

# The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 661

“Oh my god!” I gasp, my hands flying to my mouth. “I didn’t even think -“

“Tell me!” mom moans, leaning back against dad, pressing her eyes shut like she’s very pained. “I have to go shopping! I have to know if I’m buying little tiny dresses or tuxedos!” Rafe and Jesse laugh at mom. Dad presses a kiss to her hair, smiling down at her antics.

I just whip my head up to stare at Jacks in shock.

“Go on then,” Jacks says, smiling at me and lifting his chin towards mom. “Put her out of her misery.”

“What are you talking about?” I whisper.

He frowns at me. “What are you talking about?”

“Jackson, I don’t know if the babies are boys or girls -”

“You don’t?” he asks, his face twisting in confusion. Marigold looks up at him, studies his expression for a second, and then looks down at me, her face twisting just like his. I pause for a second, momentarily distracted by how amazing it is that they just look exactly the same -

But then my eyes fly wide and my hand whips out, smacking him on the arm. “Wait, you do!?”

“Of course I know!” Jackson says, laughing and shaking his head at me. “I knew instantly, from the first second that I became aware of the bonds -”

“Well then why don’t I know!?” I shriek, staring at him and then whipping my head around to stare at the rest of my family, who all grin at me. “Do you all know!?”

“Of course we don’t know, Ari,” Rafe says on a sigh. “They’re your kids, your bonds. But mom and dad always knew immediately when they figured out they were pregnant.”

“Not true,” mom says, pointing a finger at Rafe. “I didn’t know yours, because I didn’t know I was a wolf, and your dad had to

“Um, I think I need this to be about me right now!” I interrupt, rather shrill.

Mom just laughs and turns her face back to me, tilting her head to the side a bit. “It’s not hard, baby. Just...look closely at them. You’re not doing anything wrong – you were just distracted and didn’t know what to look for.” 1

I feel everyone’s eyes on me as I exhale slowly and turn my attention inward to the two shiny new bonds in my soul, my wolf sitting proudly between them, her nose held high and her tongue lolling with happiness. I look a little closer, my mouth pursing tight, inspecting, trying to see...

But then I sense it, immediately. And I’m absolutely shocked I didn’t notice it before.

I gasp, my eyes flying open, my head spinning up to stare at Jackson.

“Figured it out?” he murmurs, grinning widely at me, stroking a hand over my hair.

“Girls,” I whisper, awed, one of my hands drifting to my stomach and pressing there – to where my precious little daughters are growing. “They’re girls!”

Mom squeals with joy, turning to face dad and bursting into tears.

Rafe and Jesse let out shouts of joy, both of them jumping up off the couch and giving each other big hugs. But I just stare at Jackson, tears coming to my own eyes, completely awed and overwhelmed and stunned for what feels like the tenth time today.

“Three daughters,” Jackson murmurs, smirking at me and then leaning down to press a kiss to my mouth. “A year ago I didn’t know any girls, and now I’ve got four all of my own.”

I laugh a little, the sound shaky, and then reach up to wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him closer for a moment, wanting the steady reality of him.

Three daughters. Jackson and I – we’ve got three daughters now.

God, but that’s fantastic.

Heavens, but they’re going to run us ragged. And I’m going to love every second of it.

“I can’t wait to teach them how to snipe,” I whisper into my mate’s ear.

He laughs, pulling back enough that I can see him shake his head, even as he smiles at me.

Further congratulations go around then, with everyone hugging me and each other, celebrating the new addition to our family. Mark comes in from wherever his new bedroom is and it all starts again – the shock, the tears, the surprise, the wonder. And even as I laugh and bask in the joy of this surprising morning...

I think about Juniper. And I wish, desperately, that she was here. She should know, of course, that she's got her first niece in Marigold. And that two more are on the way.

"We'll tell her," Jackson murmurs, sensing the direction of my thoughts and stroking my hair with his broad palm. "We'll go there and tell her."

"What?" I ask, my eyes going wide as I stare at Jacks. "How - how will we do that?"

Jackson smirks and lifts his chin towards Jesse. "He's got it all worked out."

I spin my head to stare at my cousin, appalled. "What are we waiting for!?"

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"A calm moment, Ari," Jesse says, flopping back down on the couch as Rafe gets Mark a glass of champagne. "If we could have a single day without a baby announcement or a world-shattering revelation, I'd be able to take a deep breath and arrange it."

I snarl at him, conceding the point, but narrowing my eyes. "Tonight," I snap, pointing a finger at him. "Whatever you have planned, we're doing it tonight."

Jesse raises his champagne flute to me and nods, giving me his silent promise.

Rafe grins at me as he returns to the couch, letting out a happy, content sigh as he and Mark sit down next to each other, each sipping their champagne.

"Don't get comfortable," dad says from his spot in the center of the room, still standing with his arms around mom. Mom's eyes are a bit vague and distant. I grin, because I know that mentally she's shopping - planning out all the things she's going to buy for the girls. Dad snaps his fingers at Rafe and smirks at him. "Just because we have good family news doesn't mean we don't have a job to do."

