

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 681

“Um,” Midnight says, her voice high and humming. “No, please. I mean. I don’t want to hurt the pups but...” she bites her lip. “I think...I think my wolf needs her now.”

Jesse reaches an arm out, wrapping it around Midnight’s shoulders and tugging her close. “It won’t hurt the pups.” He looks up at Jackson, eyes pleading.

Jackson nods, lifting his chin towards the bedroom door.

Jesse and Midnight nod their thanks to Jackson and then pass into the bedroom. Jesse leans close to Ariel as Midnight presses the door shut behind them, giving her a little nudge on the shoulder. “Ari,” he whispers.

Ariel gasps and then shrieks, whipping up an arm and smacking him hard in the face. Jesse groans, clutching his jaw, turning

away.

“Jesse!” Ariel hisses, sitting up amongst the pillows, pressing a hand to her fast-beating heart. “What the hell are you doing here!?”

Jesse just groans, pointing at Midnight.

Midnight comes close, her hands balled up into fists and pressed to her chest. “Please, Ariel,” she says, her eyes round and brilliant with tears. “I – I need you to clear my wolf. Please, she’s so sad – she just wants to be warm.”

Ariel groans in turn, smoothing a hand over Midnight’s hair and nodding to her. “All right, kid,” she whispers, patting the bed. “Climb up here. We’ll do it right now.”

A few minutes later, safely in Jesse’s soul, Ariel looks up at the man in question, who still clutches his jaw. “You know I know that doesn’t hurt here, right?” she says, poking at his hand. “Our bodies are just metaphorical here.”

Jesse grumbles but drops his hand, sending her a little glare before setting off towards the edge of his soul, where he knows Midnight is waiting. Ariel smiles a little, forgiving Jesse his bad temper, knowing he’s just worried for his mate.

When they reach the edge of his soul, both Midnight and her wolf are waiting, her wolf sunk deep into the muck but her eyes just as bright and eager as the girl’s.

“You’ve thought about this, Mids?” Ariel calls, hands on her hips. “Because, I mean...there’s no going back, I think.”

“I – I think that I’m sure,” Midnight says, glancing down at her wolf, who gargles a little growl of consent. “You cleared a little of the oil before, and I was still able to use my shadows completely – scared the crap out of Daphne -”

“What!?” Ariel gasps, whipping her head to glare at Jesse.

“Please, can we discuss that another time?” Jesse asks, looking down at his cousin with a great deal of exhaustion in his eyes. I’m not defending her but yes, her shadows seemed...on full display.”

“Okay,” Ariel says, shrugging and conjuring up her fire, letting it grow fast and brilliant. “Let’s get this started.”

”

When the fire is big enough Ariel presses it out towards the darkness between their souls. As before, Midnight’s wolf gives an eager howl, pressing forward towards the light and the warmth, wanting it badly. And as before, the oil starts to fade from her fur, drying up and flaking off or evaporating, revealing the creamy fur beneath.

Midnight watches eagerly, happiness ringing through, warmth starting to make itself known in her soul for the first time since...well, ever, she supposes. She just...didn’t know it was supposed to feel like this.

But eventually, the progress stops. The wolf continues to press forward, wanting the warmth, but the large pit of oil remains, and the oil stops drying just at the back of her little ears. The wolf gives a howl of regret, wanting more.

“What is it?” Midnight asks, suddenly afraid, looking between her wolf and Ariel, at the fire between them. “What’s wrong?”

“Mids,” Ariel calls, hesitating. “I – I’m not sure I can get further or make it burn any hotter. I mean, I’m not in your soul with you I was in Gabriel’s soul when I cleared him.”

Ariel bites her lip, anxious and a little panicked, wanting to help Midnight and not knowing what to do.

Midnight starts to cry, little tears slipping down her cheeks.

A beat passes in silence.

Jesse steps forward.

“Here, Ari,” Jesse says, his voice firm and steady. “Can you pass the fire to me?”

“What?” she asks. But seeing the determination in him, Ariel stops hesitating and does as he asks, first shrinking the flame down to about the size of a basketball and then passing it into his hands, their unique bond allowing her to share.

