

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 651

“Oh, baby,” mom says, cupping my cheek in her hand and looking at me sympathetically. “Sometimes...the Goddess has plans for us that go beyond our own.”

”

“Damn right she does,” I say with a scowl, flumping back into mom’s pillows and shooting a little glare at the crescent moon, which I can see hovering just above the dawn horizon. “Surprise after surprise with that one.”

“Are you unhappy with it?” mom asks, clasping her hands beneath her chin and looking at me, worried. “You...you don’t have to be happy, sweetie. I’m sorry, I should have been more restrained – ”

“No, mom,” I say with a sigh, flicking my eyes to her and then down to my stomach, where I press my hands. Where two babies now live, apparently. “I...don’t really know precisely how I feel – I mean, I’m really surprised – and the timeline is not fantastic but...I don’t think I’m unhappy...”

I let my words trail off, trying to figure out how I feel but coming up with an answer that’s split between about twelve different emotions.

A baby. Babies.

Two little babies.

Jackson’s... Jackson’s babies.

A tiny little smile comes to my mouth at that thought because...

I mean. They’re going to be so cute.

My mom squeaks again and I look up, laughing when I see the big smile on her face. “You’re smiling,” she whispers, still holding her hands in fists beneath her chin. “Does that mean...”

“Mommm,” I groan, pitching myself forward, still laughing, a bit hysterical. “I don’t know, okay! Give me...ten seconds to figure it out.” I sigh, putting my head down in her lap, closing my eyes and trying to sort through it.

“You got it baby,” mom murmurs, sweet and kind, starting to stroke my hair. “Ten whole seconds, just for you.”

I grumble something to her, and she laughs again, but I just allow myself to breathe and let myself again adjust to the radical new reality of my life. It takes a long, long time to get it into my head that I'm pregnant.

That there are going to be two more little Sinclairs in the palace. And they're going to be mine.

But...are we even going to be in the palace?

Didn't I... weren't we just talking about going back to school? I sigh deeply, confused, turning my head to press my forehead against my mom's thigh.

"Tell me, baby," she murmurs, still stroking her hands through my hair, kind and sweet as she always is.

"Jacks and I were just talking about it last night," I murmur, my voice a little muffled against her leg. "About...wanting more babies someday. I didn't think it would be today."

She laughs a little. "More babies?"

I turn my head up, sighing again even as I smile. "I'm going to adopt Marigold as my own. We talked about it last night. Not right away – we want to let her adjust but...I want to be her mom. Jackson is on board."

Mom's face crumples in an instant, tears filling her eyes as she lays herself down next to me on the bed and wraps me up in a hug, pulling me close. "Oh, Ariel," she sighs, I think as undone with emotion as me. "I...I mean, I hoped you would. I think that's so fantastic."

"Me too," I whisper, smiling as tears prick my own eyes. "Though I guess now she's getting...siblings. And who knows how she'll feel about that."

"Fantastic, of course," mom mutters, sniffing a bit.

"But, I mean..." I bite my lip, grief starting to curl in me. "I'm...I'm really young for this. Three kids at twenty-three? I mean... I know it's been done before, but...I..." I sniff, feeling very overwhelmed. "I really liked my life! I'm a really good sniper! I want to be a spy!"

Mom pulls me even closer, letting me cry a little into her shirt, murmuring all sorts of comforting nonsense to me about how fantastic I am, and how it's fine to be confused, and how we'll sort it all out. And, as it always does, her warmth and support bring a great deal of comfort.

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A few minutes later, mom sits up, taking me with her and clucking over me as she wipes the tears from my face and pushes my hair back behind my ears. "There's my beautiful Princess," mom murmurs, stroking her hand over my hair and getting me all in order. "So strong and brave!"

"Enemy armies I can face," I say with a sigh and a little laugh. "Pregnancy, a whole new thing."

She laughs at this, patting my cheek and smiling at me again. "As it always is," she says, giving a bit of a shrug. "Your first pregnancy...is always a bit of a terror, even if you're happy about it."

"I don't want you to think I'm unhappy," I murmur. Then I look down at myself again, pressing my hands against my stomach, which is as flat now as it ever was. "I don't want them to think I'm unhappy."

"Well luckily they're just little cell bundles right now," mom murmurs with a shrug. "So, they probably can't feel anything yet."

"Is that true?" I ask, my face wrinkling as I look up at her. "At what point in conception does the bond form?"

"Oh, I don't know, I'm not a scientist," mom says, waving a hand at me and dismissing the question. I laugh a little, unable to help it. "We'll ask Cora in a couple of hours."

I sigh, nodding, looking back down, tentatively sending a little pulse of warmth and love down the bonds, wanting desperately for the babies to feel...I don't know. Welcome, I guess.

"You know, it's how I would have wanted it," mom says quietly.

I look up at her again, curious.

