

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 611

“Hey,” I growl, pointing my finger between Rafe and Jesse, starting to get pissed. “I am here for Jackson – I have been very kind throughout all of this huge, insane surprise tonight -”

“That boy has been there for you, Ariel,” Rafe interrupts, still very, very serious. “And you dragged him through some pretty devastating mud over the past couple of months -”

I squeak in protest, turning to stare at my brother with my mouth open. “I so did not!”

“Two other mates?” Rafe says, arching an eyebrow at me.

“Both of whose marks you got before Jackson’s?” Jesse adds, forcing me to spin to glare at him in turn.

“None of which was my fault!?” I counter, glaring hard.

“We’re not blaming you,” Rafe says, and I turn back to him. “I’m just saying – if you’re not completely there for Jackson – without hesitation, without question – I’m going to judge you for it. Hard. That guy has been at your side through a great deal of stress. He deserves the best in turn from his mate.”

My mouth suddenly turns down in a worried frown. “Do you...are you saying this because you seriously think I’m not going to do that? That I need to be told how much Jackson loves me and how good he is to me? That I’d just be good to him in turn because of forced reciprocation!?”

“No, Ari,” Jesse says, scootching closer and putting a warm hand on my shoulder. I turn to him now, that desperate frown still curving my lips. “We’re just saying – if you were considering taking your time to work through your own emotions on this – don’t. He’s going to need your full and unconditional support right from the start.”

“Well, he’s got that,” I whisper, staring at Jesse.

“Good,” he says, nodding deeply to me.

My brother and my cousin both sigh and simultaneously sit back in their chairs. But I am not yet so relaxed. “Where is this all coming from!?” I whisper.

Rafe shrugs, looking down into his glass. “You have...a bit of a jealous streak, Ari,” he says with a shrug. “You’re going to have to share him now, a little. And I don’t think you’re going to like it.”

I scowl a bit, slumping back into the cushions, hating that my brother and my cousin know me so well. “You sensed that already, did you?”

“You’ll be fine,” Rafe says, smiling at me softly. “Your heart always wins out in the end. For what it’s worth, I think you’re going to be a great step-mom.”

I go a bit still at the words. “Step-mom,” I whisper, staring at him. “Is that... is that what I am now?”

Jesse laughs – cackles really – and raises his glass to me. “To Princess Ariel – step-mom galore. It looks good on you, cousin!”

I laugh shakily and raise my glass too, shaking my head and then drinking the rest of the contents down. Rafe gets up to get the rest of the bottle, correctly sensing I might want a refill.

“She’s really cute, isn’t she?” I whisper, looking over at Jesse and wrinkling my nose.

“Oh, come on, with those genetics?” Jesse gives a casual shrug and smirks at me, holding my gaze steadily. “How could she not be?”

“It could have gone very bad,” Rafe says, coming over and splashing more wine into my glass. “She could be like a big, hulking four-year-old girl, all muscles and pigtails – ”

Jesse and I both burst out laughing and I smack at Rafe as he laughs and goes and sits down, grinning at me. “You leave my step-kid alone,” I growl at my brother, whose smile deepens. “You’d better be nice to her too.” “Oh, no risk there,” Jesse says with a happy sigh. “It’s much less pressure to be a step-cousin once removed.” I huff a laugh and sip at my wine as I shake my head at my cousin.

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“But,” Jesse says, raising his glass again to me in toast. “I think that you’re going to be great, Ari. I think this is weird, and challenging, but that...I don’t know. I think that it could be really good.”

“Mom always says babies are a blessing, however they come,” I say on a sigh, looking down into my glass, hoping that she’s right. Hoping that I can do this – support Jackson, and help to raise Marigold, and play the roles in their lives that they need me to be. Inwardly, even as I quail, I feel myself step up to the challenge.

Because I want to do it. As strange and as fast as it all is – I want it.

“What babies are blessings?”

My dad’s voice echoes from the door and I jump a little spinning towards him. My eyes go wide and my face goes a bit pale as twin smiles break out on Rafe and Jesse’s faces – both wicked, both desperately interested to see how this goes down.

“Pour yourself a drink, dad,” I say on a sigh, gesturing towards the bar cart. “We’ve got some news for you.”

Dad stills at the door, glaring between Jesse and Rafe. “Who got who pregnant?” he growls, suspicious. “God damn it, I told you boys -”

I burst out laughing, luckily blotting the rest of that sentence from my hearing even as Rafe and Jesse nearly burst up from their seats, protestations of innocence already on their lips.

“Fine, fine,” dad sighs, waving his hand at them and striding quickly for the bar cart. “God damn it, if this is going to be a long story, at least let me get a drink first.”

“Oh, are we having drinks?” Mom’s voice rings out as she comes into the living room, her face blissful, her cheeks flushed. “Yay! I’m glad I’m not too late.”

