

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 631

“Okay!” I say, cheerful and excited, looking down at my mate’s little girl. “Change of plans, Goldie! We’re going to welcome a new baby into the world!”

Marigold looks up at me with a little frown on her rosebud lips, clearly still not understanding and not particularly liking the face that candy has apparently disappeared from the schedule.

Jesse laughs, stepping closer to me, reaching out for Marigold. “Come on, hand her over. I’ll take it from here.”

“What?” I ask, willingly handing over Marigold to my cousin but frowning between Jesse and Jacks. “What’s happening?”

“She’ll be bored to tears waiting for a baby to be born,” Jesse says, beaming at Marigold, who smiles at him and whispers his name. “I’ll take Golds and Fifs up to Midnight, see if we can’t break into the cake stash.”

“Jesse, that’s too much,” Jackson says, stepping forward with a frown. “You’ll want to be in on these conversations as well -” “Oh, you will all just fill me in later!” Jesse says, waving a hand at Jacks as Seraphina comes running over to wrap herself around Jesse’s leg, grinning wickedly up at him. “Besides, you know I’m just a grunt, here to take orders.”

I laugh at my cousin, knowing he doesn’t mean that. But he just shrugs, happy to do the childcare if it frees up our attention. “Okay,” Jackson says, looking anxiously at Marigold, clearly not wanting to be separated from her even if he fully trusts Jesse to take very good care of his little girl. “Um, is there anything that you -”

“I’ve been raising kids since I was a child, Jacks!” Jesse says, turning and waving over his shoulder. “I’ve got this!”

“It’s true,” I whisper, looking up at my mate. “He’s got this.”

“Ariel!” mom calls from the door, impatient to go help Pippa.

But even as I start to move I look down, realizing that Seraphina is still there where Jesse apparently left her, looking up at Jackson with interest. “Sera?” I say, crouching down and looking after Jesse, who heads for the door without having noticed his little sister’s absence. “You okay, baby?”

Characteristically, Seraphina ignores me, continuing to stare up at Jacks. “Is that your baby?” she asks, pointing a finger after Marigold.

Jackson smirks a little, crouching down in front of our littlest Sinclair. “Yes,” he replies, simple and calm.

Seraphina narrows her eyes. “Who gave you a baby?”

Jackson’s smirk spreads into a wide grin. “It’s a long story.”

“But you’re just a puppy,” Seraphina whispers, looking him over, trying to put the pieces together. “Puppies don’t have pups

...

“I don’t know what to tell you, kid,” Jackson says, heaving a big shrug. “She’s mine.”

“Okay,” Seraphina snaps, narrowing her eyes again and pointing to her chest, “but she’s my best friend.”

I burst out laughing, delighted. Jackson just grins too, not really getting it, glancing at me.

“Sera, I think Marigold can be both,” I say gently, wrinkling my nose at my little cousin. “Jackson’s pup and your best friend.”

“Okay,” Sera says, backing away a step and half turning towards the door, her eyes still narrowed at us like she’s not sure that it’s true and she’s ready to fight for her claim if it’s not.

“Fifs!” Jesse barks from the door, Marigold still perched on his arm, frowning in after his sister who he probably just realized wasn’t with him. “Hop to it, kid!” He points at the ground next to him, his command clear.

Seraphina laughs like a wild thing, dashing off towards her brother, who grins and pretends to give her a kick on the rear as she runs past him. I laugh and stand, glancing at mom, who grins after Sera but is clearly still waiting for me.

“You good?” I ask Jacks, slipping my hands behind my back and looking up at him as he, too, stands.

“Don’t look at me all worried like that, tiny,” Jackson says, stroking a hand over my hair and smirking down at me. “I’m good. Keep in touch?” he says, tapping his temple, a little request for me to send him updates if anything changes.

“Yes, baby,” I say, standing on my toes, begging for a kiss.

My mate sweetly complies, pressing his lips quickly to mine before we go our separate ways. I give a little skip of excitement as I dash towards my mom at the door. "Come on!" I say, darting past her. "Let's go see a baby!"

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"How dare you, Jesse Sinclair," Midnight says, standing with her feet wide apart in front of her yurt, hands on her hips, glaring hard up at her mate. "You know the rules. No! Pups!"

"Oh, come on, Mids," Jesse says, grinning and gesturing towards Marigold, who is still perched on his arm. "She's starving. She wants some cake!"

"Cake," Marigold whispers, nodding slowly. Jesse grins, appreciating that Marigold is on his side despite the fact that she probably doesn't know what that word means.

Midnight narrows her eyes at the new little girl like she appreciates the cake argument. But then she shakes her head. "No way. That one," she says, pointing to Marigold, "seems quite calm. But that one," she says, shifting her finger to Seraphina standing next to Jesse, "is a terror!"

Seraphina smiles wickedly, showing all her teeth, confirming Midnight's assessment.

"No way!" Midnight says, slicing her hand hard through the air.

"Midnight," Jesse says, his voice even. "We'll go if you want. But I'll be disappointed in you if you turn this little girl away. She's brand new," he says, gesturing up at Marigold's adorable little face. "And she's hungry!"

