

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 671

“Come back here,” Neumann calls, pointing at the ground in front of him. Midnight appears again in the corner, dismissing her shadows, and dashes back over, smiling her delight.

“Are you seriously encouraging this?” the Captain murmurs, shaking his head and heaving a big sigh.

Neuman doesn’t reply, instead narrowing his eyes at Midnight. “Are you smart?”

“Plenty smart,” she says, giving a sharp nod.

“Where were you educated?”

“My yurt.”

Neumann pauses for a moment and then moves on. “Do you have advanced chemistry and mathematics?”

“Nope!” Midnight says, tucking her hands behind her back and giving her head a firm shake. “But Ariel says she will tutor me all summer and I’ll be ready for the fall.”

“All right,” Neumann murmurs, his voice dropping low, his mouth drawing to a thin line. “Let’s quiz you, then, to see if you have the mental capacity to enroll in this school. If there are eighteen bananas and six coconuts that you need to split between a pack of baboons and another of monkeys who are at war, how do you split them up to effect piece?”

“What on earth does that have to do with her capacity for espionage?” the Captain blurts out, exasperated.

“I want to see how the girl’s mind works,” Neumann murmurs, keeping his eyes on Mids.

Midnight cocks her head to the side, her eyes squinting in thought. “I’m afraid that I need more information to solve this puzzle.”

“Such as?” Neumann asks.

“Such as....what is a coconut?” Midnight says, fastening her eyes seriously on his face. “And I need to know whether or not it can be used as a weapon.”

Neuman’s face spreads into a wide smile. “It can.”

“Then I take all the coconuts for myself, to enforce control,” she says, her mouth spreading into a wicked smile. “And all the monkeys and the baboons recognize me as their King. And I give bananas to my favorites to ensure their loyalty.”

Neumann laughs a little, clearly delighted with the girl, and then turns his head to the Captain. “I mean, if she can pass through the Candidate stage, I definitely want her.”

The Captain rolls his eyes as Midnight eagerly bites her lip. “I’ll pass!” she says, nodding, eager. “I’m sure I will! I’ll kick all their butts!”

“I look forward to watching your progress,” Neumann says, leaning forward to her with a friendly smile.

“All of this is out of order,” the Captain growls, glaring around at all of us. “We cannot have children and unenrolled girls living in the Castle – it’s an impossibility – ”

“Well, I’m actually not sure that that’s a huge problem,” Jesse calls from the window. Curious, I turn to see him with a huge smile spreading across his face.

“What?” the Captain asks, his face falling at the evidence of a new undesired surprise.

“Come here,” Jesse says with a laugh, waving us over.

Marigold, leaning towards the window, gives an excited little shout. Baffled, I glance up at Jackson, who just shrugs at me, and then together – followed by Midnight, Neumann, and the Captain – we head over to the window, all peering out together.

“Oh my god!” I gasp, my hands immediately flying to my mouth.

A moment later tears start to spring to my eyes and I spin away from the window, dashing for the door.

“Mom!” I call, running across the lawn at the base of the castle. “Mom, are you kidding me!?”

She turns, a huge smile spreading across her face, a laugh breaking from her as she sees me coming with my entourage of family and professors following behind.

“Hi baby!” she calls, waving to me.

But I barely have time to look at her, distracted instead by the four houses that are being removed from their spots on a train with the aid of several trucks and complicated machines.

“Oh my – oh my god,” I whisper, fascinated and thrilled as I stumble to her side, watching the most adorable little cottage being lowered to the flat grass. “Did you – are you...” I

bite my lip, desperately wanting one of the little houses to be for me but hesitating even to ask.

“Oh, of course it’s for you, darling,” Mom says on a laugh, her eyes crinkling at the corners as she wraps me up in a hug. I shriek with joy, hugging her back as I feel Jackson and the rest catching up with us.

“But why are there four!?” I whisper.

“Well, you didn’t think I was going to let you move to the Academy and not let me have daily access to my grand-daughters for the first year of their life,” she says, pulling back to look at me like I’m insane. “Plus, my little Goldie-girl needs her grandma too!” she says, stepping close to Jacks to press a kiss first to Marigold’s cheek and then his.

I gasp, delighted, my eyes flooded with tears. “Mom, that’s too much!”

“It’s just enough, baby,” Mom says, turning back to me and cupping my cheek in her palm as Jesse and Mids come to join us.

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“We won’t be here all the time.” A new voice surprises me and I turn, starting to cry in earnest when I see my dad come around one of the houses, Rafe at his side. “We have a country to run, after all.” He grins at me, opening an arm.

“Dad,” I croak, shaking my head and tucking myself against his side when he comes close. “Are you – are you serious with all of this?”

“It was all Rafe’s idea,” dad says, grinning over at my brother, who gives me a wink.