Dad narrows his eyes at her as he finishes splashing whiskey in a glass, grabbing next for the bottle of wine she likes next.” Well, you look...suspiciously cheerful, Ella.”

“And beautiful,” she says on a happy sigh, stepping close to dad and pressing herself to his side as she looks up into his face.” You forgot beautiful.”

“How could I,” he murmurs, smiling down at her with a great deal of love on his face, making my stomach flutter at the sight. God, to love someone that intensely for twenty-five years...

Will Jacks and I get to be that happy? Inwardly, I desperately hope so.

“I don’t know how you forgot,” mom murmurs, grinning at she accepts the glass of wine from his hand. “But you’re a terrible brute. You owe me an apology.”

Dad hums his agreement, his eyes flashing over mom’s face as he takes the first sip of his drink. “Bright eyes, flushed cheeks, utter happiness...this can only mean one thing. Where are you hiding the baby, Ella?”

“Oh, in Ariel’s room,” she says, grinning up at him.

Dad goes still in shock when he realizes that she's not kidding and then whips his head over to me.

"I'm gonna let you all handle this," I say on a sigh, standing up and moving quickly to my dad, standing on my toes to press a kiss to his cheek. "After all, I've got to go say goodnight to my step-kid."

Dad stares at me in shock as mom laughs and kisses me goodnight. I wave to them all over my shoulder as I head down the hall, my nearly-full glass of wine still in my hand.

"She's...she's kidding right?" I hear my dad ask. I laugh a little, shaking my head as I reach for my door.

Jesse and I both burst out laughing and I smack at Rafe as he laughs and goes and sits down, grinning at me. "You leave my step-kid alone," I growl at my brother, whose smile deepens. "You'd better be nice to her too." "Oh, no risk there," Jesse says with a happy sigh. "It's much less pressure to be a step-cousin once removed." I huff a laugh and sip at my wine as I shake my head at my cousin.

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The room is dark when I step inside, but my eyes focus immediately on Jackson sitting on the ground at Marigold's side, both of them lit by the light of a tiny nightlight shaped like a unicorn. Jackson looks up at me and smiles when I come in, even as a little request for quiet comes down the bond between us.

Because Marigold – she's asleep, all curled up, her hair spread out all around her.

"Where on earth did you get a nightlight so fast?" I whisper, grinning as I sit next to Jacks, leaning against him. His arm wraps around me, almost instinctually.

"Jesse brought it," he replies, giving me a squeeze. "He brought...most of this. I had no idea that they made so many things just for kids." Jacks looks around, a little baffled at the array of child-sized books, blankets, toys.

"Kids have the best stuff – especially girls," I sigh. "I'm always a little jealous of all the purple and the pink and the sparkles"

"Ariel, you wear black every day," Jackson murmurs, turning his head to frown down at me.

“Only because I’m obliged to pretend I’m a boy,” I say, rolling my eyes. “It’s the worst part!”

He laughs and shakes his head, turning his gaze back to his little daughter.

“How are you doing?” I ask, putting a hand on Jackson’s chest, rubbing it back and forth softly, opening the bond so I can begin to investigate and explore, wondering if there’s anything I can do to make it better.

“I’m...” Jackson searches for words and then sighs, dropping his head. “I have no idea, Ariel. I’m still so shocked and confused. And my mind is racing trying to figure out what to do next.”

I hum consideringly, understanding, and wordlessly offer him the rest of my glass of wine.

He huffs a little laugh and takes it, taking a long sip. “Any thoughts?” he murmurs, truly seeking my advice.

“I think you should sort of take it...moment by moment, Jacks,” I say quietly. “There’s no need to have a plan just yet – you don’t know what all the options are, you haven’t had time to figure them all out. The priority is to keep Marigold fed, and warm, and happy, right? So...let’s just do that for a few days until we have a better idea of what’s going on.”

Jacks goes a bit still and then turns to me. “We?”

“Oh, we,” I say, laughing a bit and grinning up at him. “I mean, you have no idea how to do this, right?” I say, gesturing towards the little girl. “I have a little sister. And six younger cousins. Kids? I know how to do kids.”

Jackson scowls a bit. “I mean, I can keep her alive, Ariel.”

“Yeah, but when it comes time to convince her to take a bath?” My smile widens when I see his eyes do the same. “See? You don’t even know how to use bubble bath. Or what no-tears shampoo is. Or where to find mom’s stash of bath toys.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “You’re messing with me now,” he murmurs. “There’s...there can’t be any such thing as bath toys.”

“Oh, stick with me, kid,” I say, laughing and nodding up at him. “I’ll show you a whole world of child wonders.”

“Shit,” Jackson sighs, turning his eyes back to the sleeping girl. “Just when I thought I’d learned all about a new world...here come all of these insane new lessons.”