"What?" I ask, my smile falling a little bit, looking around at everyone as Jackson places a steady hand on my back, warm and supportive.

I just look up at him, completely confused - why does everyone know something that I don't?

"An all-day meeting about Community stuff," Jackson says, looking down into my face. "I'm sorry - I meant to mention it last night and it slipped my mind."

“Yeah, did you think we just came at dawn all dressed and ready to hang out with you, Ari?” Jesse asks, defying my father and lounging further on the couch.

“Yes, of course I did,” I say, blinking innocently at him. My cousin grins at me, getting my sense of humor as he always does. “Come on, you lazy things,” dad says, snapping his fingers at the boys. “Leave Ella to force-feed your sister health foods, we’ve got a meeting.”

“I can’t come!?” I gasp, desperately jealous and not quite sure why I’m being left out.

“Someone has to watch your child, Ariel,” Jesse says, rolling his eyes at me as he sighs and gets to his feet. “So, unless you want Jackson to sit it out -”

“Oh,” I say, suddenly completely understanding. Yes – child care. One of us has to do that now.

I reach for our little girl immediately, my stomach twisting with delight when Marigold immediately reaches for me, coming willingly into my lap.

“But...” I say, looking around with a frown even as I settle Goldie in my lap. “Wait, what’s going on? What are you talking about in the meeting?”

“Coordinating the assault on the North,” Jackson says, his hand moving soothingly over my back. “And just how much the Academy is going to be involved in supporting those efforts. Apparently, the Cadets are eager to see more action, but the Captain and Roger have hesitations.”

“Oh,” I say, my face twisting to the side as I consider this. I look at my mom. “Well, I should probably be part of that. Will you take Goldie today?”

Mom goes a bit still, studying me. “Of course I’d be happy to take Marigold, Ariel, but...”

I go still too, narrowing my eyes a bit. Because...why is there a hesitation there?

The room goes quiet.

I slowly turn my head, looking around at everyone in the room. “What?” I ask, frowning. “What’s wrong?”

“Ariel, why do you need to go?” Mark asks, leaning forward towards me, the only one not giving me a worried look.

“I mean, so I can be in on the conversation about how much the Academy is going to be involved,” I say, straightening my shoulders. “I mean, I’m going to want to help with that, and as the only sniping cadet...”

My words fade off as Rafe grimaces and my family starts to look around at each other, worried and pitying.

“What!?” I ask, my heart starting to pound now. “What’s going on?”

“Ariel...” dad says, his voice a little sad. “I mean, the conversation was one thing when it was a question of whether Jackson could attend the Academy with a child...”

My eyes widen as I start to figure out where they’re going with this.

“Baby,” mom says, her voice sad for me. “Your priorities are going to change – they almost have to now -‘

“No.” I growl, standing up, glaring around at all of them, clutching Marigold to my chest. “Absolutely not. I’m going back to school!”

“It’s far too dangerous, Ariel,” dad says, his voice cold and stern.

“I can protect myself,” I growl, holding out a flat palm and conjuring my blue fire there. Marigold gasps when she sees it for the first time, fascinated.

Still, my dad just shakes his head, taking a step away from mom and crossing his arms across his chest.

I raise my chin, ready for this fight.

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“Ariel,” dad says, his voice low with warning. Rafe, Mark, and Jesse sit very quiet on the couch, looking between us.

But I ignore all of them, shifting my eyes to mom. “And what about everything you were saying this morning,” I snap, vanishing my flame away. “About being able to have it all, to not have to limit myself simply because I’m pregnant?” “Baby, I meant every word of that,” mom says, pressing her hands to her heart, her eyes going wide. “But you have to acknowledge the reality that your life is different now – your life is going to change in a very physical way. And if your first pregnancy is anything like mine, you may need a great deal of bed rest! Why don’t you simply...delay your education until the girls are born? Take a minute to -”

“If I stop now,” I say, my voice getting creaky with sadness and worry, “I won’t go back – how many women does this happen to? Who say ‘oh I’m going to just take a step away for a moment,’ and then they never go back? Why not do it now!? Just finish while I’m pregnant and the babies are young enough to sleep most of the day -”

“You’re underestimating how much care and dedication an infant needs, Ariel,” dad says, his voice stern but full of feeling. Let alone two of them. The Academy is a dangerous place – you were injured and nearly died there several times -”

”

“So, I won’t do any of the physical stuff!” I blurt out, desperate. “I’ll – I’ll just do the book learning!” I hesitate for a second. ” And the sniping!”

“Yes, always a great idea to bring the infant children around the gigantic gun,” Rafe says, going for some humor to lighten the situation. I spin my head to glare at him and he grimaces, putting his hands up in apology.

“Ariel, when the world finds out about your pregnancy you’re immediately going to be a target for kidnapping and ransom,” dad says. “You’ll be much better guarded here -”

“I’ve got magic now to defend myself!” I snap out. “And! I’ll have three huge powerful magical Alphas at my side!” I look around at Rafe and Jesse and Jackson. All of the air and fury goes out of me, though, when my eyes fall on Jackson and I see him looking up at me with a great deal of sadness.

