

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 621

“This has nothing to do with whether or not we’re grateful for what Jackson did for this family and this nation,” my father says, staring at me, cold.

“With all the resources this family has,” I snarl, “with everything that we have imagined for our people – vastly different futures, equality between wolves and humans, and end to the kind of Atalaxian government that reduces women to chattel. But, somehow, we can’t imagine a single way to let a young man continue his education just because he has a child!?”

“Ariel,” Jackson sighs, reaching for my hand. “You’re going too far -”

“No, I’m not,” I snarl, whipping my hand out of his grasp. “And if you won’t stand up for what you deserve, Jackson, I will!” I turn my face back to my father and my uncle, a desperate frown on my lips. “You raised me to believe in better values that you’re enacting right now. And I’m ashamed of you.”

I whip my head down to my mate, letting him know mind to mind that I can’t be in this room any longer, asking if he wants to come with me.

But he just sighs and slumps back against the couch, not knowing what to do, not knowing where he stands. Not wanting to anger my father and my uncle, who have been so good to him. Not...not knowing what his next move should be, or can be. “Fine,” I growl, storming for the door alone.

“I, for one, agree with her,” Jesse says, following behind me. “Ariel’s ethics are right on this and, whether or not you see it yet, she’s revolutionizing the way things are done in this world. Anyone who catches themselves on the opposing side from Ariel should...seriously reconsider their shit.” His footsteps echo behind me as I storm out into the hall.

“I agree too,” Cora’s voice sounds, light and easy, though I can barely hear it now as I march away. “Though I am too relaxed to dramatically storm out, you should all imagine me doing so. For solidarity.”

My feet carry me forward, rage overtaking my mind and not letting me think anything but thoughts that replay my anger, and my arguments, and my conviction that this can’t – it can’t just be impossible for Jackson to return to school –

She’s just a little girl – she’s very small and portable – how is this derailing our entire education!?

My steps pound up and up a staircase and I only come back to myself when my hand slams against a door, shoving it open, and cool afternoon air rushes over me. I stop dead in my tracks, my breath panting a little, and just stare forward at the yurt as Jesse comes to stand next to me, barely breathing hard.

Which is infuriating. As usual. God damn athletic Alphas.

“Shit,” I say, looking up at him. “Is it...is it okay? To come here? When I’m all pissed off?”

“Everyone seeks comfort in the yurt!” Jesse says, sweeping a dramatic hand out towards it before looking down at me with a small smile. “It’s fine, Ari. Mids would love to talk you through your drama. She’s a shockingly good listener, as long as you don’t mind hearing the deadpan truth of her opinions when you’re finished spilling your guts.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Can I drink demon juice as I talk?”

“Oh, it’s encouraged,” he says, raising his eyebrows at me.

“What’s going on?” Midnight calls, pushing back the flap from her yurt and frowning at us, the bright orange glow from her tent warm and inviting. I can’t help but smile a little when I see that she’s wearing a hoodie over what I can only describe as a ballgown skirt.

“Jackson got a pup and Ariel is confused,” Jesse says, quite succinct, pointing at me.

“We’re drinking demon juice and venting our woes, Mids!” I call, striding for the ever-full wine fridge in the outdoor kitchen.

“Sounds good!” she calls, ducking back in. “Come inside!”

As I sit on a pillow, sipping my wine and looking around, I consider that the yurt has gotten...shockingly cozy since I’ve last been in it. Somehow Midnight procured a little space heater that looks like a fireplace and it kicks off a great deal of heat. Beyond that, there are dozens of blankets and books and little shelves filled with snacks.

“You’ve done good for yourself, Mids,” I murmur, kind of thinking that maybe I’ll just set up a yurt outside Alpha Academy to live in with Jacks and Marigold. I mean, the way Midnight makes it look, it’s a very cozy life.

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“Thanks!” Midnight says, quite pleased, plopping down in front of me with a glass of orange soda. Jesse lays on his side next to both of us, quite calm and casual. “Miss Ella has been very nice and gives me whatever I ask for, and also brings me stuff up too. She brings me lots of clothes.”

“Mom loves clothes,” I say, nodding understandingly. “She’ll fill the whole yurt if you let her.”

“She says I can store them downstairs. But you,” Mids says, pointing a finger at my face. “Are avoiding telling me a gossip. Where did Jackson get a pup?”

I scowl a bit, certainly caught in the act. “It’s his daughter, Mids,” I say with a shrug. “He only just found out she existed yesterday, which is...insane.”

Midnight’s eyes go wide. “So...so he made the pup?” she asks, leaning forward a bit breathless. “Doing...doing the sex?”

I work very, very hard not to laugh at this, not wanting to embarrass her. But I can’t help the wide smile that spreads over my face. “Yup, that’s how it happens.”

“Oh man,” Midnight says, sitting up straight. “That’s so gross. But you are not the pup’s mother? How does that work?”

