he realizes that she’s right.

But he nods once, accepting the challenge.

Then he sighs, dropping his head a little and closing his eyes. “Is this going to kill Ariel?”

“Oh, don’t you worry about Ariel,” Ella says, waving a hand to casually dismiss the point. “Ariel loves kids!”

“Mom,” Rafe murmurs, laughing a bit as Mark comes over with a big pot of macaroni and cheese, setting it on the table before going to get some bowls and forks. “I mean, I think this is a bigger deal than Ariel just liking kids -”

“Oh, our Ari is a very flexible person, Rafe. Honestly, I don’t think that’s a major concern.”

Rafe and Jackson glance at each other, dubious, as Marigold gasps and drops her apple from her hand, her nose lifting as her eyes move right for the pot, an eager little whine sounding in her throat.

“Do you want to try this, Goldie!?” Ella asks, laughing and reaching for the wooden spoon as Mark comes back with the bowls and grins, sitting down with them.

Marigold’s eyes dart away from the pot for a moment and land on Ella. A little frown takes her mouth as she points to her chest with her thumb. “Marigold.”

Jackson’s teeth clench and his eyes slam shut as he hears, for the first time, the sound of his daughter’s tiny, adorable, perfect little voice.

Well, first time if you don’t count all the wailing at the start. Which he supposes he doesn’t.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Ella says, laughing. Jackson opens his eyes to see her beaming at his little girl, leaning close. “Would you like to try this, Marigold?”

Marigold nods once, solid, and Ella spoons out a small portion in a little white bowl, blowing on it before placing it in front of the little girl.

Marigold reaches for it with her fingers but Jackson's hand flashes out, covering hers. "It's very hot, Marigold," he murmurs, reaching for a small spoon with a little cartoon duck drawn on the handle. "Use this."

He hands it to her and Marigold takes the spoon, looking at it dubiously. But then she sighs, and clumsily begins to scoop up the noodles, blowing on them before bringing them to her mouth.

"Holy crap, Jacks," Rafe says. Jackson turns to see Rafe grinning at him. "That was...already very dad-like."

"She was going to burn her hand," Jacks murmurs, frowning and gesturing towards it.

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"Dad instincts, kicking in on day one," Mark says, laughing a little, leaning back in his chair and popping a mint cookie in his mouth.

Jackson sighs, thinking he's getting a bit too much credit for that. He turns his eyes back to Ella. "How do I do this?"

"Oh, it's not so bad when they're little like this," Ella says with a sigh, leaning forward to study Marigold. "She's what...four?" Marigold's eyes flick up and she gives Ella a single steady nod before returning her gaze to her noodles, eating with gusto.

As one, all of the adults at the table break into a smile at that.

"God, she's like...a teeny tiny Jacks," Mark murmurs, leaning closer. Marigold ignores him but Rafe nods in agreement. "So serious," Rafe says, laughing a little. "And intent on her food."

Jacks smirks, studying the girl, realizing that that's at least a little true, and thinking again that...well, that she looks like him. Sweeter, and softer, and – obviously – tiny. But the stern set of her mouth, and her broad forehead onto which her hair flops, all dark and messy...

God, but she's...his little mini.

And he never, ever knew before how...damned cute that could be.

“Four-year-olds are easy,” Ella says quietly, studying Jackson alongside the girl. “They’re potty-trained, so you don’t have to deal with any of that mess. And they can talk and tell you what they need, beyond using the bond. Is your bond...”

Ella’s words fade but Jackson lifts his head and gives her a single nod. She smiles softly, trying very hard to keep the fluttering joy in her heart from showing on her face.

“Well, really, then your job is to just...care for her, Jacks. Keep her clean, feed her, educate her. Talk to her, make sure she’s loved and engaged and getting a good start in life. And we’ll help you,” she says, giving a simple shrug.

Jackson looks up at Ella in surprise at this offer. Mark nods eagerly too, already on board, spooning some more macaroni and cheese into Marigold’s bowl.