“Me and Jesse came up with it,” Rafe says with a laugh, tucking his hands into his pockets. I gasp again and whip my head to the side to stare at Jesse, who just laughs. “I just drew the short straw of having to convince mom and dad about it and arrange the spur-of-the-moment purchase of four ready-made homes while the rest of you got to have a fun train adventure.”

“So,” I whisper, looking back up at my dad. “This is...this is all happening? I can stay? I can enroll?”

“You clearly already decided, baby trouble,” dad says, stroking a hand over my hair. “And you were right. We never wanted to restrict you from your education, Ariel, we

just...wanted to make sure you were safe while you did it. And the Captain is correct,” he says, nodding to the man in question, who walks over with Neumann. “It isn’t practical to have Midnight and Marigold or the infants living in the Castle with all of the Cadets. We should be grateful to Rafe for this clever compromise.” “So, me and Jacks,” I say, my eyes catching on a little blue cottage that I desperately want to be for me. “And one for Midnight, and you, and...” Confused, I look up at my father. “Wait, who’s the fourth one for?”

“Cora got jealous,” mom says, rolling her eyes. “She said she wanted one too.”

I burst out laughing, shaking my head and hugging my dad again. “Thank you all. So, so much.”

“We love you, baby,” mom says, coming close and pressing a kiss to my hair. Dad wraps his arm around her instead of me, smushing me between them in a very loving sandwich. “Although your kids had better be cute, because this was expensive.”

I laugh, shaking my head and rolling my eyes. “Of course they’re going to be cute,” I sigh, happiness ringing through me like the peal of a bell.

We all spend the next few hours ironing out the details of what my continued education will look like, watching as the houses are carefully placed in a little line next to each other, engineers moving expertly around them to ensure that they’re all perfectly level and safe. Jesse and Rafe voyage into the Castle and return with breakfast supplies and a surprisingly lovely and calm morning passes with most of us seated on blankets, watching our little village come together.

“They might not have septic and plumbing until tomorrow,” mom says, grimacing over at me as I lean against Jackson’s side with Marigold in my lap, all of us watching with interest. “Will you survive?”

“We’ll make it,” Jackson says, nodding to mom even as he keeps his eyes on the work. “I just got plumbing eight months ago. Marigold still probably thinks it’s magic. We’ll make do for as long as we need to.”

I turn my head and privately stick my tongue out at mom, letting her silently know that...I’m going to need that septic tank and water system installed as fast as possible. She wrinkles her nose at me and nods, letting me know she’s on it.

“Which one is mine?” Midnight asks, walking over with Jesse, her hands on her hips. She looks quite happily at the houses, well pleased with them.

“Oh, we’re just setting you up in a tent outside,” Jesse says, slinging a casual arm around her shoulders.

She gasps, appalled, but then snarls when she looks up at his face and sees that he's kidding.

"We thought the little cabin would suit you, Midnight," mom says, nodding to the tiny rustic cabin that's situated next to the blue house that I've mentally claimed as my own.

"Good," Midnight says, nodding once. "I like that one best. Very defensible."

I grin at her even as the head engineer, standing at dad's side outside the blue house, turns to us with a wave and a nod.

"You ready?" mom says, turning to me, Jackson, and Marigold with a smile.

"Yes!" I say, getting eagerly to my feet. "Are you?" I ask, watching Jackson get up, a big smile on my face.

"Sure," Jackson says with a shrug, looking over at the house as he hoists Marigold up on his hip and runs a hand through his hair. "I mean, I've never been in a house before. Kind of crazy that the first one I'll go into will be...my house."

My mouth falls open as I stare at my mate, shocked.

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"What do you mean you've never been in a house before!?" I cry, smacking my mate on the arm.

He grins down at me and Marigold does too. "I mean, when would I have been in a house, Ariel? I grew up in a barracks cabin with a bunch of other boys, and then moved to the city where I lived in an apartment building. From there I lived in the candidate barracks and then the castle..." he raises his chin towards the castle on the cliff as I just stare at him, slack-jawed, realizing that he's right.

"That's so weird, Jackson," I whisper, shaking my head at him.

"It's nice having a feral friend," Jesse says, stepping close and clapping a hand on Jackson's shoulder. "Come on, my guy. We'll domesticate you and, in doing so, introduce you to the wonders of the single-family home."

Jackson laughs and takes my hand as we all walk up the short steps to the adorable little porch and then through the front door into our little blue house. Unsurprisingly, my eyes

mist immediately at the thought that this is our first little home together as a family. That this is where Marigold will get to know her new sisters, and where we'll have so many new experiences.

"You happy?" Jackson asks, stroking a hand over my hair as I look around at the sweet little living room, still bare of any furnishings or decorations but completely full of possibility.

I press myself to his side, tucking my face against his chest, wrapping my arms around his waist, completely overwhelmed. "Yeah, I'm happy," I squeak, meaning it utterly as my wolf pounces around in my soul, rubbing herself warmly against Jackson's wolf and then darting over to the two new little bonds, just...completely thrilled.