"If I had it my way?" she says, arching her brows at me. "I would have had it happen precisely like this. I'd have met your dad when I was twenty-two, and taken a good six months to get to know him and let our relationship develop, and then..." she snaps her fingers, grinning at me. "I'd have wanted to start popping out kids."

I laugh, harder now, starting to feel...I don't know. A bit more cheerful? Certainly less panicked. "Yeah, but you always wanted to be a mom," I say, my shoulders slumping a little. "I just started thinking about being a mom like, literally yesterday."

“Well, wish granted,” she says with a little shrug that makes me laugh.

“I know,” I say, twisting my mouth to the side, trying to parse my emotions. “I just....want other things too.”

“You can have it all, Ariel,” mom says quietly. I study her, kind of impressed with the assurance in her voice. Slowly, she nods to me. “Motherhood doesn’t have to be limiting, especially when you have the help you have. A dad with lots of money, a mom very willing to spend it. A whole extended family to help you with childcare. You can do this – be a mom of three, be a spy, be the sharpshooting Princess our nation needs.”

A little smile comes to my lips as tears come to my eyes.

Because...I have just the best mom. Always so supportive of our dreams, so optimistic.

But then again, I know a little about her life and her trials. There were moments when she, too, felt hopeless – much worse than I’m feeling now. So she knows, far better than me, how important hope and determination is.

And family.

Family, more than all of it.

Because children, as she always says, are forever a blessing.

I sit a little straighter, studying my mom, proud and pleased to be her daughter.

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“Why?” I ask quietly, tilting my head to the side. “Why would you have wanted to start early, at twenty-two? You were so much older, so much...readier for it when Rafe came along. And you wanted him so badly that you went to a sperm donor to get him. Isn’t it better, to bring a baby into the world when they’re really desired from the start?”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” mom says on a considerate sigh, casually leaning against one arm as she turns her face up to the ceiling, contemplative. “Sometimes the desire comes first, sometimes the baby does. I’m not sure it matters. But,” she says, turning her eyes back towards me. “I would have wanted to get started young so your dad and I could have lots more kids.”

I burst out laughing, shaking my head at her. “Mom! Us four are enough!”

“Of course you are, baby,” mom coos, grabbing at me and pulling me in close for another hug, pressing kiss after kiss to my hair. I grin, swatting her away. “But,” she says with a happy sigh. “Eight would have been enough too.”

“Mom, eight is far too many,” I murmur, suddenly regretting my little joke last night about eighteen. “What would you have even named them?”

“Rafe, Ariel, Mark, and Juniper,” she says instantly, her eyebrows raising with the truth of it. “All with a Jr. at the end.”

I burst out laughing again, shaking my head at her. “Mom!”

“It’s true!” she says, shoving my shoulder, laughing at me. “I had great plans to have a whole second batch of kids about ten years later, and then I was going to try all my parenting techniques again, and pit you all against each other in a great trial and see which group of four came out victorious – ”

I laugh harder now, falling down into the blankets on the bed.

“It was going to be an amazing social experiment!” Mom says, laughing too, beaming down at me. “But, sadly, dad said no.

I put my hands on my belly, which aches with so much laughing, turning my head back and forth. “Thank god for dad,” I murmur. “Someone has to hold this stupid family together.”

“Yes, thank the heavens for dad,” mom says, reaching out and stroking her fingers again through my hair. “And thanks also for your Jackson. He’s going to be...a fantastic father. If he ever gets over the shock of it.”

I look up at her, well pleased. “You really like him for me, don’t you?”

“I like him in general,” she says, giving an eager nod. “But I like him especially for you, baby. From the moment I met him, I knew he was right.”

I raise my eyebrow. “The moment?”

“Oh fine,” she says, rolling her eyes, caught in the lie. “At first I thought he was your murderer. But as soon as I figured out he dragged your ridiculous bleeding butt all through that stupid trial? And then he started sobbing when he heard you’d probably live?” She nods, very wisely. “I knew.”

“I knew too,” I whisper, smiling at her, telling her the true deep secret in my heart. “I think I knew too.”

“Yes, you’re very wise,” mom murmurs, grinning at me and patting my cheek.

The door creaks open and both of our heads spin to it as we go very still.

“What’s that about wisdom?” Jesse says, striding in boldly as he always does, not bothering to knock. “Was someone speaking about me -”

But as soon as he gets within ten feet of me, he stops in his tracks, his face falling slack. “Oh, holy shit.”

“Seriously?” Mom says, snapping her hands to her waist. “You can smell it from there? God damn it, I wish I had an Alpha

nose – ”

“Smell what?” Rafe murmurs from the doorway, stepping in with a pastry in his hand, taking a big bite. “What are you guys even doing in here, all hidden awa-”

But he goes still too, his mouth falling open, his bite of pastry falling to the floor.

“From the door!?” Mom spits out, jealous and appalled.

“Ariel,” Jesse whispers, staring at me, shaking his head a little even as he holds out his arms towards me. “Oh my god, Ariel –

I groan, sitting up, unable to keep from smiling. “I know,” I say with a shrug. “Who would have thought it?”