“Of course we will, Jacks,” Rafe says, popping a cracker in his mouth before patting his friend on the back. “You’re my brother now, right? Which makes this little one my niece.” He grins, leaning over on the table and bending low so that his eyes are even with Marigold’s. “I always wondered when I’d get one of those. Never thought this is how it would happen.”

Marigold narrows her eyes a bit at Rafe, still unsure about this big man grinning at her like that, even as she continues to eat her supper. Rafe bursts out laughing, sitting up straight, utterly charmed.

“Well,” Ella says with a sigh, crossing her arms over her chest as she studies the little girl. “Regarding the niece question, I think a great deal of that depends on Ariel.”

“What depends on me?” a cheerful voice calls from the door.

Jackson goes still, his eyes opening wide as he panics. Ella, Mark, and Rafe likewise go rigid, turning towards the door. “What’s going on?” Ariel asks, smiling around the room as she steps in. “I’ve been looking for you guys everywhere – Jesse’s upstairs with a bunch of bags, he can’t find you either, and he won’t tell me what’s going on.”

Her eyes finally settle on the little girl, who continues to concentrate on her food, and Ariel laughs a little, moving towards her.

“Who is thi-”

But then the child’s scent hits her.

And Ariel stops in her tracks, her mouth falling open as she stares down at the top of the little girl’s head.

The little girl whose genetic lineage is...undeniable.

The room goes very silent, Ariel staring at Marigold, everyone else staring at the Princess, at her bloodless face, at the absolute horror in her expression.

Marigold puts her spoon down and turns, frowning up at the beautiful woman whose lovely rose-gold hair spills over her shoulders. Marigold swallows hard, glancing around, not knowing why everyone is being so quiet.

Then, not knowing what else to do, she lifts her hand and again points to her chest, looking up into the Princess's eyes.

“Marigold,” the little girl whispers.

Ariel stays perfectly still, just staring at her mate's daughter.

Unable to move or think or feel anything but shock.

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For a moment my wolf likewise stands frozen with shock in my soul as we both just stare at the little girl in front of us.

But then my wolf breaks into a terrible howl, starting to dart back and forth in my soul, panicked.

I come back to myself, gasping in a long breath of air before I start to pant, my eyes flicking between the little girl and my mate – immediately seeing the resemblance there – the fucking uncanny resemblance between this little girl and her dad.

Her dad.

Her fucking dad, who looks just like her, from whom she inherited that steady gaze, those gorgeous blue eyes...

My hands curl in and out of fits as I try, quite desperately, to avoid a meltdown.

Because...what the fuck is happening?

Where...where did this kid come from!? And why is she in my house!?

“You...” I whisper, my eyes moving to Jackson now. “You...you have a...baby...”

“Not baby,” Marigold says and I snap my eyes back to her, awed to hear her speak because when she does she’s so...she’s just so fucking real. “Marigold.”

I huff out a little laugh, appalled and shocked and...fascinated.

Because...is that her name?

“You...have a Marigold,” I whisper, my eyes slowly moving back to Jackson, who just stares at me, devastated.

“Ariel,” he says, his voice croaking out of his throat as he gets to his feet, reaching for me. “Please, this just happened – ” “It so did not!” I say, laughing hysterically, gesturing towards her. “She’s like – eight!”

“Four!” Marigold corrects, frowning at me.

I again snap my eyes back to her, shocked.

“Alllll right,” my mom says, slowly getting up out of her chair and reaching for the little girl. “Rafe, you grab some cookies for dessert, and the three of us,” she says, pointing between herself and Rafe and Mark, “are going to take Marigold upstairs to get her ready for bed!”

I squeak with shock because...is she sleeping over!?

What the fuck is happening right now!?

“You two talk,” mom says, settling the little girl on her hip and looking sternly between Jackson and me. “And be kind to each other, okay?”