"Good," Jackson says with a happy sigh, looking around the room with interest as he wraps an arm around me, holding me close. "I'm happy too."

We stand quietly in the center of the room together for a long time, our family happily milling around us. But while they chat and talk about the possibilities and all of the furniture mom ordered to fill the room – which is apparently being delivered this afternoon – I find myself a bit breathless and wordless.

Just...completely happy, totally blessed.

My dad looks over at me and, sensing my mood, gives me a happy smile and a warm nod.

And I smile right back, knowing that he could have said no to all of this.

But that he is, in fact, the best dad on the planet – always supporting our dreams and doing everything in the world that he can to make them come true.

The rest of the day passes in a rushed blur. Dad spends a great deal of time meeting with the Captain and the rest of the staff, going over documents and reconsidering both the rules of the Academy as well as my individual learning plan. And as much as I sigh to see that my lessons with Blaze will be less violently focused for the time being – more stretching, less punching – I resign myself to the realization that adjustments do indeed have to be made.

I'm pregnant, after all, and happily so. There are some things that I'm not going to be able to do.

But not much, my wolf says, trotting around smugly in my soul, her nose lifted high in the air.

Right, I say, nodding internally. Not much at all.

As dad works, mom supervises the delivery and distribution of four houses' worth of goods as well as a surprising amount of clothing for Marigold.

"Mom," I whisper, watching it all be delivered and carried in by Jackson, Rafe, and Jesse (who grumbles about every box). "How...did you do all this? I mean, have you been shopping for years?"

"I admit," mom says, hands on her hips, directing the boys to carry a particularly plush sofa into the house she's designated as hers and dad's. "I strained even my own shopping skills last night and today. I barely slept. I'm going to need some time to restore my energy."

"So, like, you'll start again tomorrow?" I ask, dry.

Mom laughs and wraps an arm around me, tugging me close. "Well, someone has to clothe these little twins, Ariel, and I know you're going to be too busy to do it. If it was up to you they'd run around in their diapers for the first three years of their life."

I laugh, hugging her back, grateful for my mom in turn and realizing that...she's probably right.

By the time night falls it's shocking how well-equipped the little houses are. Only mine has running water and plumbing for the moment, but we've been assured that the others will be updated tomorrow.

"Wow," I say, flopping onto my brand-new couch and pulling Marigold up onto my lap, looking around at my living room which has all the basics it needs for life and company. "This is...amazing."

"I know," Jackson murmurs, settling down next to me on the couch and peering into the tiny kitchen, where mom is making me a cup of herbal tea and dad is pouring wine and whiskey for those of us who are able to partake. Rafe and Jesse are gone for the moment, getting Midnight settled in her own little house.

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"All right," dad says, coming back in with mom and settling the tray of drinks on the coffee table. Mom hands me my tea before going to perch on the arm of the big lounge chair that dad sits in. "Tell me about this plan to adopt Marigold."

My eyebrows go up. “Sorry?” I ask, looking between him and mom, realizing that mom must have told him about it. Which is not a surprise – mom and dad talk about everything and rarely, if ever, keep secrets. “Is it...a problem?”

Jackson tenses a little, likewise looking between my parents.

Goldie gives a little squeak, reaching for some coloring supplies on the floor, and I lower her on to down. She dashes over to the coloring book and picks up a fistful of crayons as I turn back to my mom and dad, giving them my full attention.

“It’s not a problem,” dad says, shaking his head slowly, his sharp green eyes on me. “Your family is your own, Ariel, and if you’re kind enough to welcome a child into it as your own then I certainly won’t stop you. But there are certain complications.”

My eyebrows go up and I glance up at Jacks, who sends a pulse of confusion to me down the bond, moving a little closer to my side.

“What complications?” I ask, a bit soft.

“Have you considered,” dad continues, looking between both of us now, “that your adopting Marigold as your daughter places her third in line to the throne?” 1

My eyes go wide because...nope. I hadn’t considered that at all. I sit back against the couch cushions, dazed at the realization that my dad is right. I mean, I’d always assumed that Rafe would pass the throne along to his own children –

But if his mate is Maryam, and she’s human, then they probably won’t be able to have kids. So, unless they adopt... My eyes turn towards the little girl on the floor, happily scribbling over a picture of a cat with vivid pink crayon. “Oh my god,” Jackson murmurs next to me. “I didn’t...I didn’t even think of that...”

“That in itself is not a problem,” dad continues, his own gaze moving to Marigold on the floor. “Except that...this is a child with ties to the Community, just like your mate. And the Community likely understands themselves as having a claim on her.” “Which means...” I whisper, “that some could understand Marigold’s reign as the Community having a claim on the throne.”