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“You’re all knocked up!” Jesse whispers, his tone incredibly sweet, like it’s the most adorable thing he’s ever thought of in his life. “Oh my god, Ariel!”

“No way,” Rafe whispers, striding over to me, staring at me unblinkingly. Then he bursts out laughing, raising his hands to his hair, digging his fingers into the thick dark strands. “This is – this is insane! No way!”

“Way,” I say, laughing too, giving a little shrug. “Um, we just found out

“Found out!?” Jesse spits out, staring between Ella and I.

”

“I thought it was two more mates,” I say, laughing at myself now, falling back into the pillows of the bed. “I’m such an idiot, I didn’t even think the bonds were kids – ”

Jesse howls with laughter, collapsing onto the bed with me and wrapping me up in a hug as he presses kisses to my cheeks and hair, hugging me tight.

But Rafe stands right where he was. “Two?” he whispers, staring at me. “Bond...bonds? With an -s on the end?”

Jesse gasps, putting it together, letting me sit up as I shrug and smile between them. “Yeah,” I say, a little helpless to do anything but smile. “Yeah, twins, I guess.”

“Oh my GOD!” Rafe shouts, finally coming back to himself and leaping on the bed, fairly tackling me with his hug.

“Gentle, gentle!” Mom cries, smacking at him.

But my big Alpha brother is, as usual, very careful with me, wrapping me up tight in a hug but in control enough that I’m not hurt at all. “This is so insane, Ariel,” he murmurs, hugging me close. “Congratulations, trouble – I’m so excited – “

“Who’s the dad?” Jesse asks, dry.

I gasp, shoving Rafe away – and when I see Jesse’s shitty little grin I snarl and kick at him, making him roar with laughter as he swats my feet away, not letting a single blow land.

“You jackass!” I shout, even as I laugh, kicking him harder.

“No fighting on my bed!” mom shouts, laughing too, swatting at me.

“No calling my sister’s virtue into question!” Rafe roars, joining in on my mission to destroy Jesse and giving him a hearty shove. We’re all laughing, a bit swept away in the moment, when a creaking noise from the door makes us all basically freeze in place.

I turn my head, eyes wide, to Jackson standing in the doorway, Marigold held high on his arm in her little footie pajamas, both of them peering at the four of us in wonder and curiosity.

Jesse moves first. “Ooookay,” he says, shoving himself up from the bed and dashing over to Jacks. “Give me the baby,” he commands, reaching for Marigold.

“What?” Jackson says, frowning at Jesse and stepping away. “Why?”

“Because you’re going to collapse in about four seconds, my guy,” Jesse says, stepping closer and taking Marigold under the arms, gently lifting her away from her dad and settling her cheerfully on his hip.

Marigold gives a worried little squeak, looking between Jesse and Jackson, sensing the tension in the room.

“Nah, you’re fine, Goldie Girl,” Jesse says with a grin, pressing a kiss to her hair. “No worries for you.”

She grins at him even as Jackson still continues to stare at Jesse. “Worries...for me?” Jackson asks, going tense.

Jesse sighs, and tilts his head towards me and Rafe and mom, who are all still frozen on the bed. “You need to take a deep breath, Jacks,” Jesse says, nodding slowly to him and tapping his nose. “And then go to your girl.”

Jackson frowns at Jesse for a second and then does as he’s told, taking a deep breath in through his nose.

Suddenly he freezes to, spinning to me, shocked.

“Oh...oh my god,” Jackson whispers, his mouth falling open.

“Jacks,” I whisper, worried for him, starting to push myself off the bed.

But before I can get there Jackson stumbles back against the door and then slips down to the ground, not taking his eyes from me for a second as I dash across the room to him.

“See, Golds,” Jesse murmurs to her. “I told you he was going down.”

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Marigold gives a little cry of distress, reaching for her dad, but Jesse holds her tight, whispering to her that dad’s fine, he’s just very, very surprised.

I let Jesse handle our daughter for a moment, going to my knees before Jackson and taking his face in my hands. “Jacks,” I whisper, turning his glazed eyes to mine. “Baby, are you all right?”

Something about this brings Jackson snapping back to me. “Ariel,” he says on a gasped intake of breath. “Are – are you fucking all right!?”

“I’m fine,” I say, all in a rush, crawling into Jackson’s lap and opening the bond between us, letting him see and feel that I really am okay – that everything with me is fine. I mean,

beyond the fact that our entire reality just came shattering down around us again...I really am okay.

He groans, resting his head against me, his whole body shaking a little bit as he takes a deep sniff of my new scent. "Pregnant .." he whispers, barely audible. "You're...you're fucking...pregnant."

"Yeah," I say, my voice a tremulous little sound as well. "Yeah, Jacks. I...sure am."

"Oh my god," he groans. "How...how do I have two kids..."

I go a bit still in his arms.

He whips his face up to me.