Midnight sighs, finally persuaded. She has a good heart, after all, and understands the ills of hunger. She stalks three steps forward, standing on her toes so that her eyes are nearly level with Marigold's. "Are you going to mess with my stuff?"

Marigold's eyes go wide and, surprised, she quickly shakes her head.

Satisfied, Midnight lowers her heels and turns to glare at Seraphina. "Are you!?"

"No Miss Midnight," Seraphina says, tucking her hands behind her back in her best impression of a sweet and obedient child. "I'll be good."

Midnight sighs, narrowing her eyes again and Sera and putting her hands back on her hips. "Fine," she snaps. "You can come in. But I reserve the right to kill you -"

"Midnight!" Jesse snaps.

"Fine!" Midnight sighs. "Kick you out! If you are bad!"

Seraphina screeches with delight at being finally allowed into the forbidden yurt and darts inside, gasping in delight when she sees how cool it is.

"Not so fast!" Midnight shouts, darting in after her. "No running!"

A crash sounds from inside.

"Oh dear," Jesse says, grimacing and looking at Marigold. "Shall we join them?"

Marigold laughs and smacks Jesse eagerly on the chest, nodding. He grins at the little girl, wondering how it's possible for Jackson's features to be so cute on a little three-year-old, and ducks into the yurt.

He laughs immediately, putting Marigold down, watching as Midnight tries to snatch at all her books, holding them out of Seraphina's grasp. Sera laughs with delight, jumping up, trying to get at them.

"Jesse!" Midnight growls between her teeth, glancing over at him. "Contain this beast you call a sister!"

"Sera, be cool," Jesse calls, sitting himself down and leaning back on his hands. "Marigold told me she wants to play dress-up with Midnight's clothes – can you show her how?"

Sera's eyes light with delight and she waves to Marigold, darting over to corner of the yurt where all of Midnight's new clothes spill out of several trunks. Marigold dashes over with her, delighted.

Midnight starts to protest, chasing after them, but Jesse grabs her wrist, tugging her back, laughing. "Let them, Mids, they can't hurt your clothes and you keep them all in a heap anyway so it's not like they'll get out of order. They only want to play – they're just little girls."

"Little demons," Midnight snarls, glaring over at Seraphina and Marigold as they sort through all her stuff.

"Sure, little demons, but very ineffectual at tearing garments. Come on, just relax."

Midnight sighs but does as she's bid, sinking down to the floor next to Jesse and wrapping her arms around her legs, resting her chin on her knees. She keeps her eyes on the girls. "Jackson's pup looks a lot like him."

"Doesn't she?" Jesse says, grinning and looking over at the pair. "She's really sweet."

Midnight hums consideringly, glancing up at Jesse. "And you don't find them annoying?"

Jesse grins at his mate. "I'm used to the chaos, Mids. I think they're funny. But it's fine if you find them annoying – plenty of people aren't crazy about kids."

Midnight hums again, turning her face back, clearly putting her thoughts together.

Jesse watches her quietly, wondering if she'll ever truly change her mind about wanting kids.

Wondering if he wants her to.

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The next few minutes pass calmly, the girls getting lost in their games, Jesse splitting a can of orange soda between him and Midnight, pouring some into a glass for her and taking the can for himself. Then he sighs, leaning back on his hand, studying his mate.

"What?" Midnight asks, taking a sip of her drink before resting her cheek on her knee.

"You just look...better, Mids," Jesse says, his eyes moving over her. "You've put on some weight. You look healthy. It makes me happy."

She narrows her eyes. "Are you going to try to seduce me now?"

He laughs, shaking his head. "No, I didn't mean it like that."

"Good," she murmurs, turning her face away, again watching the girls like a little dragon that has unwillingly let intruders into her cave and isn't happy about it. "I'm not doing any of the romance stuff. Gross."

"No worries," Jesse says on a sigh, searching his heart. But still, even as he does, he realizes with a rather strong assurance that even if Midnight is his mate, and even if he can admit that she's a beautiful girl, he is...still not attracted to her. Not in that way.

His wolf turns in his soul, anxious and confused, not getting it. Shouldn't he be attracted to her, if she's his mate?

Maybe it doesn't work like that, his wolf says, pacing back and forth. Ariel said she had a stronger sexual connection with Jackson than Luca...

Yeah, Jesse murmurs inwardly. But she still made out with Luca. A lot. She was still attracted to him.

Maybe our relationship is different, his wolf says with what can best be described as a wolfish little shrug. Maybe it reflects what she needs, which is less passion and more...companionship.

Jesse's wolf shifts his gaze, looking towards the space where the bond would be if Jesse accepted it, beyond which they can still see Midnight's poor little wolf, still stuck in that oil, panting, her eyes lit with that manic glow.

Or maybe, his wolf says, hesitating, maybe things would be different if she wasn't corrupted.

Jesse hums aloud, considering. Wondering.

"Oh, just tell me," Midnight says, rolling her eyes.