“Our Jackson got around in his youth,” Jesse says, peering over at Mids, clearly entertained. “He’s faithful to Ariel now – we presume – ”

I snarl at my cousin, who shoots a grin at me before turning his eyes back to Mids.

“But before he met Ariel,” Jesse continues, “he knew another girl. And they liked each other, so...” he shrugs, letting Midnight fill in the blank.

Midnight’s eyes narrow further. “Was she a whore?”

I burst out laughing. “Mids, no! By all accounts she was a perfectly lovely girl.”

Midnight hums consideringly, taking a sip from her soda. “Is the baby cute? And well behaved?”

“Very cute,” I say, nodding my confirmation. “And well behaved, so far.”

“And is the mother coming to demand that Jackson return so he can perform the labor of caring for the child?”

“No,” I say, my voice softening with sadness. “She died, Midnight. So, Marigold -”

“What’s a Marigold?”

“It’s Jackson’s pup’s name,” I say, laughing a little. “But yes, Marigold only has Jackson now, so he’s going to raise her.” Midnight cocks her head to the side, considering me. “Well, then why are you mad?”

I cock my head too. “What?”

“You came up here all angry,” Midnight says. “But...things sound pretty good. After all, you got a free pup out of this – a cute and well-behaved one – and you didn’t have to do any of the sex or the birth or anything. And no one is demanding that Jackson leave. So why are you mad?”

I sigh, thinking that Midnight...rather has a knack for putting things in perspective, doesn’t she? “I’m mad because my family is saying that Jackson can’t go back to school because he has to stay and take care of his kid. Which means I can’t go to school, because I’m certainly not going to abandon him.”

“Well, why can’t the pup go with you?” Midnight asks, sitting up straight.

“That’s what I said!” I gasp, leaning forward, eager. Midnight nods to me, sharp, like it’s finished.

“Don’t you think it will be too dangerous for a pup?” Jesse asks, looking at Midnight curiously. “All those weapons and Alphas running around learning to be dangerous? Plus, Marigold won’t be able to go to school, and she’ll not have any friends when there are no other children around.”

Midnight just rolls her eyes. “You could have said the same thing about Ariel enrolling. Won’t she be lonely, without any other girls? Isn’t it too dangerous for a girl? And all that.”

Jesse’s eyes flash back to me. “Good argument. And you came out with flying colors.”

“Yes well, I think they will have a stronger case with Marigold,” I say, a bit dry. “As she won’t have anyone to take care of her while Jackson and I are in class.”

“I’ll come and take care of her,” Midnight says with a casual shrug.

Jesse and I whip our eyes to her.

“That is,” Midnight says, looking between us with her clear dark eyes. “Until I enroll officially in Alpha Academy in the fall. So, you’ll need a new babysitter come September. But until then, I’d be happy to ensure Jackson’s pup doesn’t die while you’re away.”

Jesse and I just stare at Midnight in shock for...a myriad of reasons.

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Midnight stares between Jesse and I with a frown. “What?” she asks. “What’s surprising about this?”

“You’d really come and take care of Marigold?” I whisper, shocked and a little thrilled. I mean, I never even thought about hiring a nanny – but then again, I haven’t thought about much of anything at all in the past few minutes besides how mad I am at my dad –

“Wait, you’re enrolling in Alpha Academy!?” Jesse asks, a bit awed.

“Well, if Ariel can do it, I can too,” Midnight says, casting out a hand towards me. “After all, I am much tougher and more powerful than she!”

“Oh, try me, Mids,” I say, dry, grinning as I unfurl my hand, a blue flame flicking to life there.

Midnight grins wickedly as shadows shoot out from her, leaping for the flame in my hand. I gasp at first when the shadows hit my flame, feeling it like a true impact, but then I grin when I see the two forces grappling with each other. I laugh, putting a bit more power in it, and my flames gobble up her shadow.

“See?” I say, cheerful, grinning at her. “I win.”

“Not fair,” she snarls, pouting as she crosses her arms over her chest. “You got all those Goddess perks. If it was still just your red fire I could take you out.”

“I believe you,” I say, flicking my fire away. “We should experiment more with it, though. Could be helpful for both of us.” Midnight looks at me with a bit of suspicion for a moment, well aware that my fire can burn away the darkness in her soul, but then she nods. I smile, genuinely warm by the trust she has in me.

“Pardon me,” Jesse says, polite and sarcastic, “can we please get back to the point here? Mids, are you serious about wanting to enroll in the Academy?”

She shrugs, turning towards him. “Well, if that’s where you’re going, that’s where I want to be. And I certainly don’t want to waste my time sitting around all day, so I will want to go to lessons. Miss Ella says I can go to school, after all.”

“Are you ready for school?” I ask, tilting my head to the side. “The Academy is very rigorous, Mids – and I know you’re clever, but can you...do advanced math and stuff?”

“I can do plenty math,” Midnight growls, turning her glare on me.

“Okay, but like, what about a basic understanding of chemistry?” I ask, tucking my hair back behind my ears, thinking that she like me – certainly doesn’t have the physique for Warrior track, so she very likely would be Espionage, like me. And what a hell of a spy she’d be.