I bite my lip, grimacing a little. "Do you want to...count again, Jacks?"

He whips his head back down to stare at my stomach, clearly turning inwards to his own wolf, checking on the bonds that have made themselves apparent in his own soul as well. And then he groans, collapsing against me again as he realizes a very important bit of information.

"Three," he groans. "Oh my god, Ariel, there's going to be three of them – they outnumber us – "

"I know," I murmur, smiling a little as I cradle his head to me. "Luckily, none of them are literate yet, so...we have advantage for a few more years."

He just shakes his head and groans again, pulling me close, trying to figure out what the hell is going on.

"Ooooookay," Jesse says on a happy little sigh, pleased with the increased chaos of our lives, as he always is. I peer up to see him grinning at Marigold. "You want to help me get champagne, Goldie?"

She stares at him for a second, and then glances down at us, and then apparently decides that her father's emotional meltdown is very boring. "Yes," she says, giving Jesse a steady nod.

"That's my girl," he murmurs, pressing a kiss to her hair and neatly stepping over me and Jacks to stride from the room. Jesse snaps his fingers at mom and Rafe, who sigh and go along with him.

"You have five minutes," mom says, pointing down at me as she goes. "And then I'm doing a full-body health scan on you to make sure you're as healthy as you need to be. You're

going to have to start eating fruit, Ariel – I’m not having my grandbabies come into this world all malnourished.”

I glare up at her a little as she flounces out the door. She just shrugs at me like she’s not going to stop being practical just because I’m pregnant and Jackson’s having a breakdown about it. Rafe follows mom, giving us both a big smile and pulling the door shut after him.

Jackson lifts his head and I turn my full attention back to him in the new darkness and quiet of the room. “You’re seriously okay?” he whispers, looking me over. “You’re...it doesn’t hurt?”

“No, that part comes later,” I whisper, running my fingers through his hair and grinning at him, privately very grateful to my mom for talking me down from my own panic so that I can help Jackson through his.

I grimace when he goes very still, his eyes again flashing wide, realizing that I’ve said the wrong thing.

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding!” I say, taking his cheeks between my hands and pressing a kiss to his mouth. “I’m fine! And I’m going to be fine!”

“So, it’s not going to hurt?” he whispers.

“No, sugar, it’s going to hurt,” I say, twisting my mouth to the side and giving a little shrug. “The birth part is....notoriously painful.”

He groans, ducking his head against my shoulder. “I need...books. I need knowledge. I don’t know anything about pregnancy – I don’t know what’s going on. I don’t even know how long it takes!”

“About six months,” I murmur, resting my cheek on his hair.

But the feel of his soft hair against my cheek only lasts a moment as he whips his head up to stare at me, his panic renewed. “Just six months!?” he gasps.

“Rafe came in five,” I whisper with a little grimace.

Jackson just stares at me in horror.

“Jacks!” I say, laughing a little, putting my hands again on his cheeks. “It’s plenty of time. Millions of people have done this before, okay? And we’ve got an OBGYN in the family, and a magical healer. Everything is going to be totally fine!”

He just stares at me like those seven words are a lifeline. “Everything is going to be totally fine.”

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“Yeah,” I say, petting his hair softly, smiling at him. “We can do it. We’ve got this. We’ve already got one to practice on for a couple of months – we’ll be totally prepared by the time these two come along.”

“Totally prepared,” he murmurs, nodding slowly, clinging to the hope.

We stare at each other for a long moment before he groans again, tugging me close, cradling me against him in that way I really, really love. He snarls a little, protective and possessive, and a great deal of happiness spreads all throughout me. We take a few more minutes there, together, checking in with each other and adjusting to this wild new reality.

“God, I can’t believe it,” Jackson whispers, shaking his head and running a hand across my stomach. “I – I’m not ready for this.”

“But you will be,” I whisper, biting my lip a bit, hoping that...that it’s just shock. That he’s going to be happy about this soon, that he might even...like it.

He looks up at me, sensing my emotions.

I just stay very still, not wanting him to feel pressured to like it if he doesn’t.

“Ariel, of course I like it,” he whispers, shaking his head at me. “I’m...fucking terrified, and I definitely need a computer as soon as possible – I have so much research to do – but the idea of having a little kid? Two of them? That’s...me and you, both?”

He shakes his head, holding my gaze...I think a bit lost for words.

“You like it?” I whisper, raising my hand and pressing it to his cheek.

“Ariel, you and the rest of the insane people you’re related to have long sold me on the concept of family,” he whispers. “If we can have that – if we can add to it...then yeah, I want that. I want that a lot.”

“Plus they’re going to be really cute,” I whisper, starting to smile.

“Are they?” He asks, frowning a bit.

I gasp, immediately offended. “Jackson!”

“Well, how do you know,” he says, leaning forward and laughing a little, winding his arms around me, pulling me closer. “You don’t know what they’ll look like – ”

“Yes, I do!” I snap. “They’re going to look like me! And you!”