I stare into my mother’s eyes for a moment before my gaze drifts down to the little girl. And then I turn, watching as the four of them move out of the kitchen. A soft whine breaks from Jackson’s throat and I spin towards him, realizing that –

That he doesn’t want the little girl to go.

Because it’s his fucking daughter – and he wants to be with her so he can protect her –

My entire body starts to tremble. “Jackson?” I whisper, shaking all over. “What...what’s happening?”

He turns his head to me and gasps, reaching for me at once. “Ariel,” he says, grabbing me by the arm, pulling me roughly to him and wrapping me up against his chest. “I’m so, so sorry – ”

I continue to shake, gasping little huffy breaths, completely shocked at this bizarre turn of my reality. I mean, is this even happening? Is this even real?

“Who is that little girl?” I whisper.

Jackson sighs, and I feel his chin on top of my head as he tucks me in close. “She’s my kid, Ariel. I’m sorry – I didn’t know – Cristof surprised me, he brought here here like an hour ago I haven’t even had time to process it myself -”

My mind turns fast as I begin to put the pieces together.

Cristof.

Cristof had the child.

Which means she came from the Community.

Which means...

My mind flashes back to a conversation that feels like forever ago, but that was probably just a few months. Of being curled up with Jackson, and him telling me about his life, and his history –

Telling me about a girl who was kind to him, whose...

Whose favorite color was yellow.

I stare up into my mate’s face, still utterly shocked. “Tasha,” I whisper.

Jackson swallows and clenches his jaw, looking at me with a great deal of sadness in his eyes, feeling every single one of my complex emotions through the bond as they flit through me. My wolf howls desperately and begins to dash away, running, needing something to do with her body so she doesn’t go insane. Jackson’s wolf takes off after her, desperate to be by her side, but she just keeps running – panicked and terrified.

“Tasha,” I say again, gulping. “That’s that’s Tasha’s child ___”

“My child,” Jackson says, taking my face in his palms. “Mine and Tasha’s, yes.”

“Well, where the fuck is she!?” I ask, stumbling back, looking around the kitchen like I’m going to find her hiding behind the huge industrial fridge or something. Which – honestly – considering I just walked into the kitchen to find my mate’s daughter having dinner with my mom and brothers, doesn’t sound so incredibly insane right now!

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“Ariel!” Jackson snaps, more panicked than angry, grabbing my arm and holding me tight like he’s afraid I’m going to run like my wolf is. “Tasha is – she’s dead, all right?”

I whip my head back to him, my eyes wide, a moan climbing up my throat because –

Oh my god.

Oh my god –

That little girl, all alone in the world – her mother dead –

Tears fill my eyes. “Jackson,” I beg, shaking my head at him, stepping closer, reaching up for him. He understands, bending down and picking me up in his arms, holding me close. I wrap my arms around his neck and lean hard against him, wanting as much contact as possible, wanting to feel the steady reality of him. “Please, you have to tell me everything,” I beg. “Right now. Very fast. I – I need to know everything you know – ”

Jackson murmurs that he will and then sinks back into his chair, taking me with him, and proceeds to tell me everything that happened tonight – everything he knows.

Over the next half hour, Jackson spills everything to me. My wolf stops running and turns to his, and they curl up together, both anxious and worried but...together, united. And I open the bond, and keep it open, wanting to hear and feel everything that he wants to share. The emotions just...spill down it, so much so that I feel like I’m drowning in them at times, like there’s no space for my own feelings. But I hold steady for him, knowing that even if this was an insane shock for me...

That my sweetheart mate is taking it so, so much harder.

He tells me of seeing Cristof out by the car, and of everything that passed between them. And then he continues, speculating on what some of the things Cristof said could have meant. That Tasha must have run while pregnant, that she probably tried to raise Marigold alone, but didn’t have the resources. He wonders, worried, what it must have been like for Marigold to sit for days alone wherever they lived while her mother...

I take a deep, shuddering breath, tucking my face against his chest, feeling horrible. Horrible for that little girl, and horribly ashamed of myself.