Jesse blinks back to the moment, shifting his gaze to her. "What?"

"I can feel you thinking about me," she says on a huffy sigh. "What is it you want to say?"

Jesse smiles, pleased again with his mate's quick wits.

"I'm just curious if you meant what you said," Jesse says, shrugging one shoulder and lifting his can of soda to his lips, taking a sip. "About wanting to enroll in Alpha Academy in the fall? And coming this spring, to help watch Marigold and study as much as you can?"

"Yes," Midnight says, sitting up straight and setting back her shoulders. "I meant it. I want to be a spy like Ariel – I think I would be a great spy, better than her. Don't you try to stop me!"

Jesse grins at his ferocious little mate. "I'm not trying to stop you. I'm on board," he says, truly meaning it. "But, I mean, you know that Daphne still works there, right?"

Midnight's eyes go wide, her jaw dropping open. "You dare to mention the whore!?" she hisses, her eyes darkening, shadows immediately beginning to seep from her skin.

Jesse waves the shadows away like smoke, glancing over at the little girls, not wanting them to be afraid. But they continue their games, giggling and trying on different clothes, oblivious.

“She’s not a whore, Mids – ”

“She is a whore!” Midnight hisses, livid.

“Midnight,” Jesse snaps, more serious and stern than he usually is. “She’s a seamstress, all right? And a lovely person. And she works at Alpha Academy. If you come with us and enroll, she’ll probably be making your damn clothes!”

Midnight’s brow furrows, her fangs lengthening as she becomes the terror of nightmares she was when Jesse first met her. Jesse smiles a little, almost fond now of the horrible sight. “I will never wear a stitch that the whore crafts for me – she will sew poison into the seams – she will spin her whore magic – ”

“Oh, for heavens’ sake, Mids,” Jesse says, laughing a little, wrapping the shadows that drift towards him around his hand and then pulling them into himself. “Cut the dramatics. This is just a fact of Academy life – Daphne’s going to be there, and you’re going to have to be nice to her.”

Some of Midnight’s shadows clear as she realizes they’re having no effect on Jesse. They continue to waft around her even as her face returns to normal. “Can’t you just take her job away?” she says, pouting darkly.

Jesse frowns at Midnight. “I’m not taking away a young woman’s career just because you don’t like her, Midnight.”

“She makes me uncomfortable!” Midnight snaps.

“You don’t even know her!” Jesse returns, leaning towards his mate. “Honestly, Mids, you’re being unfair.”

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Midnight grumbles something about not wanting to be fair, turning her face away from him.

Jesse sighs, not enjoying making her unhappy but knowing that it all needs to be said. “And,” he continues. “While I want you to enroll if that’s what will make you happy, I

have to say – I don't think Uncle Dom is going to be thrilled about having a young woman corrupted by Darkness within his Academy and his military."

Midnight snaps her head to him, her mouth open. "What!?"

Jesse shrugs. "Darkness has a hold on you, Mids," he says. "I don't honestly know what that means, but if there's a chance that Darkness can control you? Or see through your eyes –

–

"He can't see through my eyes," she mutters, rolling them.

"Are you sure?" Jesse asks, leaning closer.

Midnight stills, her face falling, making it abundantly clear that she...is not sure.

"Darkness is our enemy right now, Midnight," Jesse says softly. "I don't know what's fully going on, but he was clearly using Atalaxia to attack us as the Goddess's children and heirs. And now that Atalaxia is gone he's going to find some new method to do it. Maybe the Community or maybe..."

"Maybe me..." Midnight whispers, horrified. She starts to rock back and forth, uncomfortable, her shadows swirling.

Jesse lets her sit in it for a moment, putting a hand out on her shoulder, wanting her to feel that he's on her side.

To his surprise, Midnight fixes her eyes on the little girls across the yurt, on their laughter and play. She watches them for what feels like a long time, her mind clearly working on the problem, on her priorities, on what she wants for her life.

She turns her head back to Jesse, her eyes sad and worried. "I don't want anyone in my family to get hurt because of my powers," she whispers quietly.

Jesse nods, his heart aching for her, squeezing her shoulder in his palm.

"But," she continues, her voice wavering. "I...don't want to give up my powers, Jess. I...don't know who I am without my powers. I don't want to be weak." Tears fill her eyes.

Jesse sighs, his heart breaking for her, and he scootches closer to Midnight, gathering her up in his arms and pulling her into his lap, cradling her close to his chest. "You'll still be Midnight," he murmurs, pressing a kiss to her dark curls. "We'll still love you precisely as much."

"But I won't be powerful," she whines, desperately sad.

“Are you sure?” Jesse asks, considering it, pressing his cheek against her hair. “Mids, how much of your powers are...your gift? How much are a result of the corruption?”

She goes a bit still. “What are you talking about?”

Jesse sighs and then begins to speak his thoughts aloud as he thinks them, musing on Gabriel’s ability to use his powers even after Ariel cleared him of his darkness – though in a different, lesser form. “I just wonder if the same would be true for you,” Jesse murmurs. “If you’d actually lose anything. Or if...it would just be different.”