Or, Ambassador, but...well, my wolf rolls onto her back in my soul, laughing at the prospect.

“What’s chemistry?” Midnight snaps out, still glaring.

Slowly, I smile.

Midnight’s eyes narrow further. “If I knew what that word meant, I’d likely be offended by your suggestion that I didn’t know anything about it. But I probably do. I’m very smart, Ariel, I can do everything.”

“Well, I mean, you’d have some time to catch up,” I say eagerly. “It’s only March now, and enrollment isn’t until September –

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“Whoa, whoa,” Jesse says, sitting up a little, anxious. “Are we have we decided on this? Is this our plan?”

“Do you not want her to enroll?” I ask, bristling a little.

“You stop that,” Jesse snaps, pointing a finger at my face. “You know I was always Team ‘Girls in the Academy.’ I’m just saying let’s...think about this for a moment. Consider if it’s what Midnight really wants amongst her plethora of options.” “Well, if you think you’re just going to be springing off to the Academy and leaving me behind to sit on the palace roof for the next few months,” Midnight says, sitting quite straight and proud. “That’s certainly not going to happen.”

Jesse nods consideringly, accepting her thoughts on this issue.

“I think it’s a good plan,” Midnight says, nodding like it’s finished. “I’ll come and study Chemas-tree and ensure the pup doesn’t die.”

I bite my lip, wondering, because while it would solve one problem for me...does it create more for Jesse? And for Daphne? I mean, when I spoke to my friend yesterday via videocall she was still visibly devastated about losing Jess to a fated mate. Will bringing Midnight around rub salt in the wound?

But then again...will keeping Midnight away for Daphne’s sake be completely unfair to Mids?

“Why don’t we...take a few days to think on this,” Jesse says, his face unusually serious, nodding to both of us. “It’s a good idea but I don’t think it does a great deal of harm to...consider all sides of the equation.”

“Okay,” Midnight says with a shrug. She lifts her eyes to me. “Does Jackson even want to return to school now that he has a pup? The book says that some mothers do not want to return to their jobs once they have a baby so they can concentrate on rearing it properly.”

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I smile at her, charmed again. “I don’t know. Maybe I should have asked before I flipped out, hmm?”

“Probably,” she says with a shrug, taking another long sip of her drink as she carefully considers me. “Do you want a puppy, Ariel? Because if it’s your mate’s puppy, it’s going to be around and stuff. You might not like that. I would hate that.”

I laugh a little, leaning back against one hand and taking a long sip from my wine as I consider the question. “I think...that yes, I do want her. I want her very much. She’s part of Jackson, and that’s beautiful to me, and I’m sure as time passes I’ll learn that she’s beautiful unto herself as well. I’m excited to get to know Marigold as she grows up – that’s one of the delights of having a pup, I think. Getting to see who they become, loving them as they grow.”

Midnight just stares at me like I’m crazy. “Do you want like...more pups after this one? Like eighteen?”

I laugh and shrug. “Maybe not eighteen. But...yeah, sure, I always imagined that some day I’d have kids. Maybe not in my early twenties, and maybe not starting with a mysterious four-year-old child dropped on my doorstep. But certainly I will want more children someday.” I smile a little at the thought – of a passel of pups that are half me and half Jacks.

My heart warms and my wolf lets out an excited little yip.

“Gross,” Midnight says on a sigh, bursting the bubble of my happy fantasy and making me break out in laughter. She smiles at me, though, like she supports my dream even if it is not her own. “I am very glad that Jesse and I do not want pups.”

“Oh, I want pups,” Jesse says, making both of us spin our heads towards him.

“What!?” Midnight breathes, horrified.

“Like Ariel said,” Jesse says with a casual shrug, “timeline is important here. I do not want kids anytime soon. But someday, way down the line? A couple of kids to keep me laughing?” He shrugs. “My dad did it in his forties. I could see giving myself twenty more years of debauchery before I allow myself to be domesticated.”

I grin at Jesse, pleased by this. He’s just...so good with kids, so wonderful with his siblings – in some ways imagining him forever childless is a great shame. But one look at Midnight lets me know that...she is not at all on the same page.

“Jesse, I am never having pups,” Midnight whispers.

“I respect that,” Jesse says, raising his glass to her, quite serious.

The yurt goes quiet and I look between this pair, honestly wondering where they’re going to end up. Because twenty years is a long time and either of them could change their minds. But if they don’t?

Where...where does that leave them?

We spend a little more time together up in the yurt, Jesse smoothly changing the subject to something idle and easy. We sip at our drinks and talk casually, but as I look around it’s very clear that we’re each in our own heads, worrying over our own problems, trying to figure out our own independent futures.

I turn towards the door of the yurt an hour or two later, recognizing Mark’s voice.
“Ariel?”

“Hey, Markie!” I call.

The yurt’s flap is pushed aside and Mark gives us a small smile. “May I, Midnight?”