Because even if this is so much more intense for Jackson I...

I can’t help it.

I'm just so fucking jealous.

Jealous that he has a little girl and that she's not mine, that someone else got to carry and raise his pup, that someone else's daughter looks like my Jackson – has his eyes, has his steady gaze.

That – that was supposed to be my little girl – the one I didn't even know I fucking wanted until she showed up in my kitchen and I found out that she belongs to someone else!

I tuck all the jealousy away as best I can – but I bite my lip, hating myself a great deal that I can't just...be kind. And be here for Jackson, who just found out that he's a fucking dad –

“Hey,” Jackson says, a bit sharp.

I look up into his face in surprise.

“What...what's going on in there?” Jackson asks, his eyes searching my face like he's trying to read my mind. “Why are you... mad at yourself?”

“Because I'm being a jerk,” I moan, letting myself slump against him.

He goes still and then laughs, the sound hesitant and a little hysterical, putting his hands on my arms and making me sit up. “What are you talking about? Ariel, you're being so nice to me -”

“No, I'm not! I'm being so selfish!”

“Ariel!” he gives me a little shake. “I don't – I don't get this, tiny. Please, help me understand.”

“See, even the fact that you feel like you have to check in on me right now,” I say, sighing and looking into his gorgeous eyes. “Like you're worried about me. You just found out you have a baby! I should be taking care of you!”

“It's a shock for you too,” Jackson murmurs, stroking a hand long over my hair. “I mean, you didn't...sign up for this. For being mated to someone who has a child with someone else. I would understand if...”

He hesitates, his words trailing off, grief overtaking his features as he scrubs a palm down the length of his face.

I go still. “Are you – do you...Jackson,” I snarl, grabbing his shirt in my fists. “Are you fucking dumping me because you have a kid!?”

“Are you sure?” Jackson whispers.

“I’m sure,” I murmur, pulling back a little so I can study his face, my eyes moving slowly over every single beloved feature. “You’re...um. You’re keeping her? You’re going to raise her?”

Jackson holds my gaze and slowly nods. “She’s mine, Ariel.”

“Okay,” I say, nodding, my heart beginning to pound a little frantically. “Then...yeah, if that’s what you’re doing, then that’s what I’m doing. I’m on board, Jacks.”

“Ariel, I -” he sputters, I think deeply shaken by the steadiness in me, in my offer. “This is a huge ask, Ariel – a child, my child – this is going to change everything in my life -”

“In our lives,” I growl, possessive and sure. “What twists life brings to you it brings to me too, Jackson – that’s what I want. I want to do this together. Unless...you don’t want...that?”

I mean, is that even a possibility? That Jackson wants his daughter all to himself? That he wouldn’t want me involved? “No, I want you involved,” he whispers, nodding, holding my gaze, sensing my thoughts that are so vividly tied to my emotions right now. “But...your life is your own, Ariel. You didn’t make any choices that lead to this - ”

“Neither did you!”

“I did,” Jackson says, a bit of a growl in his voice. “Even if I didn’t know...what would happen, when I...with Tasha...”

My wolf growls a little at the mention of their time together and I swat a mental hand at her even as Jackson’s wolf snuggles closer in support.

Still, Jackson continues, shaking his head. “I’m not turning away from this. I am shocked – and I don’t know what’s going to happen – but that’s my daughter. And I’m not going to walk away from her. Ever.”

“You’re a good man, Jacks,” I whisper, lifting a hand to stroke over his cheek.

“But this responsibility isn’t yours,” he whispers, shaking his head. “Unless...you wanted it to be. And really, really wanted it to be.”

“I want it to be,” I whisper, even if inside I have doubts. Doubts about what it’s going to be like to raise a child at Jackson’s side, how I’m going to deal with the jealousy, whether it’s best for her, how it’s going to change our lives...

But I mean, are there even doubts? Or do I just not have answers? Because maybe...maybe there are answers to these questions. And maybe those answers aren’t bad ones.