“I don’t want less power,” Midnight says, frightened. “I don’t want to be weak.”

“There are other ways to be strong,” Jesse says softly. He lifts his head, putting a hand on Midnight’s shoulder to push her back a bit so that he can look into his face. “And your wolf, Mids – she’s...suffering.” He turns inward again, his wolf howling to see hers still stuck in that oily muck, unable to move or to play, her breathing labored. “What would you gain if she was free?”

“I don’t know,” Midnight says, a little whine in her voice. “Jesse, I don’t know – it’s all so scary...”

He hums in agreement, not wanting to push her. It’s her choice, after all – her body, her magic, her wolf, her life.

After a moment, he tries one last foray. “Do you think,” he murmurs. “That if I got Ariel up here just to talk to you about the possibility of clearing your corruption...do you think you’d talk to her about it?”

“I don’t want to be forced to do anything,” Midnight growls, sniffing hard. “You said you wouldn’t force me, Jesse.”

“And I won’t,” he whispers, holding her close. “I promise, Mids. Just...please talk to her. Maybe she can tell you what would happen. I want you to know all of your options. And then you can decide.”

She sighs, leaning hard against him. “All right,” she says, her voice barely audible as she closes her eyes, trusting him. “All right, Jesse. I’ll talk to her.”

“Thank you,” Jesse says, wrapping his arms around Midnight and holding her close. Inwardly his wolf stands straight, shaking out his fur, determined to do as best as he can by this girl.

To help her live her life as she chooses, whatever that looks like.

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“Okay, okay,” I say, smiling at Pippa, giving her hand one last squeeze. “Good luck, Pips! I’ll be right outside the door!”

Pippa gives me a nod and a smile, her face flushed and sweaty. She squeezes my hand back. “See you in a minute, Ari,” she says, turning away to Elias and my mom and Cora – Alpha, magical healer, and OBGYN – who will be staying in the room for the birth.

I sigh, stepping away, biting my lip, desperately wanting to stay –

“Out, Ari,” mom says, flashing me a grin and pointing towards the door as Cora leans towards Pippa with a watch in her hand, timing her contractions and murmuring to her that it’s time to push.

“Oh fine!” I sigh, scowling at my mother and turning towards the door, flouncing out with a pout readily on my mouth. I sigh, pulling the door shut behind me, knowing that my presence isn’t necessary but really, really wanting to be there.

“How is she?”

I jump a little, turning in surprise to the croaking voice, my eyes widening in surprise when I see Mark and Benny sitting on the hallway floor, each of them looking mildly miserable and worried.

“She’s fine,” I say, flashing a smile at Ben. But then I turn to Mark and frown. “What on earth are you still doing here?” I ask, crossing the hall and squeezing in between them.

Mark sighs, scootching to the side a little bit to make room for me. “Don’t ask, Ari, okay?” he murmurs, looking down at his knees, clearly miserable.

I just stare at him, baffled, but Ben gives me a little nudge with his elbow.

I spin to my friend, confused, but he just shakes his head gently at me, urging to do as Mark asks. I frown at Ben, not getting it, spinning my head back to Mark because –

I mean, why the hell does Mark even care!? Ben’s presence and worry I get – this is his mate’s first child. But Mark looks almost green with worry –

Seriously, why on earth would he be this worried about a girl he hardly knows!?

But suddenly my eyes go wide, my wolf leaping to her feet because –

But no way –

No way –

It's...not my baby Markie, he's just a baby...and Pippa of all people –

Ben elbows me again, sharper this time, and by instinct I spin my head back to him with a scowl. Because, honestly, that kind of hurt.

But Ben shakes his head more vehemently this time, intuiting what I've intuited and letting me know that it is not going to be helpful to Mark for me to interrogate him at this moment. I sigh, masterfully tucking my curiosity away and simply putting a hand out on Mark's knee, letting him feel my support even as I force myself to keep my attention on Ben.

Honestly, I'm very impressed with myself at the moment, I am rarely capable of such restraint.

But for Markie, my baby? For him, I can do it.

"Anyway," I say, clearing my throat and keeping my focus on Ben's face. He grins at me, seeing the effort it's taking. "Pippa's fine. She's going to start pushing now."

A huffy little worried moan breaks from Mark but I manage to ignore him.

"She's amazing," Ben says, looking towards the door. "She's been...so brave, running away from everything she knows and having her baby here."

I murmur my agreements, studying my friend's face, allowing my attention to drift to him – which is easier in this moment than I thought it would be. Suddenly I feel quite guilty, wondering if I've neglected Ben in all of the crazy events that have been happening lately.

"How are you doing, Benny?" I ask quietly, genuinely wanting to know. "How are...things? With Elias? And with Pippa?"

He sighs, long and slow, but can't keep the smile off of his face. "It's been complicated. Amazing but...complicated." I nod, tilting my head to the side, understanding.

"Elias is in a weird spot," Ben says, shifting his gaze to the door. "I've been trying to be supportive and I hope that I'm succeeding. But we're just so...so happy with each other, Ari. Like – he's so great. He's so funny, and strong, and smart, and clever – I just...every moment we spend together is amazing."