“You may, Mark Sinclair,” Midnight says, quite magnanimous.

Mark grins and steps in, fixing his eyes on me. “I think you should come down. They’ve been talking and I don’t think dad’s ready to give in but...Jacks, I think, is missing you.”

“Oh heavens,” I say on a sigh, guilt rushing in me. “I haven’t been a very supportive mate, have I?”

“Nobody’s mad about you taking a minute for yourself, Ari,” Mark says as I push to my feet. Jesse does too, collecting our glasses and murmuring his farewells to Midnight, promising to come up again later.

“That’s very nice of you to say, Markie,” I say, stepping close and wrapping an arm around his waist, smiling up at him. “But I’ve taken more than a minute and I need to beg forgiveness. S.”

“Oh, I’m sure he’ll give you hell for it and refuse to accept your apology,” Mark says, sarcastic, rolling his eyes.

I laugh and call my goodbyes to Mids, following my little brother out of the yurt and back into the palace, our cousin only a few steps behind.

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When Jesse, Mark, and I arrive back in the living room, I give my father a steady nod of acknowledgement before I move immediately for Jacks.

He reaches for me with one arm, the other stretched out next to Marigold, holding a handful of beads up for her and Seraphina as they sit on the couch, stringing necklaces for each other. I spare a happy little glance at the two of them before tucking myself in close on Jackson’s side, wrapping an arm around his waist and looking up into his face.

“Hi,” I whisper. “Jacks, I’m so sorry I left like that -”

“It’s fine, Ariel,” he murmurs, pressing a kiss to my hair and pulling me in close against him. A great swell of warmth and love grows in my chest, passed down the bond from Jackson. “You were upset, you needed a minute. It’s always fine. Where did you go?”

“To the yurt,” I say, looking up at him, still a bit guilty. “I think Midnight is my therapist now.”

He laughs, warm and lovely and rumbling. “She’s going to charge you an arm and a leg.”

“Yes, once Midnight learns about the concept of money, I think we’re all screwed,” I say on a sigh. “How was it down here?”

“Fine,” he says, giving a shrug, I think going far too easy on me because he loves me. “There was some...debate. I didn’t participate much.”

“You can, you know,” I say, raising my eyes to his. “You don’t just have to be grateful. You can tell people what you want.” I frown a bit, studying him. “But, do you know what you want?”

“I do not, love,” Jackson says with a soft smile, stroking his hand over my hair. “Like we said last night, I need...a bit of time to think it through.”

“Okay,” I whisper, nodding, determined to give him all the time and support he needs.

“Ariel?” my father says, coming over, his hands deep in his pockets. I look up to see him looking at me quiet seriously, a frown on his lips. “A moment, please?”

“Of course, dad,” I say on a little sigh, patting first Jackson’s arm and then Marigold’s head as I stand up. The little girl gives me a happy smile before turning her head back to her task, clearly delighted both with her new toys and her new friend.

Dad nods towards the windows and I go and stand with him there, crossing my arms across my chest. He opens his mouth on a deep inhale, but I beat him to it.

“I’m sorry, dad,” I say, hunching my shoulders a bit. Dad pauses and slowly closes his mouth. “I was...angry, and temperamental, and...petulant. I’m not backing down from my point – I do think you should let Jackson and I stay enrolled in Alpha Academy even if we do bring Marigold along. But...” I glance over at him. “I failed to ask what he wants. And I wish I had taken the time to express myself better. More....patiently.” I grimace as I end kind of lamely, looking up at my dad, hoping he gets it.

He smiles softly, stepping closer and running a hand over my hair. “Apology accepted, Ariel. And I apologize, too, for giving a blanket ‘no’ without thinking on it. I haven’t made any decisions yet, and I need to consider all angles, but...you were right in your point that sticking to rules we made up twenty years ago simply because they’re what’s always been done is a flawed way to manage a school, let alone a nation.”

I press my mouth into a thin line for a moment before I pitch forward, wrapping my arms around my dad and giving him a big hug. He laughs in surprise before putting his arms around me in turn, tucking me close to his chest. I close my eyes briefly as I lean against him, incredibly grateful to have a dad who, despite being so powerful, truly listens to me.

“I love you, dad,” I whisper.

“Love you too, baby,” he murmurs, petting my hair. “We’ll think about it over the next few days, all right? And we’ll come up with the best decision for everyone.”

“Okay.”

We stay that way for a long moment, until a little knock comes at the door. I lift my head up, peering towards it with a frown, wondering if it’s Elias or Ben with news about Pippa. Honestly, she must be close to having her baby by now.

But when Mark opens the door and grimaces in embarrassment, I stand up straight in surprise.

“Hello,” Hank says, looking into and around the room. “Oh wow, you’re all here -”

A tiny growl sounds from the couch and I stand straight, dropping my arms from my dad, my eyes moving immediately to where Marigold leans close to Jackson, snarling like a cornered animal.

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Jackson tenses, snarling too, tucking his daughter a bit behind him as Hank’s eyes go wide, staring at the little girl.