“Life’s great mysteries await,” I say, pressing a kiss to his shoulder.

He hums doubtfully and I laugh, getting to my feet.

“Where are you going?” Jackson asks, frowning up at me.

“To get blankets,” I say, gesturing over my shoulder.

He just continues frowning, confused, and I laugh as I turn, heading for the bed.

“Well, we’re sleeping on the floor, right?” I call, gathering the comforter up in my arms alongside some pillows, yanking it off the bed and dragging it back to Jackson with me.

“Why on earth would we do that?” he asks, staring up at me like I’m crazy.

“Because,” I say, nodding down to the little girl as I begin to make us a little makeshift bed. “If she wakes up and doesn’t know where she is, she’s going to flip out, and we’re going to want to be right here so we can help her.”

“Damn it,” Jackson murmurs, shaking his head. “I should have thought of that...”

“No, Jacks,” I say with a happy sigh, finishing laying out the blankets and plopping myself down in his lap, pushing my hands gently against his shoulders as I urge him to lean back. “That’s why you’ve got me. I’ll think of it. You... let your mind turn on whatever else it wants to think of.”

He sighs for a second, my pushing obviously doing nothing to actually make him lay down, and then he finishes the glass of wine before putting the glass down and wrapping his arms around me, taking me with him as he lays back on his back. “Too good to me, Ariel Sinclair,” he murmurs.

“Not nearly good enough,” I murmur, pressing a kiss to his chest.

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“Thank you,” he replies, dismissing my point. And I smile, opening the bond again, passing a constant stream of love and reassurance down the bond to my mate. Because it’s not that I’m not freaked out, or scared, or shaken by all of this –

It’s just that Jesse and Rafe are right. Jackson needs me right now, and so does Marigold.

And if I can just put the rest of the worries out of my mind and concentrate on helping them for right now...then the rest we can figure out as it comes.

I sigh and concentrate on my bond, and my mate, and this brand new little girl. And Jackson and I just sit quietly for a long time, sharing emotions and watching Marigold sleep until we, too, join her in that state.

My eyelids slowly begin to lift in the morning as I wake up, blearily and confused, trying to figure out...why I'm so close to the ground...even though Jackson is sprawled out beneath me as usual...

But I flinch, just slightly, when I see two very blue little eyes peering at me.

"Ariel," a little voice whispers.

My face breaks into a smile. "Hi," I whisper back, reaching out a hand and drifting my palm softly over the little girl's pretty dark hair. "Good morning."

She smiles at me too.

"Who're you talking to," Jackson mumbles, his eyes still closed. He dips a hand low on my back and flips up the edge of my shirt, running his hand up the length of my spine. I can feel, down the bond, precisely where his intentions are leading with this and I grin, propping my chin on his chest so I can look up at his face.

"Jacks? Probably not the best idea right now."

"What?" he asks, cracking an eye open. "What're you -"

He flinches and then gasps when he sees Marigold, having apparently forgotten all about her. I burst out laughing as Jackson clasps me to his chest, sitting half up. And, to my delight, Marigold laughs along with me - the happiest, prettiest little tinkling sound!

"You scared me," Jackson says to the little girl, his sense of humor catching up a moment later as he smiles first at his girl and then at me. Marigold laughs harder and falls back into her blankets, making me grin. "God damn it, I... was not expecting that," Jackson murmurs, stroking a hand over my hair and pressing a kiss to my cheek and then a quick one to my mouth. "You'd better," I say, looping my arms around his neck. "You're a daddy now. Kids around all the time."

He hums in consideration, looking between Marigold and me. "We're going to need to get her her own bed...at some point."

"And her own room," I say, winding my arms around Jackson's neck, pressing my own quick kiss to his mouth, sending all of my cheerful, happy morning emotions right down along the bond. He laughs and gives me a tight squeeze before I crawl off him and stand up, stretching.

“Okay, Marigold!” I say, grinning at the girl and offering my hand. “What do you think? A little bath before breakfast?”

She peers up at me, going still. And then she bares her teeth a bit, growling.

I blink at her, surprised. “You...don’t want breakfast?” I glance between her and Jackson, confused.

“No, it’s the bath...” Jacks murmurs, yawning and rubbing a hand over his hair. “She’s sending me... images, feelings. When she thinks of a bath it’s very...cold.”

“Really?” I ask, standing straight and staring at him. “You can get all that down the bond?”

He shrugs and looks up at me. “Is that...abnormal?”

I consider it for a second, remembering back to my own childhood. Children’s bonds with their parents change as their language develops, as their needs change. But I do remember being very small and passing thoughts and feelings to my parents so... “No, I guess it’s not,” I say quietly, putting my hands on my hips. “I’m just...not used to you having a bond with someone else.”

He looks up at me, his own feelings slightly guilty and worried as he looks up at me, almost apologetic.