“Precisely correct,” dad intones, sitting back in his chair and putting a hand on mom’s back, letting me and Jackson put together the pieces and consider it.

Jackson growls softly at the idea of the Community having any claim, at all, to Marigold or the throne. But I shake my head at him, denying it.

“She’s ours, Jacks,” I whisper, willing him to believe it. “She won’t even remember the Community – in fact, she wasn’t even ever there, right? They have no true claim on her.

And we'll raise her to be a patriot – to understand her responsibilities and be a good Queen –”

“Whether or not we claim her and she understands herself as Princess of Moon Valley doesn't mean the Community will too,” Jackson says, shaking his head. “Or that Moon Valley will accept it. A child not of the Sinclair line...” he sighs, moving his eyes back to Goldie, who is blissfully unaware of how complicated this discussion is.

“She is of the Sinclair line,” I growl, hating the idea that anyone would see her as outside of it.

“Not by blood,” dad says. I whip my eyes to him, my growl growing. He tilts his head to the side, holding my gaze, giving me a little warning to watch myself. “It's the reality, Ariel. And whether or not we understand Marigold as entirely a member of our family – which we do, and will – it won't stop others from protesting her right to the throne.”

“That is my daughter,” I say, willing and determined, leaning forward and pointing at my little girl. “I claim her as such. Everyone else will just have to...deal with it.”

“Maybe she...shouldn't be...” Jackson says with a frown, still looking at our little girl on the floor.

My eyes dart up to him, flashing wide. “What!?”

“I mean,” he murmurs, looking down at me and putting an arm around my back, trying his best to be warm and comforting. “She'll be ours, Ariel. But should she really be a Princess of Moon Valley? Or does it cause more trouble than its worth? You know titles don't mean much to me. Maybe she's just our daughter and the next two are the Princesses.”

I bare my teeth at my mate, hating that thought.

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“That is my daughter, Jackson,” I say, pointing at Marigold again. “We agreed on this. We're going to take her to the Goddess, ask her to fully recognize her as such. And as my daughter, she is due all of the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of a Princess of Moon Valley. I don't care if there's no genetic connection there – I'm not going to approve of any

situation in which Marigold is marked as anything different than her sisters. If they're Princesses, then so is Marigold."

"Ariel..." Jackson says, hesitating, not sure he can ask that of me.

"If you don't like it then I'll step down from my place in the line of succession," I say, pressing a hand to my heart, meaning every word of it. "But all three of my daughters will be the same. I won't accept anything else."

Jackson clenches his jaw and cups my cheek in his hand, I think desperately touched by my passion on this issue, by my defense of our little girl. But he sighs a moment later, looking over to my parents, wanting their guidance. "What do you think?"

"I think the choice is yours," dad says, looking seriously at us and nodding. "But you should be aware of all the implications. Whatever you decide, I will support you."

Jackson turns back to me, leaving the answer in my hands.

"This is what I want," I say, nodding at my parents and then down at our little girl. "Princess Marigold Sinclair, our eldest child and our heir. Equal in every way to her sisters." I press a hand to my stomach, sending a pulse of warmth and determination down my new twin bonds, wanting them to know – even if they can't understand it yet – that I'll fight for them too, no matter what.

"All right, Ariel," dad says, grave and a little proud. "If that's what you've decided then I support you."

I look up to give him a steady nod. But when my eyes fall on my mom, whose eyes are shining with happy tears, my face breaks into a smile. She gives me a slow nod, letting me know that she thinks I've done right. I sigh, relaxing against Jackson, bolstered by her faith in me. She, after all, was a little orphan girl just like our Goldie.

Her approval in this moment is all I need to know that I've done right by my girl.

Before any of us can say another word, the door opens and Jesse and Rafe stroll in, Midnight happily striding between them.

"Excuse me," Jackson says, turning towards the door with a smirk. "But I was told that it's customary to knock before entering someone's house."

"Oh, you don't know what you're talking about," Jesse says, grinning and flopping himself into an arm chair before snatching up one of the glasses of whiskey from the tray on the table. "But as it's your first time in a house, I forgive your innocence."

"It's true," Rafe says, nodding sanguinely as he takes a seat on the floor next to Jesse's chair. "The rules get bent for family. We can come and go at will."

Jackson narrows his eyes, not sure he believes this, and Rafe just gives him a handsome smile, clearly telling him he has no choice in the matter. I grin, looking between them, quite pleased to have our entire family feel completely at home here.

Midnight steps to the edge of the couch, smiling around at everyone, about to take the final empty seat next to Jackson when my dad surprises us all by standing up.

“Don’t get so comfortable, young lady,” he says, his eyes on Marigold as he crosses his arms over his chest. “You and I need to have a word.”

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Midnight’s eyes go wide as she stares up at dad. “We do?”

“Yes,” he says, nodding gravely and tilting his head towards the door. “Come on.”