I exhale all my breath in one great gush and step away from him, feeling completely betrayed. Because...the way he’s looking

at me...

“What?” I whisper, staring at my mate who so, so clearly agrees with my dad and everyone else in the room. Who doesn’t want me to go back to the Academy anymore. “Are you...serious?”

“Ariel,” Jackson says softly, his voice terribly sad, reaching a hand for me.

“Even you want me to back off, Jackson!?”

“Tiny,” he says, his voice breaking, shaking his head at me as he stands and steps close. “I – I just want you to be safe, I want you all to be safe. And you nearly died over and over again at the Academy. I could barely protect you – and so frequently I couldn’t. And now that I have four?” He shakes his head, looking at me with such pleading in his eyes, wanting me to understand.

But I just drop my gaze to the floor, not wanting him to see my tears in my eyes.

I feel just...so...defeated. Like everyone is against me and no one understands that I can do this. That I don't want to give up everything I've worked so hard for just because the Goddess decided it was time for me to get knocked up.

It's just...so completely unfair.

"I can't believe none of you believe in me," I whisper, working hard to keep my tears from falling, not wanting Marigold to see them.

"It's not like that, Ariel," mom says softly, her voice trembling. Jackson reaches out and puts a hand on my shoulder, his fingers tightening, urging me to come closer. But I shake my head and step away, not wanting that kind of comfort right now. Because if I accept the comfort, it means I've given in.

And I'm not ready to do that yet.

I sniff hard and raise my chin, shaking my hair back over my shoulders, putting on my best Princess smile and aiming it at my daughter. "Come on, Goldie. I've been kicked out of any position of military authority, so I've got some free time. Let's go hang out and eat chocolate."

She looks at me for a moment, I think a bit worried, but then she nods and gives me a tiny smile in return.

Jackson sighs behind me as I start to walk away, heading for the hallway and my bedroom beyond.

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"Ariel," my mom calls after me. "Please, come and talk to us - "

"It's time for the meeting anyway, Ella," dad murmurs. "She needs space to think and we don't have any more time to talk.'

As I head into the darkness of the hall Jackson's voice appears in my mind, soft and apologetic.

Do you want me to come and talk to you? Please - I'm having trouble understanding what's best right now.

I sigh, holding Goldie closer, and send Jackson a little pulse of love down our bond. Because I'm angry and frustrated and feel betrayed, but he's still my mate, and he's just expressing his opinion on what he thinks will be best for our tiny family. His first instinct, after all, is to protect us.

No, I respond back to Jackson, mind-to-mind, doing my best to sound cheerful and not be curt. You go...have your meeting. It's important. I'll just...take care of Marigold.

I can almost feel Jackson sigh as I open the door to the room and step inside, because he's well aware that we've just fallen into some gendered roles that we've never, ever subscribed to before. And he knows I'm not happy about it.

But I grin at Goldie and wrinkle my nose at her, not wanting her to see or feel any of it. Because the opportunity for an afternoon alone with my daughter – that's never a bad thing, is it?

“Should we order up a big breakfast, Golds?” I whisper, conspiratorial. “All the good stuff, nothing healthy?”

She beams at me and nods eagerly. I laugh, hoisting my daughter higher on my hip and heading over to the intercom to place our order.

Marigold and I have a very nearly perfect day together. We eat a big breakfast with chocolate-chip pancakes and a side of gummy worms. Then we have more bath time, which she loves, and for the first time I get to pick out an outfit with my little girl and dress her up for her day, an experience that...really demonstrates why my mom loves shopping so much.

Then we go and spend a long, leisurely day in the park with a picnic lunch. Mark comes too, which means our body guards can stand further back, and my baby brother keeps me laughing all day with his high spirits and silly sense of humor. He shows Marigold all of the miniature houses he made and hung for the squirrels, all connected with an intricate series of tiny wooden bridges that delight her.

And as perfect as the day is, the entire time is run through with a dreadful feeling in my soul that...everything has changed and is beyond my control now. That in falling pregnant I've lost authority over my life, just when I'd honestly felt like I'd finally gained it. My wolf presses herself warm against my heart, giving me a sad little howl in support, letting me know that she feels it too and encouraging me not to give up hope.

When we get back to the palace in the evening the family apartments are quiet, suggesting that the business with the Community is continuing.

Mark looks at me anxiously, but also glances at the door.

“Oh, go on,” I say, laughing a little and giving him a shove on the shoulder with my free hand, the other supporting Marigold as she drowses against my shoulder. “You don’t have to babysit me.”

“I can though,” Marks says, shrugging sympathetically. “I love you, Ari. I don’t want to leave you alone if you’re all upset.”

“I’m not alone though, right?” I say, smiling at my little girl who yawns and snuggles closer to me.

“Love you, sis,” Mark says, stepping close and pressing a kiss to my cheek.

I tell Mark that I love him too and then laugh and give him another shove away, sending him off to do...well, whatever it is that Mark does. Then I take Goldie into my room, settling her down in her bed for a little nap before dinner.