Jackson reaches for my hand and I take it, giving him a squeeze. Guilt sweeps through me immediately, because who am I to begrudge Jackson a bond with his daughter? After all, it changes nothing about my bond with him.

I bend slightly, bringing Jackson’s hand to my mouth and kissing his fingers before turning to Marigold, crouching down in front of her. “Things are different here – we have very fancy plumbing. Our baths are warm – as warm as you’d like!”

She narrows her eyes at me, dubious, but I just grin and reach for her hand too. “Come on, kid. Let’s get you cleaned up. And then we’ll bring you to Ella, who will give you something delicious to eat.”

“Ella,” she whispers, reaching out on impulse and taking my hand. I laugh and nod to her, standing and helping Marigold to her feet too.

“Yes, the lure of Ella is universal,” I say on a laugh, starting towards the bathroom and grinning between Marigold and Jackson as they follow me.

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About forty-five minutes later Jackson and I leave the bedroom with a damp and happy little girl between us, one of her hands in each of ours. She trots happily forward and we both grin down at her, I think both of us still buzzing from the happiness of bathtime.

To say that Marigold was happy with the warm bath is an understatement. In fact, the whole bathroom was a wonder to her – from the big porcelain soaking tub to the flowing warm water and the bubbles and the toys. Safe to say, I don't think she's ever going to growl at me when I propose bath time ever again.

“Marigold!” My dad's voice booms out in the living room and all three of us whip our heads up in surprise.

I grin at my dad and the rest of my family already gathered around the living room, plates of breakfast in their laps, because it becomes immediately apparent that mom put together the loveliest little breakfast to welcome Marigold to the family.

But Marigold interprets things differently.

She gasps in fear and then yelps, darting behind Jackson, wrapping her arms around his right leg and peering out from behind his knee, growling ferociously.

Rafe and Mark laugh while dad grimaces, taking a step back, realizing that he...may have overdone his enthusiastic greeting. “Dominic,” Jackson says on a sigh, going so far as to even flash a frustrated little glare at my dad. I grin at my mate, wondering if he realizes that he just did something that ninety-five percent of the population wouldn't dare do for fear of their lives. “She's not used to men -”

“I'm very sorry,” dad says, stepping forward again, a hand held out as a peace offering. “I should have thought -”

Marigold's growl grows deeper and I grin when I look down and see that her little teeny tiny fangs have extended. I can't help the little coo that breaks from my mouth as I clutch my hands to my heart.

“Why don't you just take a few steps back, Dominic,” mom says, laughing as she crosses to us and reaches for the little girl. “Well, I didn't think she'd be scared!” dad says in protest, his face a bit frantic at the thought that Marigold disapproves. He takes three steps back, basically pressing himself against the wall. “Why's she scared of me!?”

“Because you're a huge terrifying Alpha,” Rafe murmurs, quite casual, flicking through some news on his phone as he sips at his coffee.

“So are you! So is her dad!” my father protests.

“Rude,” Mark says, frowning around, “that I am not included in this group.”

“Yes,” Rafe murmurs. “But the rest of us gave her cookies, and didn’t shout at her first thing in the morning.”

Marigold releases Jackson’s legs and runs for mom, her face still looking warily at my dad as mom sweeps her up in her arms and lifts her high in a big hug.

“What do you think, little girl?” mom murmurs, pressing a kiss to Marigold’s cheek and carrying her over to the wide buffet.” We’ve got all sorts of good things here, what do you want to try?”

Marigold looks wide-eyed at the selection, fascinated and perhaps a bit overwhelmed.

“Ella,” Jackson says, a little frustrated, moving to her side. “She won’t be used to rich foods – it will make her sick –”

“Okay, so, only half a plate of candy with breakfast?” mom asks, looking up at Jackson. I grin, laughing a little at the fact that mom’s blank face makes it impossible to know whether or not she’s kidding.

“Ella,” Jackson says, his shoulders slumping on a sigh.

“Oh, all right, all right, Jacks,” mom says, laughing and passing Marigold up to him. “You make her a plate according to your own dietary preferences. But when it comes time for dessert, I’m telling you, boy, I will not be so contained.”

Jackson gives mom a pained little look that makes me laugh because it’s very clear to me that he’s incredibly uncomfortable defying her every wish. I just pat Jacks on the arm and leave him to his work, crossing to my dad and opening my arms, wanting a hug very much.

Dad complies, wrapping me up tight, letting me rest my head against his chest. “Living up to your namesake as usual, little trouble,” dad murmurs against my hair, rocking me a little. “How are you doing with all of this?”

“I think I’m okay,” I say, closing my eyes and letting my dad take my weight for a moment, take my worries and my problems

too.

“You are, baby,” dad says, stroking my hair. “The addition of one little girl is nothing this family can’t handle.”