Jesse gives her a little smile and then turns back to Midnight. “Okay, Mids,” he calls. “Get ready. I’m coming over.”

Ariel sucks in a deep breath as a silvery bridge begins to appear in the darkness between Jesse’s soul and Midnight’s. As Jesse accepts the bond.

Midnight cries harder as the bond snaps into place, relief swelling through her.

Jesse exhales slowly as he steps onto the solid bond, beginning to cross.

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I hold my breath as I watch my cousin cross the newly formed bond in his soul, watch him hold the Goddess fire to the side as he wraps his arm around his little mate, holding her close to his chest, pressing a kiss to her hair. She cries into his chest for a moment, her hands wrapped tight in the fabric of his shirt.

But then he murmurs something soft to her, and she nods, and he smiles at her. And then they get to work.

I watch, my fists tight beneath my chin as Jesse begins to work with the fire, careful not to touch the oil himself. His wolf races across the bond next, eager to help. To my surprise my wolf goes with him, snatching some of the fire out of Jesse’s hand and holding it between her teeth, carefully working to spread it around Midnight’s soul and get rid of all the oil splashed everywhere.

Tentatively I put a foot out on the bond, wondering if I, too, can use it as a bridge. Both Jesse and Midnight turn their heads when they feel me there. But then Midnight smiles and waves to me and I cross as well, laughing a little at the wonder of it – of being welcomed into someone’s soul.

But it’s not so odd, really, when I think about it. Midnight – she’s my cousin now, or close enough. I’m so pleased and honored that she trusts me here. I, too, take a moment to press a kiss to Midnight’s hair.

And then I get to work.

It takes hours to burn away the oil of her soul. Jesse, I, and our wolves work in tandem to first clear a circle around Midnight's wolf so that we can stand close. And then I lean over the pit, careful not to touch the corruption, and slowly begin to stroke the flames over Midnight's wolf's sweet fur. The wolf gives pitiful little whines of joy as I dust away the dried oil from her whiskers and her ears, as Jesse vanishes enough of the oil that her haunches appear, and then her shoulders, and then her rump.

We're all very tired by the time enough oil is gone that we can begin to haul Midnight's emaciated little wolf out of the pit. Her spindly legs work hard to help, to push her free. But she's just so...weak. She's been in that pit for long enough that I'm not sure her muscles ever fully developed, let alone enough to run and jump and play.

I cry when we finally pull her free and the little wolf collapses, her tongue happily panting, on the clean soil of Midnight's soul. But when I look around at my cousin and his mate, I see that I'm in good company there. We all wipe our cheeks and continue working – me clearing what's left of the oil from Midnight's wolf, Jesse and our wolves drying up the rest of the pit.

Until, finally, it's all gone.

Midnight sobs, her arms around the neck of her little creamy wolf, whose tufted ears are black and grey at the tips. I smile when I see that she has little grey socks on each of her legs, leading down to black paws.

"She's so pretty, Mids," I say, leaning against Jesse, tears streaming from my eyes again.

"Yeah," Midnight says, hiccupping in exhaustion and stress and sadness and joy. "Yeah, she's...she's really great. I'm so sorry." She buries her face in her wolf's fur, sobbing again.

"You didn't know, Mids," Jesse murmurs, crouching down to stroke her back. "It's okay. You didn't know."

I back away then, letting them have a moment, stepping back into Jesses soul and then opening my eyes in the real world. I take a moment to stroke a mental hand over my wolf's head and she licks my palm, loving me a great deal – just as much as I love her.

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Jesse's eyes open first, and then Midnight's, slow and sleepy.

"How do you feel?" I ask quietly, leaning towards her, able to see her better now in the dawn light that streams through the windows.

"What happened?" Jackson asks. I turn to see him standing at the door and I smile, reaching out a hand. He frowns at me, sending me a little pulse of worry that I didn't sleep, and then passing me some magic energy. I grin, quite pleased as he steps close enough to the bed that I can lean against him.