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I beam at my friend, thrilled for him, and fight heroically against my urge to turn towards Mark's jealous little snarl.

"Is there a but coming?" I ask quietly, intending that it's not all roses.

"Of course there is," Ben says, laughing a little. "My mate – he's married, isn't he? He's got a Luna and a baby. And he and Pippa are incredibly close. Pippa and I...we're jealous of each other, in our own ways. And while we both want Elias to be happy ." he sighs and shakes his head. "We're having trouble...finding our places in each other's lives. It has not been simple."

I hum consideringly, reaching out my other hand to rest on Ben's knee, wanting to support him as well. "Do you think you will find a balance?"

"I think we will," Ben says, nodding to me. "Pippa has...come around to me more. She likes me more than she did at the start, especially as she's come to realize that I'm not trying to take Elias away from her – that I think there's some way we can do this together as some sort of weird...triple parenting," he says, laughing a bit, shaking his head.

Mark snarls again and my wolf howls, desperate to know what the hell is going on.

"I think that's lovely," I whisper, smiling at him. "Three parents to love her – the baby would be a lucky girl."

"Yeah," Ben says on another sigh, returning his gaze to my face. "But... I think Pips is feeling lonely. Elias used to be all hers, after all, and now his attention is split. I think she's...worried. And feeling alienated and alone."

I sigh, my heart going out to her, and I mentally root myself to the determination to do better by her – to be a better friend. I bite my lip, considering. "Do you think maybe they should come with us to Alpha Academy?" I murmur. "That would make things easier, and then I'd be around so we could hang out, and the sudden demand to accommodate two little girls would make it easier to argue for why the Academy's policies regarding children should change __"

A terrible, rough snarl breaks from Mark at the suggestion and my will breaks. I whip my face to him, my eyes flicking astonished over his angry visage. "What the hell is going on with you, Mark!?"

Mark's mouth flies open to reply –

But suddenly the door opens, and Cora peeks her head out, beaming. “She’s here!” Cora says, laughing a little and peering back into the room. “A beautiful little girl, perfectly healthy! Mama’s doing well too!”

Mark moans in relief, returning his head to his hands. I just stare between Cora and him, not knowing what to focus on. Cora also gives Mark a weird look. “Um, just a few minutes to clean up the baby and then Pippa says you can all meet her – but briefly, okay? The new mom is going to need her rest.”

Ben and I murmur our agreement and Cora nods, ducking back into the room and closing the door.

“Congratulations, papa,” I say, laughing a little and leaning over to Ben, pressing a happy kiss to his cheek.

“Thanks, Ari,” he murmurs, hugging me close. “It’s...a very cool day. Honestly, I’m grateful she’s a girl – girls I can handle.”

I laugh a bit, knowing that he can. He’s got sisters, after all – this is well within his wheelhouse.

The three of us sit quietly for a bit, our eyes fixed on the door, and I keep glancing at Mark from the corner of my eye – my heart going out to him. Eventually I shift my hand from his knee to his back, petting him in long, slow circles.

He glances over at me, his face drawn, and gives me a little nod of thanks. I lean against my brother, hoping he knows that whenever he’s ready to talk to me...I’ll be right here.

Eventually the door opens again and Cora waves a hand magnanimously into the room. “The new Atalaxian Princess awaits!” she says, laughing a bit.

I grin, getting to my feet alongside Ben and Mark. Ben and I eagerly move for the door while Mark hesitantly follows.

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Laughing with excitement, I move past Cora into Pippa’s room, heading immediately for the new mom. Cora follows behind me, heading to the corner to pack up her doctor’s bag.

“Pips!” I say, grinning and reaching for her hand, sitting down on the stool next to her and beaming at her. “How are you? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Pippa says, laughing a little. “Relieved that it’s done, happy she’s here.” Her eyes stray over to where Elias is holding a teeny tiny little bundle in his arms, stepping close so Ben can see. My mom stands close by, standing on her toes, peeking down at the little baby like her eyes can’t get enough.

“You’re magnificent,” I sigh, standing to press a kiss to her cheek and likewise looking eagerly over at the baby. “Did you pick out a name?”

“Bianca,” Elias says, smiling over at me, pleased and proud. “We’ve decided to call her Bianca.”

“Bianca,” I repeat, loving it, grinning down at Pippa. “So...not named after his mother?”

“Well, she may have the lineage of an Atalaxian Princess,” Pippa says with a happy sigh, looking up at me. “But she’s a little Moon Valley girl now, isn’t she? New life, new traditions.”

I squeak with joy, loving that, dipping low to give Pippa a huge hug.

“Oh, go,” she says, laughing and swatting me away. “I know the baby is the main feature.”

I laugh, doing as I’m bid and letting her go, moving quickly over to Elias and Ben and my mom. As I walk I glance to the door, not missing at all that Mark is leaning against the doorjamb, not fully in the room, his worried gaze trained on Pippa.