Jesse moves to stand up but dad puts a hand out towards him. “If Midnight is mature enough to enroll at this school then she’s got to start to make her own decisions,” dad says.

“Why?” Jesse asks, his brows knitting. “Ariel takes Jackson everywhere for moral support and no one protests. Mids,” he says, fixing his eyes on her. “If you want me there, I’ll come along.”

“No,” she says, her voice wavering a little as she looks between Jesse and dad. “I, um...yes. I’ll come and talk to you. You’re right, I have to start...standing on my own.”

I gulp a little, thinking that Midnight has perhaps stood on her own for far too long. But still, I know dad will be kind to her, so I don’t say anything. Dad nods seriously at Midnight and heads for the door. The young woman follows him outside, her curls bouncing.

When the door shuts we all turn towards the window, watching them talk.

“Mom?” Rafe says, anxious. “What’s this about?”

“He’s telling her there’s been a rule change,” mom says quietly, likewise watching, her face as anxious as the rest of us. “Starting this fall, girls will be allowed to enroll in Alpha Academy if they can rank highly enough as a candidate, the same as any boy.”

I gasp in delight, spinning my head to grin at her.

Mom takes a moment to flash a little smile at me before turning her eyes back to the window. "Yes, we talked about it at length and we believe it's right. The girls of Moon Valley can offer as much to our military as the boys. But," she says on a sigh, her tone dropping, "he's also telling Midnight that while her gender is acceptable, her connection to Darkness is not."

My heart drops, dread filling me as I realize the meaning behind her words.

Jesse groans, ducking his head into his hands.

"Shit," Rafe says on a sigh, shaking his head. "Midnight is...not going to like that."

His words are proved correct an instant later as Midnight bursts into tears. Dad sighs and pulls the girl into a hug, holding her through her difficult emotions, looking through the window towards all of us with a grave expression.

I knock softly on my bedroom door, biting my lip, worried for Midnight. She and Jesse have been in there alone for about an hour now, talking things through. Mom and dad have left, headed back to the Capital on the night train.

Jackson, Marigold, and Rafe watch me from the living room, the remains of dinner spread out over our little coffee table. When no response comes from my knock I shrug at them, not knowing what to do. Rafe waves his fingers at me, clearly telling me to try again.

"Mids?" I call, again knocking softly. "Um, can I come in?"

There's a pause. "It's your room, Ariel," comes a bitter little voice. "You can do whatever you want."

I sigh and twist the doorknob, pushing open the door and peeking inside.

Jesse and Midnight are both sitting on the bed, her pressed up against the headboard and him seated at the bottom, his legs curled up beneath him. I sigh, seeing the misery and confusion in both of them, and step into the room, leaning back against the door to press it shut.

"What's going on?" I ask softly, looking between them.

"Jesse's trying to talk me into giving away all my powers," Midnight says, glaring at Jesse and pointing an accusing finger at him.

"Oh, I am not," Jesse says, sighing deeply and raising his eyes to me. "It's been...contentious."

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I nod, understanding and crossing to the bed, climbing onto it to sit between them. Jesse turns more fully towards me so that we make a neat little triangle.

“What are you thinking, Midnight?” I ask softly, wanting her full opinion.

“I’m thinking that it’s a bad choice either way,” she grumbles, crossing her arms and sinking back into the pillows. “If I let you clear my darkness and take my powers then the nice professor won’t want me to be his spy student anymore, because I’ll be useless. And if I keep them, then King Dominic says I can’t be in the school anyway!” Her voice gets squeaky with grief on the final words and my heart wrenches for her.

“And what I am trying to say,” Jesse says, a bit between his teeth. “Is that she doesn’t even know how many of her powers are tied to her corruption. It’s very likely that she was gifted powers as a child that have nothing to do with it! But she won’t even talk to me about trying to find out -”

“I won’t be made useless!” Midnight hisses, leaning forward to glare at Jesse. “I won’t just be some tiny, powerless girl! I won’t do it!”

My heart twists again at the fear that underlies her words, the true vulnerability there. And I understand, instantly, what she means. Midnight’s powers are all that Darkness celebrated her for, as well as her value as Jesse’s mate. Without the powers... she will feel as small and defenseless as Darkness always told her she was.

“So what do we do?” I whisper, looking between them.

“Go talk to your dad,” Midnight snaps, turning her eyes to glare at me as she pulls a pillow onto her lap, hugging it to her chest. “He always does whatever you want.”

I sigh, heaving a shrug. “Unfortunately, I agree with him here, Mids. It’s too dangerous to have you enrolled in school if Darkness has a hold on you.”

“But he’s in that egg!” she bites out, frustrated.

“Is he still?” I ask, turning to Jesse, who just shrugs, clearly exhausted and without information on that.

“Midnight,” I say softly, reaching for her hand. “What if...there was a way to find out which parts of your powers would disappear if we removed the corruption? What it would feel like to have your wolf free of all that muck?”