Maybe this is a good thing.

Babies – little girls – little girls who look like Jacks –

They have to be a blessing, right?

“I want it to be my responsibility,” I whisper again, surer this time – surer that it’s not just wanting to support Jacks. That this, really, is something I can begin to commit to. That I’m strong enough to stand and help my mate as well as this little girl.

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“You’re far too kind to me, Ariel,” Jackson whispers, his throat tight.

“No, I’m not,” I sigh, slumping against him as his wolf curls up around mine, giving her a long lick on her cheek and then resting his nose again over her neck. “I’m sorry I wasn’t nice and yelled. I think I freaked her out.”

“You were freaked out,” Jackson murmurs. “It was a natural response.”

I nod, thinking he’s the one being too kind, but I look towards the door with a sigh. “Come on,” I say, unfolding myself from his lap.

“Where are we going?” he asks, standing up, looking down at me curiously.

“Upstairs,” I say, taking his hand, giving it a squeeze, suddenly a bit terrified. “I want to meet your kid.”

He groans, letting his head tilt back on his neck. “I can’t believe that’s a real sentence,” he murmurs. “I can’t believe I have a kid.”

“Same,” I say, giving him a tug towards me. Jackson wraps an arm around my waist and looks quite seriously down at my face. I smile, loving him a great deal, sure in us even if...well, even if the rest of the world just completely fell apart. “Come on,” I whisper. “If we don’t go now mom will take her shopping. And then we’ll lose her in a sea of toys and kid clothes and you may never see her again.”

Jackson huffs out a laugh but follows me out of the kitchen, rubbing his hand through his hair as we go, still looking a bit dazed.

Jackson and I are quiet and steady as we walk upstairs towards our family suite, where I somehow just know mom and Rafe and Mark and Marigold went. Jackson holds my hand firm in his own and I squeeze his back, both of us passing devotion down the bond even if its tinged with trepidation and a bit of fear.

Because both of our lives just completely blew up and we have no idea what's going to happen next, even if we know we're going to face it together.

I exhale slowly as we enter the Royal suite, the living room of which is empty, and head down the hall towards where a little light is peeking out of my room, alongside some voices.

Honestly...how did so much of my life change in an hour?

I'm still reeling even as I push open the door and smile to see my mom and Rafe sitting on the floor with Marigold between them, propped up on the little child-sized futon mattress that Seraphina likes to use when she sleeps over here. Jesse smiles at me from his place stretched over my bed – doing absolutely nothing to help, I note – while Mark peeks out of my gigantic closet, a little girl's dress half-folded in his hand.

“Hey,” mom says, beaming over at us, closing the half-read picture book that she's got in her hands.

Rafe sits up, setting Marigold's little cup of water aside.

Marigold fastens her eyes on us, brightening when she sees that it's Jackson, mostly ignoring me.

But Jackson squeezes my hand and I feel a great deal of intense emotion move through him at the sight of his little girl. And I can't help the tears that spring to my eyes – tears that come from...so many emotions.

Happiness, to see the beautiful connection already starting to form between them. And jealousy – as much as I hate it, I have to admit that it's there. Jealousy that she's not mine, jealousy that...that I'm not his whole world anymore. And confusion at all this sudden change in our lives –

But mostly, suddenly, overwhelmingly...hope.

Hope that I – that we can do something to help this little girl have a good life. This little girl who is so...so fucking frail. She's not a small creature by any means – she's Jackson's kid, after all – she has none of the tiny bird-boned loveliness of Rosie or Seraphina.

But god, she's just so thin-

Like Midnight – like she's never had a proper meal in her life –

My heart instantly reaches out to Marigold and I find myself moving, crossing the room, ignoring everyone else and going to sit at the bottom edge of her little makeshift bed, swallowing over the lump in my throat as I glance down at her little bitty feet – covered in a blanket patterned in flowers and stars –

I lean forward, pressing a hand to my heart, my chest, and smile at her.