He wrinkles his nose, dubious. “I don’t know, Ariel, you’d better hope that these kids get my genetics – you Sinclairs are

“How dare you!” I gasp, pressing a hand to my heart and leaning away. “We are a beautiful family -”

“You’re all right,” he concedes, grinning at me, holding me tight as much as I squeak, livid, trying to wiggle away in my protest and making him roar with laughter. He haul me closer to press kiss after kiss to my cheeks and mouth. “I’m kidding. They’re going to be gorgeous. Of course they are.”

“Damn right,” I grumble, letting myself relax against him.

The door creaks open a bit. “I hear laughter,” mom says, peering in. “Which suggests the great trauma is over. Which means you need to come outside so I can – ”

“Yeah, yeah,” I say, starting to stand up. “We get it, mom, you can’t even let me have a minute alone with the father of my children -”

But before I can get to my feet Jackson sweeps me up into his arms, making me gasp a little at the suddenness with which I have reached dizzying new heights. I whip my head up, glaring at him.

“You’d better not be carrying me because it’s too dangerous for me to walk pregnant.”

“I’m carrying you because I love you,” Jackson says, very seriously, looking down into my face as mom grins and pushes the door open fully. “But yes, also because I am feeling very protective right now and might not let you walk for the next six months – ”

“What!?” I shriek.

Little footsteps ring out in the living room then and Jackson and I turn our heads towards the door. I burst into a smile when I see Marigold trotting forward with a very expensive bottle of champagne clutched in her arms.

“Champin!” Marigold says, quite proud.

“Bring that back here, mongrel!” Jesse calls after her, laughing.

But even as I start to laugh I glance around into the living room and see another figure standing there – one who I haven’t seen yet today. His face is very serious, his hands sunk deep into his pockets, his eyes fastened on me.

My face goes a bit pale as I lock eyes with my father, who clearly already knows.

“Dad,” I whisper.

He holds my eyes for a moment, just the tiniest smile curling at the left side of his mouth. But then he moves his eyes to Jackson’s face, that smile disappearing.

“Go ahead and put her down, Jacks,” dad says, very serious and firm. “She won’t break. And you and I need to have...a talk.” I grimace a little, looking up at my mate as he sighs and bends to put me on my feet.

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I bite my lip as Jackson lowers me and my feet hit the ground, my eyes trained on my dad.

Dad studies Jackson for a moment longer before moving his eyes back to me. My breath catches for a moment but then he smiles, wide and beautiful, holding out his arms. “Daughter,” he says, reaching for me.

A little cry breaks from my lips as I dash away from my mate and into my dad’s arms. He gathers me up warm and tight against his chest, cradling me close, warmth and pride radiating off of him.

“You’re not disappointed in me, are you?” I murmur, the words muffled against his shirt. “Or mad at Jacks?”

“Baby, of course I’m not mad or disappointed,” dad says, rocking me back and forth. “You make your own path, trouble, and I’ll support you on it every step of the way. Are you all right? Are you happy?”

Dad pulls back a bit to study me and I look up at him, my shoulders bunched up, not really knowing how to reply. I glance back at Jackson who stands stoic, his hands in his pockets, waiting. “We’re...surprised,” I say softly. “But yeah – I think we’re happy. It’s good. It’s good, right?”

“It’s good,” dad says, beaming down at me with a wide smile, his beautiful eyes crinkled at the corners as he strokes a hand over my hair. “Two little grandchildren, all at once? Come on, how can I not be thrilled?”

I grin at him, liking that. “Are they going to call you Pop-pop?”

Dad roars with laughter, tossing his head back. I laugh with him, loving it. There’s really nothing like making my dad laugh like that – with total abandon. Such a rare feat. It fills me with warmth.

“We’ll figure that out later,” dad says, lifting his head and wiping away a mirthful tear. “Maybe they can just call me Dominic, so I won’t feel so old.”

“Oh, you can’t be old, Pop-pop,” mom says, coming over and beaming at us, holding out a glass of champagne for my dad. “I won’t let you. My magical healing on a cellular level is much better than Botox.”

“Yeah well, maybe Kingly Grandfather or a simple My Liege would be better to start,” dad murmurs, loosening his arms around me and waving the drink away. “Celebrations later. I have business to attend to.” He shifts his eyes back to Jackson, who is waiting.

“Bisniss,” Marigold whispers from her spot nestled between Jesse and Rafe on the couch. I grin over at her, reminded again that her clever little mind is well attuned to watch and listen to everything. But then I sigh, letting my dad go, stepping next to my mom. We both watch as dad crosses to his bedroom door, nodding towards it though he keeps his eyes fixed on Jackson, his demand clear.

Jackson takes a deep breath and only glances at me for a moment before following my father into the room.

“Oh geeze,” I sigh, a hand moving instinctually to my stomach. “Dad’s not going to make me a single mother, is he?”

“No, your father is very even tempered,” mom says, slipping an arm around my shoulders and giving me a squeeze. “He’ll just break Jackson’s arm. Nothing permanent.”