“What’s going on here?” Jackson growls. “How do you -”

“What is going on?” a voice says. “Dad, let me through -”

Maryam steps forward then, peering into the room with a frown, scowling when her eyes land on Jackson and his extended canines.

But then a little gasping shout of joy sounds and all of our mouths fall open as Marigold pops out from behind Jackson, jumps out from behind the couch, and makes a dash for Maryam.

“Oh my god!” Maryam says with a delighted laugh, reaching for Marigold as the little girl leaps for her. Maryam snatches Marigold up into her arms, turning her in a delighted circle. “Bunny rabbit! What on earth are you doing here!?”

Marigold laughs with joy, beaming up at this woman who she...so clearly knows. I watch in awe as Marigold rests her head on Maryam’s shoulder and says a single, happy word. “Maryam!”

“No seriously,” Maryam says, her face falling with worry and fear as she glances back at her dad and then narrows her eyes as she glares around at all of us. “What is this child doing here? How did she get here?”

“Maryam,” Jackson says, slowly standing to his full, intimidating height. “How on earth do you know my child?”

“Your child,” she spits out, laughing in derision – but then she goes still, staring at Jackson and then down at the little girl, and then back and forth at least three more times. “Oh my...oh my god...”

“Um, clearly...some clarifications need to be made,” mom says, hurrying to shut the door and give Hank a warm pat on the shoulder as he stares around, clearly shocked and in a bit of awe. “How...how does everyone know each other?”

“Apologies,” Hank murmurs, stepping forward, a little awkward. His eyes rest on Marigold and Maryam as he comes to stand next to them. Marigold again bares her teeth, snarling at the doctor, a clear warning to keep away. “As you’ve clearly all put together, I know this child. I’ve treated her twice in pop-up clinics outside of the Community. Once for a cough, and once for her vaccines.”

Marigold snarls at the word, narrowing her eyes.

“Yes,” Maryam says, fonder and gentler than I’ve seen her before, laughing a little as she grins down at Jackson’s daughter. Bunny did not like her injections, and dad’s reputation has suffered for it. But the two of us get on like a house on fire, don’t we, Bunbun?”

“But Maryam,” Hank says with a sigh, resting his forehead in his hand before looking up at Jacks, guilt all over his face.” Maryam helped me, on both occasions as part of a humanitarian aid force, distributing food to the patients.”

“Apples,” Marigold whispers, blissful.

“I’m so sorry, Jackson,” Hank says, stepping towards him. “Her mother must have used a false name – which makes a great deal of sense, in retrospect – there was no way for me to know – ”

“It’s fine,” Jackson says, his voice flat, his eyes trained on his daughter in Maryam’s arms. His hands twitch, clearly resisting the urge to snatch her back.

Maryam, intuiting this, crosses the room, pressing a kiss to Marigold’s cheek before she passes the little girl to Jackson’s arms. Jackson visibly relaxes, smiling down at his daughter as she rests her head on his shoulder.

“Why...why do you keep calling her Bunny?” Rafe asks, stepping forward, curious.

“Because that’s her name,” Maryam snaps, rolling her eyes at him. I smirk a little, thinking that no matter what Rafe had said, Maryam was going to throw it back at him like a damned bullet.

“Her name is Marigold,” Rafe growls, his voice a low grumble.

My grin widens as I see my ever-calm brother start to lose his temper at the drop of a hat. Damn, but this Maryam really knows just how to get under his skin. I laugh a little, thinking it might be good for him.

“Well, she didn’t tell me that, did she?” Maryam snaps, glaring at Rafe and then turning to smile at Marigold again. “I think Bunny suits her, anyway. She’s just a little fluffy bunny, with these cheeks.” Maryam grins, giving Marigold’s cheeks a squeeze, making her laugh.

“Please,” Hank says, his voice breaking on the word a bit. We all turn to him, surprised by the worry on his face. “Maryam and I are leaving for the North in an hour – and I have to ask...the...the child’s mother?”

Hank’s face falls as our silence tells him all he needs to know.

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“Oh...oh my god,” Maryam says, taking a step back, shock all over her face. She presses a hand to her heart, shaking her head. ” She’s...gone? That’s...that’s so fucking awful...”

“You knew her?” I ask, stepping close to Jackson’s side and glancing at Marigold, wondering if she should be listening to this. “She was...” Maryam bites her lip, glancing between me, and Jacks, and the baby – clearly intuiting the whole complicated situation. “She was a really lovely person, Ariel. Really determined, and tough, and strong. And she – she really loved this one

Tears prick Maryam’s eyes as she reaches for Marigold, stroking a hand over her hair. And then Maryam turns away, I think not wanting the little girl to see her cry.

“Young women in the North are dying nearly every day for want of medical care,” Hank says, his voice grave. Stern, he turns to my father, straightening his shoulders. “I’ve said it before, Dominic, but I hope you’ll listen to me now that the issue has landed on your doorstep. Now that the war with Atalaxia is finished, if you do not turn the entire force of your attention towards the ills of your Northern lands, it will be neglect akin to atrocity.”