She glances at him once but then looks away, shifting uncomfortably and returning her eyes to her daughter, all bundled up. I bite my lip but...I let it stand. After all, they haven’t asked for my help. And despite my tendency to meddle...well. It seems to be what Pippa wants, after all, and she gets to be in charge today.

I move towards Mom, Elias and Benny, my arms out. “Gimme,” I say, grinning with abandon.

Ben laughs, shifting little Bianca out of my reach. “No way,” he says, shaking his head. “I just got her.”

“Oh, you jerk,” I sigh, standing closer, demanding. “As a Princess of this realm, I order you -“

Mom bursts out laughing and gives me a little shove on my shoulder even as Benny laughs, relenting and passing the baby into my arms. My eyes fill with tears the moment my gaze lands on her and I look up at Elias, completely overwhelmed.” She’s beautiful, Elias,” I whisper. I turn towards Pippa, shaking my head. “Absolutely wonderful.”

Pippa nods eagerly, agreeing with my assessment and I laugh as I look down at the perfect little girl. Her coloring – pale- skinned with a dark little patch of hair, her scrunchy little

newborn face much more peaceful than I've ever seen. She clenches one tiny fist in front of her, apparently already having escaped from her swaddle.

"Oh, she's going to be a little fighter," I say, desperately proud already. "And smart and clever and funny – "

"Don't flatter the child," Elias says, dry, leaning over me, beaming at his little girl. "She'll get a big head."

"Precisely as I intend," I say with a happy sigh, pressing a kiss to her forehead before handing her back to her dad. "Truly, congratulations," I say, beaming around the room to all of Bianca's collected parents. "She's a wonder."

I turn last to Mark at the door, including him in the group.

Because even if he hasn't said anything yet.

And even if Pippa hasn't acknowledged him...

I see the way his eyes are trained on the bundled little girl.

I sigh, glancing over at Pippa, who still refuses to look at my brother...

...wondering what the hell is happening there.

We spend a few more minutes admiring the new baby and congratulating Elias and Pippa, but my mom and I see Pippa's energy begin to fade nearly at the same time. Mom catches my eye and I gave a happy nod, slipping my arm around Ben's elbow. A few words whispered in his ear has him regretfully turning away from his mate's little girl – the little Bianca who is a daughter to Ben now as well, in his heart if not technically by blood.

With a fond press of Elias's hand, Ben comes with me the door to gather up Mark as well. We call our goodbyes and our congratulations and good lucks to the new parents as Cora and mom gather the new parents close to give final checks and instructions before they can be left alone to rest.

The door swings shut and I sigh with happiness, my arms looped around Ben and Mark's elbows as we three start down the hall. I grin as I glance up at Ben's face and see his proud smile, only slightly tinged with melancholy and jealousy – because I know that were it up to him, he'd have stayed in that room much longer.

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But my grin falls when I turn my head to look up at Mark, because that devastation...it persists.

“Mark,” I say quietly, leaning towards him, wanting very much to play the big sister right now.

“Still not yet, Ari,” Mark says on a sigh, glancing down at me. He gives his best attempt at a smile, but it fails.

“Okay, then let me get you a drink, little boy,” I say, resting my cheek against his arm.

Ben laughs a little. “He’s not a little boy at all, Ari,” he says, shaking his head. “He’s gigantic – nearly as tall as Rafe and Jacks

“Incorrect, Benny,” I say, spinning my head to grin at him. “He’s just teeny tiny, like me. Come on, both of you – drinks all round.”

Ben, Mark, and I head into the family apartments, which are empty, suggesting that the meeting about the Community is still going on. I do as I promised, fetching us a couple of drinks and handing them round, but we’re a quiet little group tonight. None of us feels particularly chatty, each of us instead lost in our thoughts about burgeoning parenthood, and the loves of our life, and what on earth the future looks like.

I smirk at Mark and Ben sitting on either sides of the same couch, considering that...if what I suspect about Markie is true, then he and Ben have a great deal more in common than I ever thought they would. Privately I wish that they would just talk to one another, thinking that they could really be a help to each other. But, not wanting to push it, I just sigh and leave them to their easy silence as both sip calmly at their drinks, lost in thought.

I move to the window, sipping at my own glass of wine, looking out at the beautiful city as dusk falls. I sigh, happy, struck by the beauty of our capital city even as my thoughts turn to the surprising new developments of my life. To Jacks, and sweet little Marigold, and how she fits into our world. Because while it’s clear that she slips into the family quiet easily and that everyone has fully embraced her, what does my life look like going forward?

Do we go back to Alpha Academy for our second and final year? How do we manage to balance Marigold’s needs with our own responsibilities and ambitions? What am I supposed to do, like, carry her up into the sniper’s blind in a sling on my back or something?

I smirk a little at the thought, thinking that Jackson would completely flip about it, when my eye suddenly catches on movement in our courtyard below. My attention immediately shifts, something in my wolf instinct allowing me to focus immediately on the figure that stands in shadow, leaning against a tree. Looking up at this very window.

At me.

And my lips curl quietly into a smile, because even if the figure is indistinct...