“Thank you,” I say on a sigh, meaning it.

“Come on,” dad says after a moment, giving me a little nudge. “Let’s feed you up too. Fatherly instincts and all.”

“Can I eat junk?” I ask, grinning up at my dad as he leads me over to the buffet.

“As much as you want, darling,” dad says, stroking a hand over his hair. “You’ve already been spoiled rotten so there’s nothing that a few more bits of chocolate won’t do. I don’t mind playing the role of the much more indulgent father now that you’re all grown up and ending wars.”

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I burst out laughing and pick up a plate, my stomach rolling over with hunger as I do as my father suggests, picking out a rather indulgent breakfast.

Breakfast passes quite calmly with all of us scattered around the living room eating off our knees. I mean, there are several dining rooms all over the palace, but when it comes to our personal meals? This always seemed to suit us more. Mom gets Marigold a little tray and sets it up before a pillow so that she has space to work, and Jackson and I sit on either side of Marigold as she digs into the plate of eggs and sausage and toast that Jackson made for her.

My family chats calmly but Jackson mostly watches his girl, and I watch him, pleased and entertained.

“She eats like you,” I murmur, reaching out and tucking some of his hair behind his ear.

“What do you mean?” he asks, lifting his eyes to mine.

“Endlessly,” I say, dry, nodding down to Marigold’s empty plate as my mom brings her over a little bowl of fruit. Marigold reaches for it, eager.

Jackson laughs, full and rich, and nods to Ella, giving his permission for Marigold to have it. She digs in with gusto, her eyes wide, and I realize that she’s eating things and experiencing flavors that she may have never had before.

“Yes, I suppose I can take credit for the appetite,” Jackson says on a sigh, stroking his hand down over her hair. “Though I wonder...”

“What?” I ask, leaning closer, dropping my voice, intuiting that he doesn’t want others to hear.

He turns to me, likewise dropping his voice. “Well, is she just making up for lost time? Or does she have...”

My eyebrows shoot up as I consider it for the first time – that Marigold might have magic, might have magic to match Jackson’s own –

“Oh wow,” I whisper, looking down at Marigold’s dark head. “How would we...know?”

Jackson just shrugs, shaking his head at me with a wondering little frown.

Mark comes over then and we both turn to him with a smile as he stretches out on the floor in front of Marigold, propping himself up on his elbow and sipping from his mug. “Hey Marigold, good morning,” he says, easy and fun as my Markie always is.

Marigold drags her attention away from the fruit bowl for just a moment to meet his eyes. “Mark,” she says, quite definitive, giving a nod.

Mark’s face bursts into a handsome smile. “Yup, that’s me.”

Marigold wordlessly turns her attention back to the fruit but then goes still, her nose working, and then her eyes move directly for Mark’s mug. A little whine sounds in the back of her throat.

“She can’t possibly want coffee,” I murmur, frowning down at her and then glancing down at my own mug next to me.

“Nah it’s hot chocolate,” Mark says, holding it out to Marigold. “Here, you can have mine -”

“Mark,” Jacks says on a sigh, reaching out to block the cup. Marigold snaps her head up to her father, her adorable little whine sounding again. My heart clenches at the sound and I’m made aware, quite suddenly, of why it’s so hard for my mother to not indulge our every whim.

God, dad sure did have his work laid out for him throughout our childhoods, keeping her in line.

“Oh, come on,” Mark says, his tone wheedling, giving Jacks a charming Sinclair smile. “Watching a little girl try hot chocolate for the first time? How can you take this opportunity away from us?”

Jackson sighs, defeated again, and gives in. “Just a sip, okay? If it’s not too hot.”

“Nah, it’s cooled, no worries,” Mark says, leaning further over towards Marigold.

Mom, dad, and Rafe all peer over, delighted and curious, as Marigold takes Mark’s big cup and lifts it to her mouth, taking a little sip.

Her eyes go wide as soon as the liquid hits her mouth and she eagerly yanks the cup up, spilling chocolate down the sides of her cheeks, taking big glugging sips.

“Oh my god,” Jackson groans, grabbing for the cup, but Marigold whips her face away towards me, chugging down the drink. I burst out laughing as Jackson finally gets the cup away from her, especially when I see that there’s only the tiniest bit left at the bottom.

We all laugh, and Jackson joins in a bit too, shaking his head at Marigold, as Mark takes back his cup and makes a big show of being appalled that she drank it all. To all of our delight, Marigold laughs too at Mark’s antics, and the atmosphere overall is very happy and cheerful.

That is, until the door to the room opens, and Jackson snarls, clutching Marigold to his chest.

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“Whoa,” Jesse says, starting back from the door a bit as he peers into the room. “Should I...go?”

“Jesse,” Marigold whispers, peering over Jackson’s arm, her eyes locking on my cousin. Jesse beams at the little girl, I think quite pleased that she remembers his name.