She pauses, narrowing her eyes at me, suspicious. But when Jesse and I don't say a word, letting her process the question, she drops her eyes. "If it didn't do anything permanent," she murmurs. "I guess...it would be good to have the information."

"Okay, well," I say quietly, reaching for Jesse's hand. "Why don't we...have a look?"

"What do you mean?" Midnight asks, anxious, leaning away from me as Jesse slips his hand against mine. "What...what are you going to do to me?"

"I'm not going to do anything, Midnight," I say quietly, holding her gaze steadily with my own. "I promise – not until you ask me. But we could take a look into your soul, perhaps? See what we discover?" I hold my hand out to her too.

"Please, Mids," Jesse says, leaning towards her, pressing a hand to his heart. "I promise you can trust us. But Ariel's right – we have to...try to figure out whatever we can."

Midnight goes very still for a moment before she sighs and reaches out, slipping her palm against my own.

I nod to her once, assuring her I'll keep my promise, before we all close our eyes and slip mentally down to that soul-deep realm where our wolves live.

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I exhale slowly, my fingers twisting in my wolf's fur as I look over at Jesse, standing next to me, his wolf at his side.

"This is weird, cousin," he says with a little grimace. "Welcome...to my soul."

"It's nice here," I say, nodding, looking around at the mostly-blank space that looks precisely like my own. "I like what you've done with the place."

He smirks and nods his head to the left, silently asking me to follow. I do, and it's not a long walk before we reach the dark space where his soul ends. Across the darkness, though, I can easily see a too-familiar sight.

"Oh, heavens," I say, putting my hands on my knees and peering forward, my eyes fastened on the little dark wolf, sunk deep into the oil, just her eyes and nose and points of her ears truly visible above it. My wolf howls at the sight of her, desperately worried. "Jesse," I say quietly, glancing up at him, "this is...very bad. Much worse than Gabriel."

“Well, I think she’s been corrupted since she was a kid,” Jesse says on a sigh, crossing his arms and looking very worriedly over at his mate’s wolf. “It makes sense that it would be worse. But this is...even worse than it was before. Darkness is pulling her further in, perhaps? Maybe even as revenge.”

“Jess, I think...I think Midnight has to take action,” I say quietly, grief and worry twisting in me as I straighten. “I don’t think she’s going to survive like this. At least, not for long.”

He sighs, dipping his face into his hand, obviously agonized by that insight. “Okay. Yes, we’ll...we’ll try to persuade her that it’s important.”

“Where is she?” I ask, looking around for her.

“Well, she can’t come here,” he snaps, his temper a bit short in his worry. “We don’t have a bond.” His wolf pants with worry, shifting from foot to foot, his eyes fastened on the little she-wolf in her oily bog. Midnight’s wolf snarls and then chokes on the oil that floods her mouth. Jesse’s wolf yips, starting forward, dancing at the edge of his soul, clearly wanting to go to her. “All right, Jess,” I say quietly, reaching out and slipping my arm around his. “Why don’t you just...call for her?”

He does as instructed, cupping his hands to his mouth and shouting “Oye! Mids! Get your ass down here!”

I press my lips together, trying to hold back my smile.

She appears a moment later on her wolf’s side of the soul, her hands on her hips, glaring at her mate. “What!?”

“We’re trying to do something to help you here, Midnight,” Jesse says, exasperated, gesturing at her wolf. “The least you can do is show up.”

She glares at him and then down at her wolf. “Yeah, but I don’t like coming here. It’s gross.”

He just stares at her, aghast, a frustrated huff of air puffing from his lips.

“Darkness said it was important to stay clean,” Midnight says, crossing her arms primly across her chest and shaking back her hair.

“Which you would think would extend to your soul,” Jesse snarls.

I interrupt, pitching my voice louder. “Mids,” I call out, giving her a cheerful smile. “I was going to light my Goddess fire – just here on this side – and experiment to see if you could feel it. Would that be okay?”

“Um,” she says, her toes turning inward as anxiety starts to rush through her. “I...I guess. But don’t bring it over here, okay?”

“You’re in charge, Mids,” I say, nodding seriously and un-looping my arm from Jesse’s, starting to call up the magic. ” Whenever you say stop, we stop.”

She glances down at her wolf, which continues to snarl at us, its livid red eyes fixed on Jesse’s wolf. But then Midnight gulps and nods and I exhale, letting the blue flames form in my palms.

I let the fire grow and grow, sending it out into the air when it gets too big to hold. Jesse takes a step back as it grows as big as a person, then as big as a wolf, then larger. I glance at him. “You good?”

“Yeah,” he says, a bit mesmerized, his eyes fasted to the huge blue ball of fire. “Just...impressed. And it’s very warm, isn’t it?”