“Hi,” I say, my voice shakier than I’d like it to be. “My name is Ariel. It’s so, so nice to meet you.”

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Marigold studies me for a long moment and I feel Jackson step close, feel him settle down on the ground behind me. The little girl flicks her eyes to him and then back to me.

“Ariel,” she whispers, and my name said in her tiny voice makes my heart seize. I smile at her – a big, rich smile – even as tears slip out of the corners of my eyes. I wipe them hastily away, not wanting her to think that I’m sad.

“Yup, that’s right,” I say, laughing a little and shifting my eyes to my mom – who, of course, is also crying.

Marigold shifts her eyes to Jackson, a clear question on her face as she tries to figure out what his name is. She knows the rest of us by name, after all, except him. His name – the name of the most important person in the room to her right now. The person with whom she has a bond, whom she already knows to be attached to her.

“Um,” Jackson says, working hard to keep his voice casual and steady. “I guess you can just call me...dad. If that’s okay with you.”

Marigold stares at him for a long moment and then nods once, turning her eyes back to the book in mom’s hands, clearly wanting more of that.

But mom, I laugh to see, is crying too hard now to continue reading. She laughs along with me – we all do – as she sets the book down in Marigold’s lap and wipes at her cheeks with her palms.

“They’re all messy, Marigold,” Rafe says on a sigh, laughing and picking up the book as the little girl turns to him. “Here, let me continue this, though I’m not going to be as good at the voices as she was.”

We all curl up then, quite quiet and cozy, and listen as Rafe reads the story. Jesse comes down from the bed to stretch out next to me and Mark comes in too, bringing a bunch of child clothes – where on earth did he get those? – and continuing to fold them as he listens.

I lean back against Jack and keep my eyes fastened on the little girl.

Jackson's little girl.

Who eats cookie after cookie as about half an hour passes, her eyes fastened steadily on the page as my brother reads to her. And I smile, just slightly, because...

I mean, because I think it's all going to be okay.

With this team at our backs? It's all going to be okay.

Rafe reads until Marigold's eyes start to droop, until she slumps down against the pillows, her breathing slow and deep.

"All right," mom says, making Rafe pause as she pulls the blankets up around Marigold's chin. "Why don't you big boys clear out of here and give Jackson a chance to tuck his little girl in."

Mark and Jesse grumble – honestly, the story was very good – but get to their feet. Mark ducks into the closet quickly to put away all of Marigold's freshly folded clothes.

"Hey," Jesse whispers, bending down to put a hand on my shoulder. I look up at him in surprise as he tilts his head towards the door. "Why don't you come out with us for a second. Let me buy you a drink."

I just stare at him in shock at this request, making him laugh.

"Come on, Princess," Jesse says, straightening and grinning at me. "You look like you could use one."

I laugh a little, glancing at Jackson. "Do you mind?"

Jacks just stares at me for a second. "Should I mind?"

I laugh and shake my head, getting to my feet as my mom smiles softly at me and Rafe gets up too, tucking the little story book beneath Marigold's tiny mattress so she can find it tomorrow.

"You go, Ariel," mom says with a little laugh, looking down at the little girl who works hard to keep her eyes open, wanting to see everything that's going on. "Jackson and I can handle it in here."

“Can we?” Jackson asks, looking at my mom with a great deal of fear on his face.

I laugh and get to my feet, pressing a kiss to his cheek as I do. “It’s just tucking her in, Jacks,” I say softly. “No trouble at all.” “What’s tucking in?” he whispers, looking at me and then mom, baffled.

I laugh and take Jesse’s proffered arm as mom grins at Jackson and begins to explain. Then, Mark and Rafe following behind, the four of us head out the door and into the living room.

Rafe, Jesse and I head for the bar car in the corner, but Mark hesitates, looking towards the door.