“Who...” Jackson says on a sigh, loosening his hold as he realizes that it’s not some great threat, just another branch of the Sinclair family. “Did you bring...?”

“Not the whole pack,” Jesse says, glancing over his shoulder. “Just mom and dad and Seraphina.”

Jackson sighs, looking down at the top of Marigold’s head, clearly at war with himself.

“What are your hesitations, Jacks?” mom asks, stepping closer to us, tucking her hands behind her back. “Please, you’re in charge here, but... I think people are just excited to meet her.”

“She’s not used to a lot, Ella,” Jackson murmurs, settling Marigold into his lap. “The flashes that I’m getting from her of her life – it was very basic. She didn’t even have running water. And she didn’t really know any other kids. I remember what it was like coming here to the capital for the first time, and how stressful it was, and confusing and overwhelming. I just...don’t want her to be freaked out. Slow and steady is...better”

Jackson strokes his hand over Marigold’s hair. I smile as I watch him, shocked to see him so...fond of her, so paternal, so protective in less than twenty-four hours.

Wow. This wolf dad stuff must really run deep.

Or maybe just in guys like Jacks.

“We can go if you want, Jacks,” Jesse says, stepping just barely over the threshold and glancing back over his shoulder. “I totally get it. But Seraphina did bring Marigold a present, and if she doesn’t get to give it, she’ll...probably flip out. So would you mind, if maybe she came in for just a second?”

Jackson narrows his eyes. Marigold watches everyone very carefully, her eyes snapping from face to face, taking everything in. “What kind of present?” Jackson asks.

Jesse smiles softly, incredibly fond of our family’s baby, and pushes the door open a little bit to show Seraphina standing there with a little bouquet of flowers that she clearly picked herself. Weeds, mostly – early dandelions, and chickweed, and clover – all tied together with a wide purple ribbon.

“Just something small,” Jesse says, looking down at his smallest sister with a great deal of love.

All of our hearts just break with a nearly audible snap as a huge smile spreads over Seraphina’s face. She hesitates, looking up at Jesse, not sure if she can come in.

“Oh god,” Jackson says, giving in like the rest of us and smiling at Sera. “Come on in, Fifs. Of course, come in.”

The smallest Sinclair’s face bursts into a grin as she dashes across the room to us. Jackson nods to Jesse and Cora and Roger too, letting them know that he’s fine with them as well, though I can feel his anxiety about such a full room – more people than Marigold’s ever socialized with together at once, probably.

But it doesn’t seem to affect Marigold at all. Instead, she looks with big wide eyes at Seraphina as she dashes over.

“Hi, my name is Seraphina Liliana Sinclair,” Sera says, so quick all the words blend together as she sticks her arm out straight towards Marigold, offering the bouquet. “Mom says you’re just my age. I’m four.”

“I’m four,” Marigold says, nodding too, a little smile spreading across her mouth.

“I brought this for you,” Seraphina says, stepping forward further, still holding it out.

Marigold just stares at the flowers, unsure what to do. “What is it?”

“I don’t know. Flowers. You can have them. I found them in the back yard and I picked them for you.”

“Thank you,” Marigold whispers, taking the flowers and holding them awkwardly in her hand. I smile softly, looking a bit breathlessly between the girls, wondering what the hell is going to happen next.

The two just stare at each other for a long moment before Seraphina cocks her head to the side. “Wanna play?”

Jackson tenses. “I’m not sure I - ”

But Seraphina bursts out into a giggle and shifts in a flash into her puppy form, stretching her front paws out in front of her in a clear invitation to play before darting off behind the couch. Marigold gasps and drops her flowers, a huge smile breaking across her face before she shifts too, scrambling out of Jackson’s lap in her puppy form to chase Sera.

“Wait!” Jackson calls, fear clear in his voice. “I -”

“Jacks,” I murmur, putting a hand on his knee. “Seraphina is a good kid – she knows how to play.” I bite my lip, not wanting to push too far. He’s her dad, after all. “You can’t control everything and...maybe it will do her some good, to have some fun. Get sleepy so she goes down for a nap.”

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He turns his head back to me. “They nap?”

My mouth spreads into a grin. “At four? Kind of a lot.”

“Oh god,” he groans, putting his head again in his hands. “I don’t – I don’t know what I’m doing. I’m trying to do it all right – I just...have no idea what’s going on...”

“You sound just right for a new dad,” Roger says, wandering over with Cora at his side, both of them smiling lovingly down at my big, confused Alpha mate. “We pretty much lived in that state of anxiety and unknowing for the first eight years of Jesse’s existence.”

“And I’m great!” Jesse calls from the breakfast buffet, where he loads up a plate.

Jackson hesitates, studying Jesse, clearly wondering if it was the best choice.