When the door to my room finally opens again, the sun has long gone down.

Marigold and I are cuddled up in the window seat, a soft blanket wrapped around both of us, reading one of the picture books that Jesse borrowed from Seraphina.

“Dad!” Marigold whispers, turning her head towards him, a big smile spreading across her face.

Jackson can’t help his returning smile, even if the rest of his face and his stance are very serious. He sighs, closing the door and leaning back against it, taking a moment to just look at us.

“Hey, Jacks,” I say softly, reaching a hand out for him, my heart filling at the sight of my gorgeous sweetheart mate, all mine. “Come see us.”

Jackson sighs and pushes himself up from the door, crossing the room to me.

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I scootch forward on the window seat, making room behind me. Jackson takes a moment to dip low, pressing a kiss to Marigold’s cheek and then to her hair, telling her how much he missed her and how glad he is to see her. The little girl laughs, beaming up at her father, and I can feel both of our hearts wrench at how incredibly precious she is.

Then Jackson sighs and slips in behind me, his back against the wall, pulling me back so that my back rests against him.

“Here, Goldie,” I whisper, placing the picture book firmly in her lap. “You play with this.”

She looks down at the book for a moment before her eyes stray to the collection of little plastic ponies that Seraphina gave to her. I laugh and give her a little nudge, encouraging her to go play with those if that’s what she wants.

I cuddle close to Jackson as we watch our little girl scurry over to the toys, dropping to her knees in front of them and beginning to play.

“How are you?” Jackson murmurs, his voice heavy and low, his mouth close to my ear.

“I’m okay,” I reply, turning my head to gaze up at him, all tingly and warm curled up in his arms like this. “How was the meeting?”

“It was...fine,” he says with a little frown, his eyes searching my face. “It was difficult to pay attention. I kept thinking about you.”

“Very unsoldierly of you,” I say, giving him a smile, teasing.

He smirks and rests his cheek against my hair. “It was miserable. I felt horrible the whole time. I’m so sorry, Ariel.”

“Don’t be sorry, Jacks,” I whisper, letting my eyes flutter shut. “You’re just protecting your family.”

“No, I should be sorry,” he says, shaking his head. “When the exact same question was poised to me – whether or not I should continue to attend school now that I’m a father – you jumped to my defense. Not a single moment of hesitation before you were on your feet, defending my rights to continue my education. And I...completely failed you. I regret it.”

A little bit of grief coils in me there, because he’s right. But I forgive him instantly. Jackson’s had a challenging life and the past few months have asked him to grow so much. He’s doing beautifully and I love him for constantly, always stepping up to the challenge, for wanting to grow.

“Do you think it’s different?” I ask quietly. “Since like...you can leave the kids behind and go continue your education? And I’m kind of...attached to them right now?”

“I don’t know,” Jackson says, heaving a sigh. “I’m not trying to be evasive – I just...honestly do not have an answer for that, Ari. I need...a lot of books. I may not sleep again until I’ve read them all. What do you think?”

“I think that things are different,” I whisper, settling my hands on my stomach and looking down at them. “But I’m not sure I can get behind any policy that says a woman is too pregnant to continue her education. Not for me and not for any of the women in our nation. It’s not right.”

He hums, nodding, agreeing with me. “I’m sorry I didn’t think of it that way this morning.”

“I owe you an apology too,” I say quietly, looking up at him. “I’m sorry I huffed out of there and didn’t tell you to come talk to me. It wasn’t fair.”

“I think we both needed space,” he murmurs, nudging my cheek with his nose. “Emotions were high. We needed time to... figure out what we were thinking.”

I nod, agreeing with it, but still meaning the apology very much. Jacks – I only want to be fair to him. And I can be temperamental and willful. I don’t ever want him to suffer for that.

He snarls a little, playful and wanting, brushing his cheek against my hair and letting me know, down the bond, that he likes me quite temperamental and willful.

I smile, relaxing back against my mate, letting the issue settle for a moment. I send a silent request for him to tell me everything that happened in the meeting. My mate complies, giving me all the details he can, telling me about how the Academy will shift its focus from tactics appropriate for fighting against Atalaxia to those more necessary for an internal fight against the Community.

It’s complicated, of course, by the fact that they’re our people too. And further tricky because we know very little about what’s going on up there in the North. But as Jackson continues to detail the kind of training that they’ve got planned, and tells me how central espionage will be to the efforts, and reveals that volunteer units of Cadets are actually going to go north to participate in real action...

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I can’t help it. I just get incredibly jealous.

“Tell me,” Jackson urges, feeling the shift in my emotions, tightening his arms around me.

“I just want to do that,” I say, laughing a little, shaking my head, feeling petulant. “It sounds so cool, and important, and... vivid. I want to do that work, Jacks. I want to help.”

He nods, humming his understanding, letting me have the space to speak.

“I just... Jacks, I don’t know if I’m going to be a very normal kind of mom,” I say quietly, worried about it. “I don’t think I can do it.”