“And I for one will never forgive you for it,” Maryam adds, her voice thick with grief but no less strong for the emotion. I glance at her again, thinking that she’s certainly got enough grit to be Queen. Maybe my grandmother knew precisely what she was doing in selecting her as Rafe’s mate.

Even if Maryam herself doesn’t see it yet.

“I think you’re right, Hank,” dad says, his voice low and serious. “And if you can delay your trip for an afternoon, we’ll convene a council right now and see how we can get started on precisely that work.”

I glance up at Jackson by my side, worried for him, wanting his perspective on this. But he just looks back at me stony-faced and shifts his eyes to his little girl, guilt rushing through every bit of him – because he didn’t know, couldn’t get there fast enough to save her mom.

“I’d like to be part of this, if I may,” Rafe asks, stepping forward, quite serious.

“Me too,” Jesse adds, doing the same.

“Oh, of course you do,” Maryam scoffs, rolling her eyes.

Rafe turns to her, wide-eyed, his temper again slipping. “What, now I can’t help? I know a lot, Maryam –”

“Oh, you only suddenly want to help because you have some kind of weird crush on me —”

Rafe scoffs. “I so do not!”

“Then where was all of this attention for the people of the North,” Maryam shoots back, snapping her hands to her hips, before we met and your stupid wolf-thing declared me its mate?”

“I was in Atalaxia,” Rafe grows, shooting out a hand towards the east. “Fighting a war –”

“Whatever,” Maryam sighs, rolling her eyes, making me burst into a ridiculous grin.

“Whatever!?” Rafe sputters, appalled.

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“Okay, children!” Mom says, her voice sing-song as she steps between Rafe and Maryam, grinning just like me. “Let’s cool down now! We all want to help the Community and I think our time is better spent getting to work.”

I laugh a little at my mom’s cool management of the situation before glancing at Rafe, who scowls, and Maryam, who studies him- quite smug. Then I turn my eyes up to Jacks, who, as I may have predicted, is already looking down at me.

“You want to be in on these conversations?” I whisper.

“Yes,” he says, slow, quite grave. “Yes, Ariel. I very much do.”

“Good,” I say, leaning against him and reaching out a hand to pet over Marigold’s hair. “I do too.”

The little girl smiles at me and I smile right back.

In my soul my wolf raises her snout to the sky, howling with her eagerness to do something to help our people.

Dad moves quickly then, murmuring softly to Roger and Cora as he takes out his phone, clearly contacting his advisors and calling them to an emergency Committee. The room bustles with action – mom helping Seraphina clear up the beads, Mark, Jesse and Rafe moving to stand with dad to see how they can help. But my wolf is very satisfied when Hank tucks his hands behind his back and walks over to us, because Jackson deserves some answers.

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“Let me take this little rabbit,” Maryam says, quite gentle and friendly, reaching for Marigold. Jackson tilts the little girl towards her friend and Marigold laughs, going happily and easily to Maryam, who takes her over to the window to look outside.

“I’m so sorry, Jackson,” Hank says, coming close and looking up into my mate’s eyes. “I...I should have put it together before.”

“It’s not your fault,” Jackson says with an easy shrug, and down the bond I can tell that he truly holds nothing against this man who is clearly doing so much to help so many people. “As you say, Tasha was likely hiding her identity and going her best not to be found. It’s not your job to see through that kind of subterfuge.”

“Please,” I say, stepping close to Jacks and clasping my hands around his arm, wanting him to feel my support. “Is there anything you can tell us, Hank? About Marigold’s...history?”

Hank sighs and looks over to where his daughter is standing with Marigold, pointing out towards the park that abuts the palace, maybe chatting about some of the animals that live there. “What I know is brief and largely medical. Our little pop-up clinics served...hundreds, maybe thousands of people in need and still barely scratched the surface of what needs to be done up there.” Hank hangs his head, pressing the bridge of his nose between his fingers. “But...that little girl and her mother made an impact. They were hard to forget.”

Jackson tenses next to me and I look up at him, worried. But he simply clenches his jaw and steels himself, wanting to know.

“She wouldn’t tell me much,” Hank says, dropping his hand and lifting his head to again meet Jackson’s eyes. “She was...very proud, wasn’t she?”

“She was willful, yes,” Jackson replies, his voice soft.

Hank nods, his eyes shifting to his daughter and Marigold. “But they were starving. She came for the food at first, not the medical treatment. She didn’t trust us but she was willing to risk it for her daughter. But the second time they came we learned more. We learned that Asha – or, sorry, Tasha, as you call her – was determined to never go back to where she came from, that she’d never let them touch her child. I encouraged her to go South, even to the capital where she could get more aid, but...like so many from the North, her ideas of what happens here in the South were...skewed. She refused, thinking it too dangerous.”