"Jesse and Ariel cleared my wolf," Midnight says on a happy sigh, just before she yawns. I laugh a little as she cuddles up in my pillows, clearly exhausted and intending to sleep right there.

"Do you still have your magic?" Jesse asks, leaning towards her, curious.

"Jess, let her sleep, she can answer that -"

But suddenly shadows burst from Midnight and she fades into the shadows behind the pillows, almost indistinguishable." Yup," she says on a hefty yawn. "Still got 'em. Darkness lied to me. They must have come from someone else."

"A gift from the God of Death?" I ask, turning up my face to Jackson, curious.

He shrugs down at me. "Or Life. I don't know."

I nod, intrigued, but then I yawn – despite my magical boost, I'm still tired.

"All right, come on," Jackson says, scooping me up off the bed and nodding to where Jesse has laid out along the edge, his hands tucked behind his head, his eyes already shutting. "These two have clearly claimed the bed. We'll tuck you into Marigold's."

"They're very rude," I murmur, narrowing my eyes at Mids and Jesse, not meaning a word of it. But then I just wrap my arms around my mate's neck, letting my own eyes fall shut as he carries me away to our daughter's room.

I grin, several hours later, when Jesse comes out of my bedroom, yawning his head off just in time for dinner.

"Yay!" I say, clapping my hands a little and gesturing towards the very filled coffee table, which has plenty of food and several plates which we've set aside for him and Midnight. Seeing my excitement, Marigold cheers too, clapping and holding up her hands. Rafe and Jackson, seated on either side of the little Princess, grin down at her.

"I like this," Jesse murmurs, smiling at us a little and sauntering over. "I think I could get used to applause, whenever I enter a room."

“How is she?” Jackson asks as Jesse flops down on the floor next to me, reaching for a cheeseburger and taking a big bite even without a plate. I grin and toss a napkin onto his lap.

“She’s good, I think,” Jesse says, nodding as he looks down at his food. “She’s still asleep but...it’s weird how much I can feel. Through this...bond, or whatever.”

Jackson nods, smiling a bit, while Rafe’s mouth twists to the side and he looks down. My heart breaks for him, because I know he wishes he had an accepted bond. Quietly I make a note to myself to ask Rafe about his plans to see Maryam again, which I’m sure he’s dying to do.

“How are you doing with that?” I ask quietly, reaching out and rubbing circles on Jesse’s back, wanting him to feel support. I know that he’d been holding out, that he doesn’t have romantic feelings for Midnight. But still, it’s done now, isn’t it?

He just looks over at me and shrugs and my heart breaks again, wishing this was easier.

“She scared the shit out of Daphne last night,” Jesse whispers, shaking his head and dropping his gaze to his food. “I feel horrible.”

“I’m sure it will be fine,” I say, hoping desperately it will be true. “If we can just – ”

The door to my room opens, though, and all eyes turn to Midnight as she strolls into the room, humming happily, her hands

behind her back. “Hi!” Midnight says, grinning around at everyone. “Is there any desert?”

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I laugh, pointing at the big plate of apple pie on the table. “Well, I’m glad to see that you’re feeling cheerful,” I say, grinning at her.

“I am!” she says, happily plopping down next to Jesse and reaching for the pie, pulling it all onto her lap and digging in with a fork. “I don’t think that any of you can even imagine how nice it is to have years worth of darkness lifted from your soul!”

“We’re very glad for you, Mids,” Rafe says, leaning forward towards her, quite fond. “And glad that you get to keep your powers, too.”

“Well, not all of them,” Midnight says on a sigh, her mouth screwing to the side as she stabs her fork into the pie, apparently losing a bit of her appetite.

“What?” Jesse says, sitting up straight with a frown. “But you did the shadows this morning -”

“Oh, these work just fine,” Midnight says, flicking first into her shadow ghoul self, and then into the darkness that lets her hide. A shiver runs through me at first because although I’m getting used to it...I mean, it’s still very scary.