“What’s a normal mom?” Jackson asks, genuinely curious.

“Like my mom,” I say quietly. “Dedicated to raising the kids and keeping the family together. Letting the man in the house take charge.”

“She does more than that.”

“I know,” I say on a sigh. “But...mom and dad fall into some really normal gender roles. It works for them. Family has always come first for mom she loves it.”

“You don’t think you’ll love it?”

“I think I will,” I say quietly, looking out the window at our vast and beautiful country. “But I love other things too. I think I’m more like my dad. I think I want and need to have more balance. Are you okay with that?”

“Of course I’m okay with that.” Jackson gives me a warm little nudge with his nose, letting me know that he means it. “If it helps, I don’t think I’m going to be a normal dad either. Mostly because I have no idea what that entails.”

I laugh, turning to him, smiling up into his face. “You’re going to do great, Jacks.”

“So are you, Ariel.”

I cuddle closer, pressing a kiss to his jaw.

“What I do know is that you and I are going to do everything we can to love and raise these girls,” Jackson murmurs. “And...I don’t have any knowledge to back this up with, but I think that’s all that really matters. And I think they’ll be proud to have a badass warrior mom.”

“And if they don’t?” I ask, a little smile playing at my lips.

“Then I’ll...punish them...” Jackson murmurs, his voice clearly belying the fact that he has no idea what he’s talking about. Or what that punishment would even look like. Or how he’d ever actually have the heart to enact that threat.

I burst out laughing and Jackson snarls, snatching me close, pressing me to him and letting me feel precisely how much I’m loved. Which is a great deal. Marigold looks over at us at the noise and smiles, two little pony toys clutched in her hands.

“We’re going to be great at it,” Jackson whispers, kissing my temple. “I can just feel it.”

“Yeah,” I say on a sigh, resting against him. “We are, aren’t we?”

He hums, confidence running through him alongside his very real worry that we have no idea what we’re doing. But the confidence wins. We’re going to figure it out and love the hell out of our kids.

“Only question is,” Jackson says. “What do we do now?”

“What do you want to do?” I whisper, turning my head to look at him.

He shakes his head at me. “You lead on this, Ariel. What do you want?”

My lip quivers a bit as I look up at him, so touched in his faith in me. “I want to go to school,” I whisper.

Slowly, his lips break into a smile. And then I shout with surprise as Jackson moves fast, hoisting me up into his arms and standing all in one big movement. Marigold squeaks as I burst into laughter, shaking my head at my mate as I secure my arms around his neck. “What on earth are you doing!?”

“Taking you to school!” he booms out, laughing and striding for the closet. “Come on, do you have any cadet uniforms in here?”

I laugh harder, shaking my head at him, spilling out protests that it’s ridiculous and we have time and there’s no rush.

But he pauses and grins at me, eager and kind. “If you’ve decided, Ariel...why wait?”

I bite my lip, going still in my mate’s arms, and then burst into a wild grin. “Let’s do it!”

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Marigold, perched high on Jackson’s arm, looks around the train station with wide eyes as she munches on a cookie. I bite my lip for a moment, watching her, anxious that she’ll be anxious. After all, her life has already involved so much change...

“She’s fine,” Jackson murmurs, smirking down at me for a moment before turning his eyes back to our daughter. “She’s just... interested. No fear. Right, Goldie-girl?” He

presses a kiss to her cheek and Marigold gives a quick nod, not looking at him, instead staring out at all the interesting sights.

“Brave girl,” I murmur, reaching up to stroke a hand over her hair. “I wish I had a bond and could feel all that.”

Jackson just smiles at me, wishing I did too.

“So, which one of these are we taking?” he asks, moving his eyes from mine and raising his chin at the line of trains resting at their platforms. It’s very late in the evening and hardly anyone is around. “No royal car today, huh?”

“Nope,” I say on a sigh, adjusting my backpack, which is mostly full of stuff for Marigold. After all, all Jackson and I really need are the cadet uniforms we’ve already changed into. I grimace a little, looking at the line of trains, because while we checked the schedule and ensured that one would be going past the Academy tonight... I honestly can’t tell which one it is.

God damn it, I should have paid more attention the first time we ran away to the Academy. Rafe and Jesse did all the work. “Lost?” A voice calls out behind us and my eyes go wide.

I inhale sharply as I spin, hardly believing –

Because how!? How did he know!?

Jesse grins at me, his hand slipped casually into his pockets as he strolls over to us in his own cadet uniform, Midnight trotting at his side to keep up.

“Jess!” I gasp, dashing for him and throwing my arms around his neck. Jesse laughs and hugs me back. “What – what are you doing here!?”

“Ariel, did you think I’d let you run off to the academy without me?”

“How’d you know I was doing that!?”

He laughs again, pulling back a little to shake his head at me. “I know you, stubborn little trouble brat. And I saw him looking all mournful all day,” he says, nodding his head towards Jackson. “So, I knew he was going to give you whatever you wanted. And I knew mom and dad cautioning against you going to school was just going to make you want to do it even harder. So,” he shrugs. “I figured best bet was to show up here with my pet demon in tow,” he nods to the side at Mids, “and see if you’d let me in on the plan.”