“What!?” I gasp, spinning my head to her.

“I’m kidding,” mom says, bursting into laughter and giving me a tug, leading me over to the couch. “It’s going to be fine! He’s probably just excited to have another dad to talk to for once.”

“He’s got Roger for that,” I murmur, my eyes straying anxiously back to the closed door.

“Yes, but Roger’s all jokes,” mom says, seating me down in her favorite armchair and then going to the drinks cart to fetch me a champagne flute of my own. “Dad’s excited to have someone serious to talk to.”

“Hey, I’m serious,” Rafe says, frowning up at mom as she comes back, balancing his champagne glass on his knee.

“Seriously boring,” Jesse says in a mock whisper, leaning close to Marigold and pretending it’s a secret. She giggles, looking up at him, clearly loving him a great deal already – as most children do.

“I’m not boring!” Rafe growls, glaring at Jesse. Then he spins back to mom and me. “Wait, I’m not boring, right?”

I just grimace, making his eyes fly wide.

“You’re thrilling, Meatball,” mom says, handing me my flute and lifting hers towards him. “But it’s Ariel’s day today. To our little trouble, and the little teeny double trouble that’s going to be here in six months!”

“To double trouble!” Jesse says, laughing and raising his glass.

“I’m interesting,” Rafe grumbles, still glaring at all of us even as he raises his glass. Marigold puts her hands up too, even without a drink, and we all laugh, lifting our glasses towards her and then to me in celebration.

I sigh, shaking my head, still not believing that any of it’s real as I lift my glass to my lips –

But as soon as I take a sip, I sputter it out.

“Sparkling cider!?” I gasp, spinning my head to glare at my mother.

“You are with child, Ariel Sinclair,” mom says, raising her eyebrows at me.

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“I’m like barely with child! Oh, come on, a sip in celebration isn’t going to hurt them!”

“Mommy wants her liquor,” Jesse whispers to Marigold, his eyes wide with pretend worry. Goldie’s mouth circles into an anxious little ‘o’ as she turns her gaze to me.

“Nope!” mom says, absurdly cheerful. “None! And no caffeine either – you’ve got to be healthy, Ari –“

“No coffee!?” I squeak, horrified. Rafe grins at me, delighting in my agony as I slump dramatically back against my chair. “I’ll never make it. I’m not prepared for this.’

“You’ll be fine, cupcake,” mom coos, petting my hair back from my forehead. “We’ll get you some nice herbal tea.”

I groan and then hold my glass out towards Marigold. “Here, Goldie, this is for you. You like apple juice, right?”

Her eyes flare with interest and Marigold hops off the couch, trotting over to me, her hands reaching for the glass. We all watch with interest as she takes her first sip of the drink, her eyes opening wide with joy as the liquid hits her tongue.

I laugh, gathering my little girl up into my lap for a cuddle as she takes sip after sip of the drink, clearly enjoying it even though she doesn’t quite know what to do about the bubbles.

“When you going to break it to her that she’s going to get some siblings?” Rafe asks, grinning, leaning forward to peer at his new niece.

“I think you just did you idiot,” I say, laughing a little and petting Goldie’s hair even as I glare at my brother. “She’s right here. She listens to everything.”

“Oh, she doesn’t know what siblings means,” Rafe says, waving a dismissive hand and taking a drink of his champagne. “Siblings,” Marigold murmurs between sips, smiling down at the glass, proving us both right. I grin, watching her.

“I guess Jacks and I will do our best to break it to her whenever he gets out of there,” I sigh, turning to look at the door to my parents’ bedroom, anxiety running through me. I mean, I know that dad isn’t going to do anything horrible, but still...Jacks has been through a lot lately. I just hope dad goes easy on him with whatever it is he wants to say.

“Oh, he’ll be fine,” mom says on a happy sigh. “And in the meantime, I get my baby girl all to myself without Jackson being all Alpha and possessive. Come on, trouble, let’s do that health scan so I can ensure you’re fit to carry my grandchildren.”

“Okay,” I say, shifting in my seat to lean closer to my mom, smiling a little as her warm lavender light begins to spill all over

me.

Jackson walks to the center of the large bedroom before he turns toward the Alpha King, straightening his shoulders and slipping his hands into his pockets. His wolf stands steady in his soul, his snout low to the ground, watching, wary.

Because as much as Jackson's pretty sure the King means him no harm...Jackson is well aware that he did just accidentally impregnate the nation's eldest Princess. Second in line to the throne. And that...there might be consequences for that.

"Well?" Dominic Sinclair asks, prowling after Jackson and stopping about three feet away, the two Alphas squaring off, power and dominance radiating from each of them. "Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

Jackson goes a bit still, dread coiling in him. Because...god damn it, Dominic wants words? Words are the thing he's least good at. Jackson narrows his eyes, a little confused. "Sir...should I have something to say?"