I grin at him and then exhale slowly, returning my eyes to the flame and pushing it – just slightly – out into the darkness between Jesse’s soul and Midnight’s. I watch through the flames as Midnight’s eyes go wide, as she cringes away from it, clearly afraid of what will happen if it comes too close.

But her wolf goes still.

And then the wolf blinks, the manic light fading from her eyes.

And then she moans, reaching her snout out as far as she can, her ears pinning back to her head. The little wolf reaches, pushing hard through the muck, trying to get closer.

Midnight cries out and Jesse stumbles forward. “Are you okay!?” he calls, worried.

Midnight’s wolf gives a little howl, surging forward as best she can, reaching – reaching so hard towards the blue light and the warmth it provides. A pitiful little moan breaks from my own mouth as I push the fire further, wanting to give it to her, wanting her to have as much as she wants and needs.

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Midnight bursts into tears, looking down at her wolf, her entire body starting to tremble. “I – I didn’t know,” she whispers, starting to shake her head.

“Mids,” Jesse calls, his voice breaking, kneeling down at the edge of his soul and reaching for her. “Midnight, please, are you okay?”

She just continues to cry, her face tucked into her hands, her shoulders shaking.

I push my fire a little further as the wolf gets to the edge of her gigantic pit, her snout stretched out as far as it can go, and my heart sings when I see just the barest edge of oil burn away from her snout, revealing –

My eyes go wide when I see that the fur beneath is a creamy white. I groan again, pushing the fire further, and Midnight’s wolf gives a pitiful little howl, shutting her eyes, letting the warmth rush over her. More oil peels back, revealing more plush white fur along the length of her snout, the tips of her ears...

“Stop!” Midnight cries out. My eyes flash to her as she drops her hands from her face and begins to shake her head, vehement. “Please, stop – I can’t – I can’t – I’ll lose everything.”

I pull my fire back, as I promised, but keep it burning.

Midnight’s wolf whips her face to Midnight, a sorrowful, plaintive little howl slipping from her lips. Midnight looks down at her wolf and shakes her head again, apology everywhere alongside her fear.

“Midnight,” Jesse says, the single word a plea, begging for her to continue.

But she just continues to shake her head, looking down at her wolf. “I can’t,” she whispers.

Jesse looks up at me, desperate for me to continue, not knowing what to do.

“Jess,” I say, pulling the fire back so that it becomes a ball in my hands. “I – I don’t even know how much I could do from this distance – I can only get so close...”

He groans, knotting his fingers in his hair and pressing his eyes shut.

“I – I’m going back,” Midnight says, her voice creaking. I turn my head to her just in time to see her vanish. Her wolf gives a terrible little howl, sinking back into the depths, scrabbling to find her footing and keep her fresh, clean fur out of the muck in a way that just breaks my heart in half.

“Come on,” Jesse grumbles, standing and reaching for me. “I – I don’t want to leave her alone.”

With a last plaintive look back at the wolf, I take his hand and we return to the real world.

Midnight cries her eyes out, terror sweeping through her. Jesse moves closer on the bed, wrapping his arms around her and holding her close through her pain and her grief, her worry and confusion. Ariel moves close as well, taking Midnight's hand, squeezing it and whispering warm and comforting things.

As the minutes pass Midnight calms, her mind coming back to her. Eventually she finds the strength to give one last big sniff and then looks up at her mate and her friend.

"Are you okay, baby?" Ariel whispers, leaning close and stroking a hand over her hair. Midnight can't help but lean into the caress. "I'm so sorry. Did it hurt?"

Midnight doesn't say anything because the truth is that she's just being a big coward. It didn't hurt at all – it felt wonderful. Warm – warm. Her...her wolf didn't even know that she could be warm...

But the idea of losing all of her powers, all her magic...

"It's okay, kid," Jesse murmurs, pressing a kiss to her hair. "You're allowed to be scared. It's okay."

She sniffs again, leaning against him, trying to put her mind and her thoughts and her heart together. Her wolf howls in her soul, begging for the warmth to come back, but Midnight slams the door on her noise – as she so often does.

But then guilt rushes through her, because she knows it's wrong. Her wolf. Her poor wolf. Slowly, she opens the door again and lets her wolf's howls echo through her soul, finally listening to what she wants and needs.

It is...just unbearably sad.

"Can I go to bed?" Midnight whispers, closing her eyes and tucking her cheek close to Jesse's chest. "Please? I am so tired. Can I go to bed?"

"Of course," Jesse murmurs. He sends an anxious glance Ariel's way, but she just shrugs, implying that she doesn't know what else to do. It's still, in the end, all Midnight's choice. It has to be. "Come on, kiddo. Let's get you to bed."

He wraps his arm tight around Midnight's back, and then slips another beneath her knees, and lifts her easily from the bed. After all, she's still – in so many ways – just a malnourished girl who has only recently begun to learn to accept love, and care, and kindness. She sniffs softly in his arms, clearly overwhelmed.