Cora and Roger burst out laughing, and I do too, and then Jackson does and the room rings with it. I scootch closer to Jackson’s side, looping my arm in his and leaning against him. “It’s gonna be fine, Jacks,” I whisper. “This is her family. Kind of a crash course in it, yes but...she’s going to have to get used to us sometime.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” Jackson murmurs, looking over to where Seraphina really is playing quite gently with Marigold – much more gently than she does with her other siblings, who she bites and tackles with glee. But the light in Marigold’s little brown puppy eyes that shine so bright against her wolf’s dark fur – god, she just looks so incredibly happy that my eyes fill with tears.

“Looks like breakfast cocktails are in order,” Roger says, giving us both a wink and then starting over for the bar cart.

“What?” I ask, wiping at my eyes.

But I understand more completely when I look over at Jackson and see his eyes filled with tears too as he watches his little girl play with her new cousin. As he realizes that unlike him, she’s going to grow up with a family.

And a really, really good one at that.

I lean close against my mate and pass a great deal of love down our bond.

Jacks leans against me too and sends it right back.

Sensing that it will put Jackson most at ease, my family is uncharacteristically calm and subdued for the rest of the day. Roger pours Jackson a big glass of whiskey that he nurses, his eyes constantly moving back to Marigold. As the hours pass each of the adults in our family spends a little one-on-one time with Jacks, chuffing him up and ensuring him that he can do this.

Rafe, Mark, and Jesse each take turns playing with the girls, little games that leave the pair shouting with laughter and joy. At some points I even hear Marigold chattering with her new friend, talking on and on in her excitement, belying her first impression as a quiet and subdued child.

But even as they have fun, I keep myself stuck to Jackson's side, knowing that Marigold is in good hands and that Jackson needs me more right now. Because even as he starts to settle into his new role as father – more aligned with dad and Roger now than Jesse and Rafe – I can still feel the confusion, and anxiety, and quite a bit of fear roiling within him.

So, I just stay quietly at his side, passing him counter emotions as much as I can down the bond. Not telling him that he's wrong just... providing encouragement and perspective. Letting him know that we're safe. That it's good. That it's all going to be all right.

By the time the girls fade a bit, ready for their afternoon nap, and Cora and mom take them into mom's bedroom to lay down and sleep for a bit, I sense that Jackson's a bit ready for a nap too. His anxiety about the nap ran high for a moment until Cora introduced him to the concept of a baby monitor, after which I saw his shoulders slump visibly with relief. Saw, indeed, a great deal of exhaustion come over his face.

"You okay?" I whisper, leaning against Jacks, smiling up into his face.

"Oh, I guess so," he says, glancing down at the monitor and accepting a fresh drink from Roger, taking an eager sip and

welcoming the relaxation it promises. Then he smiles at me and nods over to the couches where everyone is sitting, and we go over to join.

We're just sitting down and settling in when another knock comes at the door.

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Dad starts to get up to answer the door when mom comes flying out of her room, waving a hand at dad. Cora follows soon after, pulling the door shut and nodding to Roger and Jacks to let them know that their daughters are asleep.

I turn my head to stare between Roger and Jackson, a little baffled, suddenly, when I realize that...these two men, from completely different generations, have daughters the same age.

"I know, right?" Jackson murmurs on a sigh, taking a big sip of his drink. I burst into laughter.

"Sit sit!" mom calls to us, grinning. "That's for me. Timing couldn't be better."

"Who is it?" Rafe asks with a frown.

“My crew!” Mom says, gleeful as she pulls open the door and waves in her favorite construction manager – a workman with whom she has had a relationship for years. “This way, this way!” she says, waving the foreman and all of his workers forward. My eyes go wide when I see that they’re carrying quite a bit of wood and tools.

“What – what are you doing?” I ask, baffled.

“Oh, I wanted it to be a surprise,” mom says, biting her lip and folding her hands behind her back. “But... Markie? Do you want to tell?”

All of our eyes turn to Mark, who sits next to me and blushes. “Well, Marigold needs a room, right?” he says.

I just stare at him for a second, blinking, before my eyes go wide. “Mark, no!”

He just laughs and shrugs. “Come on, I need to move out of my little kid room sometime. This way I get to move to swanky bachelor quarters down the hall and Marigold gets her own space. And since our rooms have an adjoining wall -“

“We’re building a door!” mom squeaks, excited, unable to let Mark finish without bursting in. She clasps her hands excitedly beneath her chin, her eyes moving between me and Jacks, desperate to know what we think.

“Oh my god,” I breathe, pressing a hand to my chest. “No way! Mark, that’s too generous – that’s been your room since you were a kid -”

“What – what is happening...” Jackson asks with a frown, still not getting it.

“I’m giving Marigold my room,” Mark explains, smiling warmly at Jacks. “And since she’s so little, mom is building a door between your rooms so you can check on her without having to use the hall.”