Dominic stares at Jackson for a second before his face breaks into a smile. "Nah, it's okay, Jackson. You can relax. I'm just putting you through your paces a bit for fun. It's not every day that your daughter gets pregnant and you get the opportunity to scare the living daylights out of her mate."

Jackson exhales a long sigh, letting his shoulders relax, his head hang a bit.

Dominic laughs, stepping forward to clap a hand on his shoulder.

"Consider me paced, sir," Jackson murmurs, raising a hand to rub at the bridge of his nose for a moment. Then he drops his hand and raises his head, meeting the King's eyes. "You're not angry with us? With... me?"

"You're a good kid, Jackson," Dominic says, giving his shoulder a squeeze. "I'm not angry with you. You've demonstrated yourself to be a strong and faithful mate to my daughter, dedicated to her happiness and safety. And beyond that, you're a good addition to the family. I can't ask for more than that. There's nothing wrong, ever, with two people who are so clearly dedicated to each other bringing a child into the world."

Jackson nods slowly, a little frown taking his mouth because... "Well, then why the private chat?"

"Because," Dominic says, patting his shoulder once more before dropping his hand to his side. "You're good to Ariel, and good for her. But I want to see you do right by her."

Jackson raises his eyebrows, honestly surprised. "Am I...not doing right by her?"

Dominic smirks at Jackson, waiting for him to put the pieces together.

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The King and the Alpha stand in silence, staring at each other.

Jackson breaks first.

“Please, Dominic,” Jackson says, laughing a little desperate laugh, turning a palm over in a plea for mercy. “I – I don’t get it. Please tell me what I’m doing wrong – I’ll fix it, immediately I’ll fix it.”

Dominic bursts into another grin, shaking his head at the poor young man who is so talented in so many ways, and so naïve in others. “You’re mated to a public figure, Jackson. I’d like to see you make things official with Ariel – claim her. Publicly. As your mate.”

Jackson just blinks at the King and then leans forward, confused. “But she is my mate,” he says softly, narrowing his eyes. “Didn’t I didn’t I do that? She’s got the mark...” he gestures unnecessarily to his own neck.

“She’s your mate, and we all know that,” Dominic says, nodding. But then he raises a hand, pointing it to Ella’s bedstand.” But to the rest of the world you’re the Mystery Hunk. And everyone in the country thinks my daughter is mated to the tragically unfaithful Luca Grant. It will thus be very scandalous when, in six months, she gives birth to two pups who look particularly...hunky.”

Jackson groans, covering his face with his hands, hating to the ends of him that Dominic Sinclair knows about the whole mystery hunk’ thing. Dominic laughs again, slipping an arm around Jackson’s shoulders and leading him across the room, through the door of the closet, and then over to the mini bar that Ella keeps in there.

“So, what do I do?” Jackson asks with a sigh, accepting the very small dram of whiskey that Dominic pours for him.

“I’d like you to consider having a mating ceremony,” Dominic says, pouring a second drink for himself and leaning against the minibar. He takes a sip of his drink as he studies his daughter’s mate. “So that the world can see and acknowledge you as Ariel’s choice. A member of the royal family. The father of her children. Public, official.”

Jackson nods slowly, looking down into his drink. Anxiety rolls in him as he does. And it’s not – at all – that he would mind having a ceremony with Ariel in front of friends and family. That might actually be nice. It’s just...the whole ‘before the whole nation’ thing. He’s always been very careful, very private.

But now...

"You already chose this, Jackson," Dominic says softly. "Like her mother, Ariel shines like the sun. People are drawn to her, interested in her. She'll always be a celebrity. You knew all of that when you marked her. Clearly, you had time to walk away if that was too much. And clearly, there were others who were willing to take the spot."

Jackson sighs, a little ashamed of himself for hesitating, and again raises his eyes to Dominic's. "I know. I'm sorry, I agree. And I'm not hesitating – not really. I'm just...it's been a lot to adjust to before nine in the morning."

"That I understand," Dominic says, moving closer to Jackson so that they stand side-by-side, their shoulders touching.

They stand like that for a long few moments, Jackson taking some time to gather his thoughts and feelings, Dominic letting him have the time. Dominic smiles as Jackson adjusts, liking the boy a great deal, especially for his Ariel – his first little girl. Strong, steady, willing, adoring. It's what he would have picked, if he'd had a choice.

Dominic raises his eyes to the ceiling for a moment, sending a little prayer of thanks to the Goddess for this blessing, this good match for his little girl. And then for the two little babies, new additions to a family for them all to love.

A blessing, truly. All of it.

"Okay, so, what do I do?" Jackson asks, straightening his shoulders and looking towards the door, clearly ready now after a few minutes of contemplating. "Do we just...go to the Goddess's Temple and have the ceremony? Or..."

Dominic laughs, wrapping a hand around Jackson's elbow to hold him back, well aware that the kid would march Ariel down to the Temple right now if it's what was right. "Don't worry about the ceremony just now, Jacks. Ella will handle all of that, after all. She'd kill you if you didn't let her throw Ariel some big elaborate ceremony."