"I'll come see you in the morning," Ariel whispers.

Jesse nods to his cousin and gives her as much of a smile as he can before he moves to the door, wondering how the hell he's going to convince this precious little creature to free herself from the darkness that's killing her.

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Ariel moves ahead of Jesse, quietly opening the bedroom door and then the front door, clearing the way. Jesse passively bids Jackson and Marigold goodnight as he goes, but his mind is distracted. He doesn't even see if Marigold is still awake.

Instead, he just keeps his eyes on the grass in front of him, aiming for Midnight's new little cabin, wondering what the hell he's supposed to do now – what he can say to convince his little mate to trust them, to free her wolf of the darkness.

“Oh!” says a surprised voice.

Jesse whips his head up and stops in his tracks, his eyes fastening on the red-headed young woman standing in the path before him, a basket over her arm.

Midnight opens her eyes, turning her gaze towards the girl, a growl sounding in her chest.

Jesse just...freezes. Completely without anything to say for one of the first times in his life.

“Um,” Daphne says, her worried eyes flicking between Jesse's face and the sad little demon in his arms. “I'm so sorry – I didn't mean to intrude – I was just...Cora asked me to leave some prototype designs in her new house so I...I'm...I'm so sorry

...

She blushes furiously, her shoulders going up around her ears as she looks down at her basket.

“Be gone, whore,” Midnight snarls, her voice deep and vicious.

“Midnight!” Jesse gasps, coming back to himself, hoisting her higher in his arms and snapping his eyes down to see that she's gone full shadow ghoul again, with pits for eyes and that hollow of a mouth leaking clouds of shadow. “Apologize, right now! You're being so rude -”

Daphne gives a little squeak of terror and turns, rushing off for the castle.

“Hey!” Jesse barks out, glaring down at Midnight, his arms tightening around her. “You are not allowed to be mean to her -”

Midnight’s shadows fade, her face turning back to normal, and she turns her grief-filled little face up to him. “But she’s a whoooore.”

He glares down at her, livid. “She’s lovely. And an employee of this Academy! You are not allowed to terrorize her just because you’re ”

He cuts himself off abruptly, his wolf nipping him in his soul, angry in turn that he’d be so cruel to his tiny mate when she’s having such a rough time already.

Midnight sighs, a few tears leaking from her eyes, and rests her head back against his chest. “I’m sorry,” she whispers. “My instinct is to hate the whores.”

“She’s not a whore,” Jesse sighs, shaking his head as he continues on the path to the little cottage, his wolf howling and sniffing the air, searching for more traces of Daphne. But still, he knows that even if she was frightened that she’ll be all right. Right now, he needs to get Midnight to bed. “At least we know your shadows still work, even when you’ve had a little of your corruption cleared.”

“Oh,” Midnight says, going a bit stiff with surprise in his arms, her eyes going wide. “I...I guess we do.”

Midnight barely sleeps, tossing and turning in the bed, her wolf’s sad and desperate little howls echoing in her mind. She groans, pressing the heels of her palms in against her eyes, wrapping her shadows around her for comfort as she’s always done. Still, she doesn’t allow herself to slam the mental door on her wolf’s pain, forcing herself to witness it.

Her wolf sinks deeper and deeper in the corruption, devastated and afraid, her pretty white fur soaking up the darkness like a feather in ink.

Midnight bites her lip at this, horrified because...

Well, because she never even knew her wolf had white fur. Always, always that fur has been black.

But...had she been born that way?

Or has she always been a beautiful cream-colored wolf, only stained with years and years of corruption in darkness?

Finally, after hours of tossing, when her wolf finally loses her last grip and sinks back into the oil, Midnight sits straight up in bed and whips the blanket off.

Jesse, asleep curled up in an arm chair in the corner with a pillow tucked beneath his head, gasps awake at the sudden noise.” What?” he asks, frantic, looking around. “What’s wrong?”

“Jesse,” Midnight says, her voice trembling and scared. “I – we need to go to Ariel. Right now.”

Jesse goes still for a moment but then reaches out his hand. “All right,” he says, steady and serious. “Let’s go.’

A few minutes later, Jesse and Midnight push open the door to Ariel and Jackson’s new little house, the hinges creaking just a little. Jesse stands straight in surprise when he sees Jackson curled on the couch, Marigold sleeping peacefully tucked in next to him, a book open in his hands. “What the hell are you doing up?” Jesse asks, his brow wrinkling.

Jackson just looks at him with equal confusion. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Jesse just stares at him for a second and then nods down at Midnight. “She wants to see Ari.”

“Ari’s asleep,” Jackson says, frowning a little and folding the book shut. Jesse smirks when he sees the upside down title: From Bond to Baby: A Month-by-Month Guide to Wolf Pregnancy. “Can it wait till morning? She needs more sleep now.” Jackson taps the cover.