“Hey!” Midnight growls, snapping her hands to her hips.

I bite my lip, looking around Jesse’s side, looking for Rafe, but...

“It’s just me,” Jesse murmurs with a sad little twist to his lips. “Don’t be mad at him. He’s got his own things to worry about.”

I nod, tucking away any little sadness that I might have and beaming at my cousin instead. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

“Aw,” Midnight says, stepping towards me and frowning as she reaches out and tugs on my sleeve. “You’re all wearing matching clothes. I want some.”

“Marigold doesn’t have any,” I say, laughing and reaching for Midnight next, pulling her into a hug. “I’m so glad you’re here. I can’t wait for you to see the Academy.”

“I’ve already seen it,” she sighs, rolling her eyes even as she hugs me back. I laugh, realizing that she’s right – she certainly did see the Academy when she was spying on us for all of those weeks in secret. “But yes, I am excited to go.”

“You’re not anxious to leave your yurt?” Jackson asks, petting an affectionate hand over Midnight’s hair. I look up at him, smiling a little and curious about the very clear affection he has for Mids. Jackson is usually very restrained around other women – but perhaps Midnight’s childish stature and naïve tendencies make her an easier target for his affection.

“No, Jesse says no one will mess with it and we put a sign up on the door saying any pups who go in it will be cursed,” Midnight says, tilting her head back to smile up at Jackson. “Jesse says that will work because they already think I am a witch. And that I can have a nice big bed at the Academy. He says I can have Rafe’s.”

I grin, thinking that my possessive brother might have something to say about that.

“Midnight,” Marigold whispers, smiling widely at Jesse’s mate even as she lays her sleepy head down against Jackson’s shoulder.

“Hello, Golden One,” Midnight says, grinning at Marigold, making me laugh at the nickname. “I am your elder, which means I am in charge and you have to respect me. You good with that?”

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Marigold laughs a little but just nods.

“Are we doing this?” Jesse says, glancing up at the clock that looms large over the entire station. “We don’t have a ton of time.”

Jackson looks at me and arches a brow. I laugh and nod, grinning at our little party. “Let’s go!”

The next morning I wake up blissfully happy to be back in my nook. My mouth opens in a little yawn and I nuzzle closer to my mate’s naked chest, all warm and cozy. I sigh, content, and reach out a hand that I brush over Marigold’s soft head. She’s curled up at Jackson’s side, likewise nuzzled close, breathing deeply as she continues to sleep.

I bite my lip against a little squeal as I look at her as, half asleep, Jackson lifts a hand to my back, softly stroking up and down against my nightshirt.

I turn my head, pressing a kiss to his chest before I sit up a little, peering through the open curtain at Jesse and Rafe’s beds, a form curled up in each, though Midnight’s tiny body is barely visible amongst all of Rafe’s bedding.

Last night was exhausting but completely worth it as the five of us stowed away in a box car like we did before and traveled the long distance to the Academy. Marigold slept most of the time but opened her little eyes to look up in awe at the castle up on the cliff, staring at it with true wonder. Midnight had been all determined enthusiasm too, asking me endless questions about chemistry that I answered as best I could.

But the moment when we settled down in the nook, ready for some much-needed sleep, was definitely the best part. It’s a tight fit, after all, with three of us in my tiny little bed now. But despite my guilt at the fact that Jackson’s feet still hang off the end of the bed as they always do, I have to admit that there’s no place I’d rather be than here with my little family, all cuddled close.

I take a moment to check in my new bonds with the babies and laugh a little when I find Jackson’s wolf already there alongside my wolf, both of them sniffing at the bonds and giving them a happy little lick to say good morning. The bonds don’t respond – of course they don’t, the babies are surely too small – but still, they look...bigger this morning? More vibrant?

I grin, incredibly excited to see them grow. God, I never thought much about what it would be like to be pregnant, but I have to admit...I’m kind of loving it.

At least, until the morning sickness starts. Then I’m sure I’ll despise it all.

A yawn breaks from Jesse’s bed and I grin when I see my cousin sit up, his eyes still shut, rubbing at his brown hair. A little noise next to me makes me look down and I smile to see that Marigold’s pretty blue eyes are open, looking up at me.

“Good morning, Goldie,” I whisper, running my fingers through her hair. “How did you sleep?”

“Good,” she whispers, shutting her eyes again and blearily rubbing her face against Jackson’s side. “Breakfast?”

I laugh, thinking that she’s certainly her father’s daughter, and Jackson gives a little hum of agreement that I can feel resonating through his chest.

“Jesse’s in charge of breakfast,” I whisper to Goldie, giving her a little nudge. “Go bother him and he’ll get you some.” My little girl grins and rolls over in the bed, swinging her legs off the edge and hopping down, rushing for Jesse.

“No!” Jesse moans, throwing his blankets up over his head and cuddling back into his pillows. “I didn’t agree to childcare! I refuse feeding responsibilities!”