I know, instantly, precisely who it is.

“I’m going downstairs for a minute,” I murmur, swallowing the rest of my glass of wine down in a single gulp and leaving the glass on the windowsill.

Ben and Mark mumble something back but I’m already moving, heading for the door, my wolf prowling restlessly in my soul. As I hurry down the steps to the first floor, heading for the door that leads directly to that courtyard, I send a pulse down my bond to Jackson, careful to keep it cheerful and easy.

You good? Jackson asks, interested but not worried.

Yup, I say, reaching for the doorknob. Just going outside for a bit of fresh air – the east courtyard. In case you’re looking for me.

Cool, Jacks says, calm and a bit distracted. We’re almost done here.

I send a happy little pulse of love back to him in confirmation, even as I push the door open to the courtyard and rush through it. Then I close the bond off – not completely, but numbing it a great deal.

Because this? This is...just for me.

I slow my steps, slipping my hands behind my back as I walk forward towards the figure who still leans far too casually against the tree. My wolf gives me an anxious nip of warning as I step close, but I smooth a hand over her fur.

Because this one? He can’t hurt me. Not anymore.

“Hey, Luca,” I say, smiling slowly up into his gorgeous face.

“Princess,” Luca says, one corner of his mouth turning up into a dimpled smirk. “How’ve you been?”

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“I’ve been really busy,” I say, wrinkling my nose at him, unable to help my wide smile. God, he’s just...so precisely the same, isn’t he? All tall and sexy and confident. “You know, since you left me naked and crying on the floor of your bedroom.”

“Aw, come on, Ari,” Luca says with a sigh, the smile slipping from his mouth, his head hanging. “You have to start right in with that?”

“Where would you prefer I start?” I ask quietly, not wanting to be cruel but also knowing that Luca has just got...such an easy way of turning things in his favor, of making it easy for me to forget that he’s ever done anything wrong, ever.

And it usually starts with that pretty smile.

“How about we start with me apologizing?” he murmurs, lifting his soulful brown eyes to mine.

I quirk an eyebrow, letting him know that might be wise.

“That’s the only thing that’s been ringing in my head for weeks, after all,” he says on a sigh. “It killed me, Ariel – after I left, and had like...eight seconds to think about it. I’m so, so fucking sorry – and then when you got kidnapped from that battlefield? And I wasn’t there?” He hangs his head again and I see the true grief and regret that haunts him.

“You didn’t look very sorry at the start,” I say quietly, crossing my arms over my chest.

“What?” he asks, lifting his head again, confusion bunching his brows.

I smirk a bit. “I saw the tabloids, Luca,”

He groans, turning his head to the side.

I laugh, light and easy. “Oh please, you were basically posing – you knew I’d see the pictures – ”

“I so was not ”

“Oh yes you were,” I say on a sigh, grinning at him, unable to help it. “With your shirt just...casually unbuttoned like that?” I roll my eyes, shaking my head at him. “Come on, Luca, I know you – you were never a messy dresser until very recently.”

He sighs, caught a bit, lifting his eyes to mine, apology and mischief mingled in them.

“Come on then,” I say, lifting my chin towards his chest. “Let’s see it.”

“Ten seconds into our reunion,” he murmurs, shaking his head slowly from side to side. “And you’re already trying to get me to take my shirt off?”

I burst out laughing, my hand flashing out to smack him on the chest. “Come on! You got it for me, after all. The least you can do is let me see it.”

Luca sighs, putting on a great show of pretending to be put out by this. But even as he does his fingers move to the buttons of his black shirt, quickly undoing them until he can pull the fabric aside and I can see it there – my name tattooed in flourishing letters across his chest, the A directly over his heart.

“Well?” he asks, low. “What do you think?”

“It’s beautiful work,” I say, leaning in to inspect the lettering, which really is lovely. I mean, I’m no tattoo expert, but whoever did it truly did a fine job. I flick my eyes up to Luca with a smirk as I lean back again. “You’re such a drama queen.”

It’s Luca’s turn to laugh now as he lounges again against the tree, not bothering to button his shirt up. Again, deliberate. He gives a casual, handsome shrug, looking like a damn model there against the tree, all dark and moody and tattooed. Which, I’m well aware, is precisely how he wants to look.

My handsome mate came to play, as he always does. After all, his looks were always the weapon against which I had the least defense.

“How’d you know I was home?” I ask, tilting my head to the side, studying him. Allowing myself to enjoy this, but not falling into his trap.

“Did you think it was a secret?” Luca asks, quirking an eyebrow at me. “Your fanatical public were dying for news of their lost Princess. And the press did not disappoint.”

Luca reaches behind him and pulls, of all things, a tabloid out of his back pocket, holding it out to me. Surprised, mildly delighted, I take it from him, my eyes lighting up when I see the picture on the cover –

Jackson covering my head as I duck into a helicopter outside that rusty old gas station on the borders. The picture is hazy – clearly amateur, obviously taken by that clerk we met. I grin, my eyes drifting over Jackson’s powerful form –

God, he does take a good picture –

And then moving to the words across the top of the page.