Jackson pauses and then nods, understanding that. He turns back to Dominic and raises his eyebrows, a question still there about what the hell to do next.

"Well, you should probably ask Ariel," Dominic says with a smile. "It's usually tradition. Though...I think I personally skipped that step when it came to Ella, so if you want to surprise her, there's some precedent for that."

"No," Jackson says, instantly. "I don't like surprises. I'll ask her. But...if there's time? Maybe I can do it in my own way? Not like... right now, in the living room?"

Dominic nods, letting him know that that would be all right – perfectly fine. “Don’t wait too long. Ella can’t keep ceremony planning a secret for any extended time. It will kill her.”

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Jackson grins.

“Are you ready for all of this?” Dominic asks, his eyebrows knitting together with worry.

Jackson’s smile falls. “Ready for what?”

“For...this,” Dominic says, waving around to the ridiculous closet and all that it implies. “Fatherhood to three kids. A life as a member of the Royal family, a national figure, a political entity unto yourself. The Princess’s consort. As the father to Princes and Princesses. It is...not a simple life, Jackson.”

Jackson clenches his jaw and looks down into his drink, truly considering it. Inwardly Dominic’s powerful wolf shakes out his fur, quite pleased with his new son-in-law, pleased that he takes the time to consider the question instead of just blurting out whatever it is he thinks Dominic wants to hear.

“I’m ready for it,” Jackson says quietly. “Or, if there are ways that I’m not...I know she’ll help me. If this is what life with Ariel and these children is, then I’m ready for it.”

“Good man,” Dominic says, putting his drink down and opening his arms to Jackson. Jackson goes a bit still, not knowing what to do, which just makes Dominic laugh as he steps forward and wraps Jackson up in a hug.

Jackson’s eyes fly wide as Dominic presses a kiss to the side of his head because...he’s never, ever had a mark of affection like that from another man. From a father figure, at that.

“I’m proud to have you as the father of my grandchildren,” Dominic murmurs, stepping back and keeping a hand cupped around the back of Jackson’s head. “We love you, kid. I love you. We’re so pleased to have you as part of the family. We’ll help you however we can.”

Jackson clears his throat and swallows hard, looking down into his drink, at once incredibly pleased at the words and simultaneously remarkably embarrassed at the tears that line his eyes.

Dominic just smiles, missing nothing, and pats Jacks on the back. "Come on, let's go back out there," he says on a sigh, guiding Jackson back towards the door. "Ella's probably torturing Ariel. Making her eat a vegetable for the sake of the children."

"Ariel hates vegetables," Jackson murmurs, still a little dazed.

"Don't I know it," Dominic says on a sigh.

"Momm," I groan, holding a hand up and leaning away from her. "I don't want more pineapple – stop trying to force feed me!"

"It's for the babies!" mom snaps, mock-angry, laughing as she leans closer to me with a big piece of pineapple stabbed on the end of a fork. I snarl and push her hand away just as a grape hits my head. I gasp and spin to glare at Jesse, who throws another.

"This, too, is for the children," Jesse says, grinning like the demon he is, pulling another off the stem and winding back his arm. Rafe and Marigold laugh, Goldie reaching for the grapes in Jesse's hands, wanting to join in.

We all quiet down and go a bit still as the bedroom door opens again, turning our worried eyes on Jackson and dad as they come out.

"Dad!" Marigold shouts, abandoning her quest for grapes and jumping off the couch, dashing towards her father. Jackson's face breaks into a smile as he bends down and scoops the little girl high up into his arms. She laughs and pats at his face with her hands, grinning at him, clearly delighted.

"Glad to see you're in one piece, Jacks," Rafe says, leaning back against the couch.

Jackson just smiles at my brother and then turns his eyes to me, his gaze warm and loving and proud and happy. My face breaks into a smile so big my cheeks ache.

"Okay, I've waited long enough!" Mom says, waving her speared pineapple victoriously over her head. "Now that you're both here are you finally going to put me out of my misery and just tell me already? Please, please don't be withholding and make us wait for the birth in the name of some kind of horrible surprise -"

"Wait, what?" Jackson asks, his face twisting with confusion as he moves to me and perches on the edge of my armchair, his hand moving to my back, starting to move in slow and steady circles.

"Don't you toy with me, son-in-law," mom snarls, narrowing her eyes and pointing the pineapple at his face. "Information! Now!"

“What are you talking about, Ella?” dad asks, laughing at her and stepping close, wrapping one arm around her waist from behind as his other hand reaches up and curls around her wrist, forcing her to lower her weapon.

“They’re being cruel, Dominic!” mom whines, looking up at him all pouty, making me laugh. “They’re keeping the babies’ genders secret!”

I gasp, my eyes flying wide because I didn’t even think of that!

God, what kind of mother am I, that I didn’t even think to consider whether I’m having boys or girls or one of each!?