Jackson gapes at Mark, and then at me, and then down at the baby monitor. And then he dips his head down into his palm, overwhelmed and touched.

All the women in the room bite back an instinctive coo at Jackson’s overwhelmed state while the men smile warmly at him, understanding.

“And you don’t have to live here, if you don’t want to – though of course you’re welcome to,” mom says, coming and sitting close to Jackson and me on the couch, putting a hand on his arm. “I just...when you are here – which I hope will be often- you need more space. And Markie’s right, he’s growing out of his room -”

“I would like it stated,” Rafe says, a bit dry, drawing all eyes to him as he raises a glass of whiskey alongside his declaration.” That some of us are not this generous and have no intention of giving up their room to any future children. My room is my room, forever. In

fact, in the many future generations of Sinclair children to come, I would like my room preserved in perpetuity, precisely as I leave it. And no one's allowed to touch my stuff.”

I burst out laughing at my brother, shaking my head at him, my whole family joining in as the crown prince finishes off his drink and gets up for another one, winking at us.

I turn my eyes back to Jacks, grateful for my brother, realizing that his joke made a little space for Jackson to collect himself. I grin at Rafe, who nods to me and gives me a tiny little shrug.

“Thank you, Ella, and Mark,” Jackson says, looking at them seriously. Then, to my surprise, he turns his eyes to me. “What do you think?”

“I think it’s a great idea,” I say, nodding eagerly. “I mean, it will be so easy to check on her next door – and we can make the room so cute, decorate it however she likes -”

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“No, Ariel,” Jackson says, laughing a little and putting a hand on my knee. “What do you think in like, a larger sense. Do you... want to live here?”

I sit up straight in a bit of surprise. “I...do live here,” I say quietly, not getting it. “This is my home.”

“I mean permanently,” Jackson says, turning more completely to me now with a small frown. “Like, is this where you want to be to raise Marigold? Here, where you grew up. Is that best?”

I just stare at him, realizing finally –

Stupidly –

What everyone else has probably put together.

That...that we have to live somewhere. Somewhere steady, and solid, where Marigold can go to school and have a schedule and a routine. Where she can participate in activities with other children and make friends.

But...

“But we have to go back to the Academy!” I blurt out, staring wide-eyed at Jackson.

Jackson stares back at me and my family goes dead quiet for a second before turning politely away and starting little mini conversations, pretending to give us time to discuss this amongst ourselves while they very clearly – at least to me – continue to listen with rapt attention.

Jackson is quiet for a moment before smiling softly, raising a hand to my cheek. “You go back to school, Ariel,” he says, cupping my face, shaking his head at me a little bit. “It’s so important to you, I know that – and you should finish, it’s just another year – ”

“Jackson!” I gasp, smacking his hand away. “We’re – we’re both going back to school! We’re both finishing Alpha Academy!”

He hesitates for a moment, his shoulders slumping. “Ariel, I have to put Marigold before my own wants right now – I have to stay here -”

“Why!?” I ask, my eyes going wide in my panic.

He just stares at me, confused.

“Ariel, our room is crowded enough,” Jesse says, wandering over, perfectly casual, as if we’re talking about sports or the weather. “Where would you even propose to put a third bed?”

“She can have yours,” I snarl, glaring hard at him, not in the mood for jokes.

Jesse smirks and takes a sip of his drink. “Touche. Problem solved. I’m in on this plan.”

“Jackson’s not wrong,” my dad says quietly, all eyes turning to him. Everyone goes quiet as dad shakes his head, sorrow warring with firm reality on his face. “It’s clearly stated in the school’s rules that enrolled students are not allowed to bring family and loved ones. Technically, enrolled Alphas are supposed to be single to avoid precisely this situation and so that the young men can focus on their education.”

I lean forward towards my father, just as firm and starting to get mad. “It’s also a rule that enrolled students had to be male, but I threw that right out the door!”

Dad’s mouth presses into a thin line as he considers me. “Exceptions were made for you, Ariel. But if we begin to throw out rule after rule, when does it end?”

“When I say it ends!” I shout, livid suddenly.

“Ariel,” my father says, his voice a low warning, scolding me like I’m a child.

But that just stokes my fire a bit more. “After everything that happened these past few months,” I growl, my own voice dropping low as I glare hard at my father. “After everything that I and Jackson did for this nation – this? This is what is causing a

stumbling block to his happiness!? To our happiness!? That you just don't let kids in the castle!?"

"I -" my father begins, leaning forward, but I don't let him get far, rising to my feet to glare around the room.

"This man is a hero in this war," I snap, pointing at Jackson. "This man saved me and killed your enemy with his teeth in his neck! And this is how you show your gratitude!?" I sneer at my father, and at Roger, knowing that they're the ones who wrote the rules.