‘Princess Saved by Mystery Hunk!’

I burst out laughing, delighted, clutching the tabloid in my hands.

“I know,” Luca says, dry. “Mystery my ass. If they knew Jackson at all they’d have rephrased it. ‘Very dull hunk of brick accompanies Princess as she saves herself,’ I think, would be the more accurate title.”

I just sigh happily, pressing the magazine to my chest, eager to show it to Jackson. “I’m keeping this,” I say, ignoring Luca’s jealous little insults. They don’t matter anyway.

Luca shrugs, not caring that I keep the magazine. His face falls into more serious lines, though, as he holds my gaze. “You’re... all right, though? Atalaxia...they didn’t...hurt you?”

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“No, they didn’t,” I say quietly, shaking my head. “I’m good.”

“And the pictures of you in a crown...”

I shrug, giving Luca a quick summary of my time, holding out my wrist so he can see Gabriel’s mark there too. His eyes widen at first when he sees it and I note, with a bit of a smile, that his fangs extend a little bit, a growl rumbling in his chest. But Luca tucks it all away quite masterfully and I drop my arm, not bothering to mention Jackson’s mark.

Because that’s clearly visible, isn’t it? Just where the curve of my neck meets my shoulder. Luca’s eyes flick to it, and then to his own mark high up, beneath my jaw. Except they’re different, aren’t they? Luca’s mark has faded now – just a collection of scars. Jackson’s is healed but alive, blushing warm and pink.

Luca sighs, dropping his eyes from my neck, his shoulders slumping. “I’m so, so sorry, Ariel,” he says, shaking his head. “I regret...everything, that day. Everything I did was wrong. I was a...fool and a child. And I’m so incredibly sorry.”

“I forgive you,” I say, meaning it, my wolf howling a little to see him in such genuine pain. I care about him, after all – after everything. And he means this apology – we can tell that he does, both by the true grief we can see in him as well as...well, alongside the little pulse of it that I can feel coming down that’s left of our bond.

Because it’s still there, that little scrap. Not enough, anymore, for us to have a true and vivid connection like we once had. But... still extant. Still my mate, in this tiny little way.

Luca just shakes his head, I think overwhelmed. I tilt my head to the side, thinking that it's so strange that I...just don't know precisely what he's feeling. When I'm so used to knowing.

"I'm sorry too," I say, reaching for him finally, my hand coming to rest on his forearm.

He lifts his head to look at me. "What?"

"I wasn't as good to you as I could have been, was I?" I whisper, my heart sinking, because I know that it's true. "Ariel - "

"No," I say, shaking my head. "I mean, what you did was...really shitty, Luca. But I was keeping secrets too. I didn't choose Jackson as you accused me of doing - at least, not at that point. But I was hiding things from you and it wasn't fair. I should have told you that I had lost my virginity. I should have told you that he was sleeping in my bed every night -"

"He was what?" Luca's eyes go wide in appalled shock.

I grin a little and shrug. "The details don't matter."

"Like hell they don't!"

I laugh a bit, shaking my head, wrinkling my nose and taking a step away. "They don't. Not anymore. Just - maybe we can both agree to forgive each other? Move on from it?"

"Yes," Luca breathes, taking a step towards me, reaching for me again. "Ariel, yes - if we could - that would be amazing -" "You're really important to me Luca," I say quietly, holding my ground. "I always want you in my life. I think that given time there's space here for a beautiful friendship."

Luca stops in his tracks, narrowing his eyes at me, straightening up and slipping his hands in his pockets - probably to avoid grabbing me. "So that's where this is going? You're friend-zoning me, Ariel?"

I wrinkle my nose at him and smile. "Oh no, Luca, I think that you'll find that you friend-zoned me."

"I never -"

"You rejected me, Luca!" I say, laughing and shaking my head at him. "You broke our bond - "

"I held onto it

"C

"You broke it," I say, staying firm even under the weight of his desperation when my first instinct is, as it always is, to say whatever it is that will make him happy.

"Ariel," he breathes, shaking his head at me, begging.

“When someone tells me they don’t want to be with me,” I say quietly. “I have enough self-respect to take them at their word and let them walk away.”

"But I came back," he whispers, shaking his head.

I shrug, not giving into it. “It’s done. Besides,” I say, glancing over my shoulder. “I’ve made my choice. And got a new cute little family now to boot.” My eyes travel upwards to the window to my family room where a figure looms in the window, a little girl held high in his arms, both of them peering down at us – one curious, one grim.

I break into a grin at the sight of my sweetheart mate, all murderly and livid at Luca but still letting me deal with this myself. I give a little wave and, to my delight, Marigold waves back.

Luca leans forward, peering up wards as well, unphased by the silent threat of Jackson standing there, all tense and lethal. " Who is that little kid?"

“Jackson’s daughter.” I turn back to Luca, pleased, wanting to see his reaction.

“Wha-” Luca says, the word falling out on a appalled exhale of breath. “Where the hell did Jackson get a daughter!?”

[illegible]