“Breakfast!” Marigold calls out, laughing as she jumps on his bed and starts rifling through the blankets, looking for him. “Breakfast, Jesse!”

He snarls, mock threatening, making her laugh harder. My little heart soars as I watch them play and Jackson wraps his arms around me, holding me tight, joy likewise thrumming through him.

“Come on, Goldie,” Midnight says with a yawn, sitting up in bed, her wild back curls all ruffled and standing up at odd angles. I grin, thinking she looks quite pretty as she holds out a hand towards my daughter. “Childcare is my responsibility. I will show you the magical food door in the wall – we will put a note in it and when the bell rings, there will be food!”

Marigold squeaks with excitement and jumps down from Jesse’s bed, running for her.

“This is amazing,” Jackson murmurs, laughing a little himself.

“I know,” I say on a happy sigh, turning my face to him. “Do you think – ”

But before I can get any further, an angry knock comes at the door.

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“Ut-oh,” Jesse says, turning to grin at me. “Looks like the secrets out.”

“You could look less cheerful about it,” I say, glaring at him even as I climb out of bed and move towards the door as Jackson pulls on his shirt. “It’s not your education at stake, after all.”

“Nooo, don’t forbid me my glee,” Jesse says, laughing a little as he, too, makes himself more presentable and stands up. I grin at him, knowing that he’s just teasing – that he’ll back me up no matter what.

I reach for the door handle as a second angry knock comes, but I don’t let it rattle me, instead glancing over at Midnight and Marigold. Pleased to see that they’re undisturbed and continuing their breakfast order, I take a deep breath and pull open the door.

The Captain glares down at me, livid.

“Oh hey, Captain!” I say, giving him my best Princess smile and tucking my hands innocently behind my back. “It’s so nice to see you again – how’ve you been!?”

“Sinclair,” he growls, taking an angry step forward to loom over me. He opens his mouth to begin what I’m sure is a long and fervid lecture about not letting girls into the castle.

But then he suddenly goes very still, staring at me, his eyes going wide as his mouth falls open.

And I just grin, knowing that he probably just caught a whiff of my scent.

I hear and feel Jackson coming to stand behind me, steady and strong, my Alpha ready to protect me and our two little baby girls against anything the Captain might say or do.

“Captain,” Jackson says, his voice rumbling low with warning. “Good morning. Would you like to come in?”

“Hi!” Jesse calls, a little too cheerful.

I suppress a grin and step back from the door, waving a hand to invite the Captain further in.

He doesn’t move, just continues to stare at me. “You’re...you’re...”

“Knocked up!” Jesse supplies, gleeful.

“Jess!” I sigh, turning to glare at him a bit.

“I mean, it’s true,” my cousin says with a shrug, grinning at me.

“Yeah well, he brought his mate,” I say, pointing over at Midnight, who puts the breakfast order into the dumbwaiter and shows Marigold how to shut the door and push the button

that will deliver her magical commands. “And she’s possessed by Darkness. So. I’m not the only one breaking the rules.”

“To be fair,” Jackson murmurs, slipping a hand around my waist and pulling me back against his chest. “I don’t actually think the Cadet handbook has any clauses that forbid Cadets from getting pregnant. So, you might be in the clear there.”

My eyebrows raise as I turn my eyes back on the Captain, indicating that my mate might have a point.

Something about this breaks the Captain out of his shock and he snarls, stepping into the room and leaving the door standing open in his rage. “This is – this is ridiculous – I will not have this kind of anarchy at my school!”

“It’s not anarchy,” Jesse murmurs, walking to the center of the room and seating himself down in his armchair. “I think you’ll find that we’re very organized.”

“Organized,” Marigold whispers, tottling over to Jesse, who scoops her up and seats her comfortably in his lap, pressing a kiss to her hair. Midnight follows, giving a happy little wave to the Captain, sitting in Rafe’s chair.

The Captain just stares at both of them in shock before his eyes quickly dash to Marigold, and then up to Jesse’s face and back. But then his head whips to Jackson, putting together the undeniable fact that the little girl is Jackson’s daughter, not Jesse’s.

“Cadets are not allowed to have children,” the Captain growls, leaning towards Jackson to glare at him. “And if they do, they are not to take residence at the Academy -”

“Well, I’ve got three now,” Jackson says with a shrug, evenly meeting the Captain’s gaze, his arm tightening around me. “And I don’t think Ariel is letting any of them go anywhere.”

The Captain just stares at him, again stunned, trying to put together the math that makes that statement make sense -

“Twins,” I whisper, grinning and pointing at my belly.

The Captain shifts his eyes to me. “We’ve made exceptions for you before, Sinclair, but this goes too far – the Academy is far too dangerous a place for a pregnant woman - ”

“I’m not pregnant!” Midnight calls, sounding far too proud of the fact. “So I can stay!” 1

The Captain whips his head to stare at her for a second before returning his eyes to me. “You are hereby disenrolled, Sinclair,” the Captain growls, still livid with me for thinking I could just show back up and everything will be fine. “We can discuss your continued

enrollment after you've..." he stumbles for the words, his eyes moving down to my belly. "Produced the children..."