I look up at Jackson and he nods, looking down at me. “We were told that horrible things happen down here. That to go South would result in the worst kinds of death. It makes sense that she wouldn’t want to go – she had no reason to trust that any sort of help would come.”

My heart breaks at this because my mother has worked so hard to establish aid in our cities, to ensure that people get the help they need. My stomach turns at the idea that the Community poisons the mind of their people so completely that they fear the places where they actually could actually get help.

“She told me they lived in a cabin,” Hank says on a sigh, clearly coming to the end of his knowledge. He shrugs. “It was likely a hut. I knew they were starving, I gave them as much food as I could. But...our aid program was mobile and had to move on to a new place. What help we gave was clearly not enough.”

“We should have done more,” I whisper, hanging my head.

Jackson hums his agreement, guilt rushing through him too. Because he got out, of course. But so, so many got left behind. Including his daughter.

But even as he feels all of that, I pass support down our bond. Because even if we’re too late to help Tasha – there has to be so much we can do now. So many more people who we can help.

Inwardly I set my heart to the task, determined to do it.

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 629

“Has Ella looked her over?” Hank asks, his professional demeanor returning now as he studies Marigold from a few feet away. Maryam turns, hearing the shift in her father’s voice and bringing Marigold back over. “Is she healthy, besides being malnourished?”

“Oh, she’s fine,” mom says, clearly overhearing her name and coming over. “I did a scan last night after we fed her. As you say, Hank, she’s malnourished and going to need some feeding up – but I cleared up some bumps and bruises and a little viral bug she was carrying. But beyond that she’s a perfectly healthy little four-year-old girl.”

“She’s not four,” Maryam says, laughing a little and coming close.

Marigold whips her head to Maryam with a frown. “Four!” she says, quite definitive, holding up four fingers.

“What?” Mom asks, confused, looking between the pair.

“Oh, little baby liar,” Maryam says, laughing and wrinkling her nose at Marigold, who blushes, caught. My mouth falls open in surprise.

“She – she knows how to lie?” Jackson whispers, his eyes wide. “I didn’t know...they could do that...”

“Well, apparently this is a crafty, clever little rabbit,” Maryam says on a laugh, turning to grin at the rest of us. “Food was distributed according to age, with children -3 allotted a slightly smaller amount than the 4-8 year olds. This one has been telling me that she’s four since she was barely big enough to walk into my aid tent.”

“Four,” Marigold growls, her brow lowering, quite definitive.

We all laugh, imagining the hungry little girl making her bold bluff for more food. Jackson grins, sensing an affinity with his daughter and reaching for her. Maryam laughs and hands her over to her dad.

“It’s true,” Jackson says with a sigh. “Timeline-wise, she’s closer to three and a half. I guess you could round up to four, if it makes you happy, Marigold.”

She nods, sharp and definitive. “Four,” she says, resting her head on her dad’s shoulder.

We all grin and nod, giving into it.

“Is there any way to know her birthday?” Mom asks, excited, turning to Hank. I smile at her, knowing immediately the direction of her thoughts. Mom loves birthdays.

But suddenly I frown, snapping my face up to Jackson. “When’s your birthday?”

He just shrugs, looking down at me, clearly at a loss. My mouth drops open, appalled.

“No way of knowing,” Hank says, shrugging. “You’ll just have to pick a date.”

“Is this really our best use of time?” Rafe asks, frowning as he comes over, Jesse at his side. I look around for Mark but see that he’s already gone. “Planning Marigold’s birthday party?”

“Yes!” Mom says, quite appalled at her son for suggesting that it’s not.

“Rafe’s just pissed his birthday got skipped this year,” Jesse says with a shrug and a wicked little grin. “Since me and Juniper and Ariel were all kidnapped.”

I gasp as I realize that Jesse’s right, that we completely skipped his birthday. And I didn’t even realize it!

Twice! Twice now, this year, I’ve forgotten my sibling’s birthdays!

“Rafe!” I gasp, stumbling a few steps towards him, apology and horror all over my face.

“I’ll never forgive you,” he says, quite loftily, raising his face to the ceiling in mock tragedy.

I squeak in agony, feeling like the absolutely worst sister on earth, wrapping my arms around his waist and giving him a squeeze. “I’m so sorry, Rafe, I’ll get you any present you want – what do you want? Anything -”

Rafe just laughs, low and deep, giving me a hug in return. “I want you to stop squeezing me so hard, Ari, for heaven’s sake – I don’t need a girdle -”

“You sure about that?” Jesse asks, dry, looking Rafe consideringly up and down.

Rafe snarls at our cousin and I laugh, stepping away. To my surprise, Maryam just watches us with a considering expression, like we are...not at all what she expected us to be. I turn my head a little to the side, wondering what the surprise is here. After all, she knew us as kids. And I honestly don’t think we’ve changed at all.

Still, she studies us, clearly curious and confused.

“All right,” dad says, coming over with Roger and Cora, his face stern and business-like. We all straighten, turning towards him, responding immediately to his authority and his need for our attention.