“You don’t want a drink, Markie?” Jesse asks, looking at him with a raised eyebrow. “And get the full debriefing about Ariel’s actual emotions on the subject of Jackson’s love child?”

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“Um,” Mark says, running a hand through his hair, his eyes again straying to the exit. “I think I want a walk.

“You okay, baby?” I ask, turning to him with a frown. Mark – why is he being weird now? Honestly, with all of these developments, I’m not sure I can handle anything new from Mark too.

“I’m fine,” Mark says, turning and giving me a big grin. “Don’t worry about me, Ari. You have enough on your plate.”

“Does she ever,” Rafe says with a sigh, turning to me and handing me a fresh glass of white wine that he just poured. Mark waves to us over his shoulder, calling to us that he loves us, even as he heads for the door.

“He’s the most mysterious of the Sinclairs,” Jesse says, smirking after Mark even as he heads for the couch and waves for Rafe and me to follow. We do, Rafe carrying a glass of wine for him and Jesse too.

“No, he’s not,” Rafe and I both say at once. We all laugh as my brother and my cousin settle down with me, Jesse with me on the couch and Rafe in the arm chair to my left.

I sigh and slump back against the cushions, lifting my glass to my mouth and gulping down a great deal of wine in one go. “So,” Jesse says on a happy sigh, grinning his wicked smile between the two of us. “You two have had some...developments over the past few days. Haven’t you?”

“You’re the one whose mate is sleeping on the roof in a tent, Jess,” Rafe replies, dry, making us both laugh, Jesse’s head tilting back on his neck as he does. “When it comes to weird developments, you have no room to talk.”

“True,” Jesse says, lifting his head back up and grinning at both of us, I think genuinely happy to have our little trio back together. “But tonight’s really about Ariel anyway. How you doing, kid?” He gives me a prodding little nudge with his foot.

“I don’t know,” I groan, letting myself slump further against the cushions, tucking my legs up beneath me. “That... I mean that all happened so fast. This morning Jackson and I woke up alone and everything was fine, and then two hours ago I’m just on a video call to Daphne, and then boom! All of a sudden my mate has a daughter and mom is tucking her into bed in my room!?”

I sigh, baffled by it all.

“To constant surprises,” Rafe says on a sigh, lifting his glass to both of us. “At least this family never gets dull.”

“We could use a little dull,” I grumble, staring into my wine.

“Oh, should I call Mark back?” Jesse asks, making me laugh even as I shoot him a little glare. “He can go on and on about the native breeds of squirrel - ”

“You leave my Markie alone,” I snarl, kicking him this time. Jesse grins at me and nods. I forgive him immediately, knowing he was kidding.

And also, Mark really can be weird about wildlife. So...I get it.

We’re quiet for a few long moments before Rafe sighs, long and deep, drawing our eyes to him.

“You’d better do right by Jackson on this, Ariel,” my brother says, holding me with rather a steely gaze.

I sit up straight, gaping at him. “What!?”

“I’m serious,” he says, giving me that slow and steady Alpha nod that dad uses when he’s laying down the law. “You’d better put Jackson first and support him in everything he needs as he adjusts to -”

“To begin!” I interrupt, whipping a finger in the air and whipping my head between my brother and my cousin. “You two are supposed to be on my side! Where are the comforting questions of ‘how are you, dear Ariel?’ and ‘Ariel, darling, what a shock – how do you face such stress with such equanimity and poise?’!?”

“Would we call this poise?” Jesse murmurs wonderingly, narrowing his eyes and gesturing at me with his drink.

I snarl, glaring at him.

“And continuing on that point!” I say, only baring my teeth at him a little bit. “Why would you assume that I’m not going to do right by Jacks!?”

“Well, are you?” Rafe asks, leaning towards me, stern and curious.

“Because if you’re not,” Jesse says, likewise leaning in. “We’re not going to forgive you for it, Ari.”

I spin my head back and forth between the two of them as I gape at both, shocked to be at the center of this interrogation that just seems so ridiculous to me!