I sigh, tilting my head to the side, not letting his anger and his commands ruffle me. After all, we've had time to prepare for this.

"I'm afraid that timeline isn't going to work for me, Captain," I say, heaving a little shrug. "I'll be continuing my enrollment now. We'll each have to find ways to adjust."

The Captain's face starts to redden with rage at my open defiance. "You cannot - "

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"If I'm dismissed from the Academy now," I interrupt, holding up a hand and conjuring up my blue flames, which make him take a step back in surprise. "Then the military of Moon Valley loses the opportunity to train and make use of its most powerful weapon. Which, if you ask me, is far too much of a loss when the solution is simply to make a slight adjustment to the rule book."

He snarls at me, teeth flashing. "Obviously we value your powers, Ariel, which is why I suggest you return after your... confinement. It is far too dangerous for a pregnant woman to train at the academy!"

"Eh," I say, glancing at my fire and then vanishing it away. "If I leave now I don't think I'll ever come back. I'll be far too busy caring for my children, building a home for my family, learning my place. You know," I say, giving him my prettiest smile - one that likewise shows all my teeth. "Women's work."

Jackson growls softly behind me, giving me his full support.

"That is not what I mean," the Captain growls, unhappy to be put in this position.

Another voice drawls from the door. "Then what do you mean?"

I gasp with delight, my head spinning to see my favorite professor leaning casually in the doorway. Neumann gives me a little half smile in greeting before turning his eyes back to the Captain.

"What's the problem here?" Neumann asks, the little smirk still curling his lips. "Are you presuming that pregnancy has rendered the girl unable to read?"

“Don’t speak to me like I’m a fool, Neumann,” the Captain growls, his anger growing and becoming more palpable in the room. “Obviously this has nothing to do with her intellectual capacities. It is the physical training which puts her in danger and makes us liable, not to mention the continued threat of insubordination -”

“Oh, Ariel’s talents never leaned towards the physical anyway,” Neuman says on a sigh, waving a lazy hand to dismiss the Captain’s concerns. “She’s always been crap at that.”

“Hey!” I snap, straightening up with a frown.

“Ariel, any Alpha in this room could knock you down with a flick of their finger and I refuse to be impressed simply because you can pull a trigger with moderate accuracy.”

“My accuracy is more than moderate,” I growl. To my surprise the Captain nods along with me, still glaring at Neumann.

“It doesn’t matter,” Neumann says with a sigh, waving that lazy hand at me in turn as he refocuses on the Captain. “The point is that the girl’s education plan was always individual anyway. We’ll simply keep her away from the knives. Yes?”

The Captain sighs, clearly outmatched here, and ducks his face into his palm even as he shakes it. “God damn Sinclairs,” he mutters. “I...need to talk to Roger and Dominic about this.”

I nod, accepting this, recognizing that even his willingness to talk to my dad is a victory. Neumann smirks at me and nods, silently agreeing that we’ve taken the cake on this one.

“Okay, me now!” Midnight says, jumping up from Rafe’s chair and striding over to us, her hands firmly planted on her waist. “I’m going to enroll! Please make me a uniform!”

Neumann’s face bursts into a delighted grin. “What on earth are you?” he asks, bending down a little to see her better.

The Captain groans, lifting his face from his hand. “No. Absolutely not. No little girls in the Academy – you have to go.” He points at Marigold. “That one too.”

Jesse gasps dramatically and cuddles Marigold closer. “How dare you, this is a Princess of our realm -”

“Oh, no she is not,” the Captain scoffs, folding his arms over his chest.

I bare my teeth at him, growling, and he turns to me, blinking with surprise. “What!?”

“That is my daughter, Marigold,” I say, raising my chin, quite proud. “You will take care to show her the respect she deserves.”

“Come on, Goldie,” Jesse murmurs, his big smile clearly betraying how much he’s enjoying this. “We’re too important to deign to debate your royal status.” He stands, holding her close and wandering over to the window.

“I’m still primarily interested in this creature,” Neumann murmurs, pointing at Midnight.

“No other girls,” the Captain growls, turning to glare at Neumann and Midnight in turn.

“No, you have to let me in,” Midnight says, tossing her hair back over her shoulders, prim and smug. “I’m very important. No one can do what I can do. You will let me enroll and I will study Chemistree and be a spy.”

“I said -”

“All right,” Neumann says, blatantly ignoring the Captain. “Go on, kid. Show us what you’ve got.”

Midnight grins, wicked and gleeful, and then her shadows erupt from her. I gasp, a bit shocked to see her completely fade from sight in a cloud of darkness, her edges blurring into darkness. She dashes away then to the dark corner of the room where she becomes indistinguishable from the wall.

“Fantastic,” Neumann murmurs, smiling widely, shaking his head.

“Oh god,” the Captain says, sighing heavily and looking up to the ceiling. “This is becoming a finishing school for incredibly dangerous magical girls.”

I burst into a grin, absolutely loving that idea.