Well, Maryam turns slightly slower than the rest of us and emits a huffy little sigh. But I just grin, liking her all the more for it.

“I’ve managed to call in enough of the Committee for an emergency forum,” dad says, looking around at all of us, quite serious. “Anyone here would be welcome to attend and give your perspective. Hank, will you be able to delay your travel?” “Yes,” Hank says, glancing at Maryam before giving a definitive nod. “We can take a later train.”

“Good,” dad says, taking a deep breath, getting ready to give more orders.

“If I may,” Hank says, crossing his arms over his chest and looking seriously at his King, his voice grim.

Dad pauses for a moment and then turns to the smaller man, deferring to him. I grin at this too, loving my dad very much for his willingness to listen.

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 630

“Whatever assault on the Community you’re planning should seek to provide as much humanitarian aid as it does military force,” Hank says, sure and clear. “The goal should not merely to be to defeat whoever is in charge but to bring help to those who are suffering. I will only participate in this council if those are joint goals – otherwise, I will aim my time and efforts elsewhere.”

Dad pauses for a moment, considering this, and then turns to my mother, deferring to her in turn. “Ella? Are we prepared to offer that kind of aid?”

“Oh, yes,” she says, nodding eagerly, tucking her hands under her chin, her eyes wide and bright. “Cora and I have been working on our ability to expand quickly – we’ve got some resources in place. I mean, we’ll need a minute to requisition supplies and personnel but...yes, Dominic, I think we’re ready.”

“Good,” dad says, turning back to Hank, giving him a nod that signifies his agreement to the plan. Hank works hard to keep a smile from his face but Maryam doesn’t bother, well pleased to see their priorities go forward.

“But the military will be the ones directing the missions and the aid,” dad continues, looking to Roger for confirmation. He nods, agreeing to the plan. “We will need a significant tactical force as well as our Espionage and Scouting units to go in first and give us the information we need to plan our engagement.”

To my surprise and delight, dad shifts his eyes to me here.

“This suggests significant commitment from Alpha Academy, as many of our actual spies are currently...missing. Or otherwise engaged in Atalaxia. So, we’ll have to go to the recruits.”

My wolf howls with excitement, because am I mistaking it? Or is dad asking me to put my Espionage skills to the test!? I bite my lip, excited at the prospect, and do my best to contain my excitement, just giving a little nod.

“I’m in,” Rafe says, crossing his arms solidly over his chest. “I’m sure many Cadets from the academy will be as well.” Jesse raises his hand slightly, showing his support. “I can – ”

“I’m going to help too,” Maryam says, raising her chin, her voice ringing out. “On the humanitarian side, of course, as it’s far more important.”

We all turn to her in surprise and after a beat she frowns around at all of us.

“What?” Maryam bites out. “I have medical experience. I know these people way better than most of you. I’ll be an asset!” “Maryam,” Rafe growls, slowly shaking his head in absolute refusal. “It is far too dangerous for you – ”

“You’re letting blondie go!” She shouts, pointing directly at me. A smile bursts onto my face.

“Ariel is a trained spy,” Rafe snaps, leaning forward towards Maryam, anger rising in him like a quick tide. “She knows how to handle herself in -”

“Oh whatever,” Maryam says, giving what I’m coming to understand as her habitual dismissive eye roll. “Just try to stop me, you big brute.” With that she strides for the door, clearly intent on heading to the meeting whether or not he wants her to.

“Maryam!” Rafe shouts, enraged, storming after her towards the door.

“Don’t you pick me up again!” Maryam shouts back, her voice echoing back into the room as she starts to stride down the hall. “Just because you’re bigger than me doesn’t mean that you -!”

“God damn it, Maryam! Would you listen to sense!?”

“All right,” Dad says, fighting a little smile as he turns his eyes back to the rest of us, clearly letting Maryam and Rafe handle their own business. Hank sighs and closes his eyes, already exhausted by the drama. “Everyone take a few minutes to gather what you need – we’ll meet in the Conference room in five minutes.”

Everyone bustles around, getting things sorted before the meeting, and I turn, slipping my hand into Jackson’s and looking up at him. “You want to go to that meeting?”

“Yes,” he says on a sigh, looking down at me. “I really, really do.”

“Okay, give me the baby,” I say, quite happy, reaching for her.

“What?” he breathes. “Ariel, no, you have to come too – ”

“Oh, you can fill me in,” I say, laughing a little as I take a very happy little Marigold into my arms. “Me and Goldie are gonna go sample some candy, aren’t we?”

Marigold laughs and nods to me, probably not understanding what I mean but happy to be on board with the plan.

“Um, actually,” a voice says from the door. I turn, surprised to see Elias there. “Actually could...could I ask some of you to come with me? Cora, Ella? Ariel?”

I gasp a little, realizing that his face is pale and anxious for a reason.

He locks eyes with me as mom and Cora likewise turn towards him with concern. “Yes,” he says, swallowing, giving me an anxious nod. “Yes, please come – she’s asking for you. It’s time.”