I glance over at Marigold, who continues to munch on her chicken nuggets, completely undisturbed. I grin, pleased to see either that my daughter is brave or has an affinity for spooky stuff.

“So, what doesn’t work?” Jesse asks, his brow wrinkling.

“Well, I tried to shift to the Land of Darkness,” she says on a sigh, her shoulders slumping. “You know, for fun.”

Jackson raises an eyebrow like they have very different ideas of fun.

“And I couldn’t do it!” Midnight continues, tossing a hand up in the air.

“Well, is that so bad?” Rafe asks, cocking his head at her. “I mean, at least you know Darkness can’t get you anymore. And you can enroll in the Academy and all.”

“Yes, Rafe, it’s bad,” Midnight says, rolling her eyes at him like he’s completely stupid. We all grin widely at that. “That’s how I get around all sneaky – like, even in the Academy, I could flash to Darkness and then back and appear on a completely different floor. It’s very useful for spying and I’m sad to have lost it!”

She sighs and looks down at her chest, the little smile on her lips suggesting that it was worth it, for her wolf’s sake, even if she is sorry to have lost a skill.

“Oh!” Jackson says, suddenly getting to his feet.

We all turn to him but he just walks away into the bedroom, oblivious to our attention.

“He’s still weird, Ari,” Jesse murmurs, frowning after my mate. “You’ve still got a lot of work to do on that one.” ¹

I laugh and shove his shoulder, making him grin. Marigold laughs too and Jesse snaps his gaze her.

“And don’t get me started on you, baby weirdo!” Jesse says, grinning at Marigold, pointing a finger right at her face. She cracks up laughing, falling back into the couch cushions. “Little miss I don’t even know what a lollypop is and just try to bite it!”

She laughs harder and happiness spreads through me, delighted at how much my little girl is already a part of the family.

“Does this help?” Jackson asks, coming back into the room with something held out on his palm. We all look towards him with interest, Midnight getting to her feet to peer into his palm.

When she sees what’s there, she gasps, looking up into his face with big round eyes. “Jackson,” she whispers, staring at him like he’s magical. “Where on earth did you get that!?”

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When she sees what’s there, she gasps, looking up into his face with big round eyes. “Jackson,” she whispers, staring at him like he’s magical. “Where on earth did you get that!?”

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“What,” Jackson asks, frowning down at the little rectangular stone in his hands. “Is it like, special?”

“Jackson!” Midnight hisses, standing on her toes to smack him on the chest. “They’re invaluable! This is only the second I’ve ever seen in the world! And I only know of one besides that other one!”

“Oh,” Jackson says, grinning down at her. “Cool.”

I burst into a grin at my mate, who has a knack for understatement.

“What is it?” Rafe asks, getting to his feet. Marigold sits up, likewise peering, curious.

“It’s the little...thing,” Jackson says, looking down at it again and running a hand through his hair. “It appeared in my tent when I was looking for Ariel in Atalaxia. I used it to shift to the land of Darkness. But then I got distracted and didn’t give it much thought.”

“I didn’t give it much thought,” Midnight says, her voice a perfect imitation of Jackson’s deep tones as she rolls her eyes. Jesse and I burst out laughing. “You idiot! It’s a talisman!”

“Oh!” I say, pushing myself to my knees and looking more curiously at it now. “Gabriel had one of those.”

“And the King,” Midnight says, nodding and tucking her hands behind her back, leaning closer to peer at it. “Though yours is a different color. Theirs was black and gifted as part of their corruption and darkness. Yours is like...yellowy-white.”

“Like your wolf,” I murmur, nodding, thinking that it’s a nice cream color.

“Why didn’t you get one, then?” Jesse asks.

“Because I was a talisman,” Midnight says, turning and rolling her eyes at him in turn.

My smile deepens, quite pleased to see that none of her personality has changed as a result of the cleaning away of the corruption. The God of Darkness – he really had a hold on her, but Midnight is truly her own unique little person, isn’t she?

“I was gifted by Darkness early enough that I didn’t need a stupid rock.” Midnight finishes, turning back to Jackson’s, looking at it wistfully.

“Well, now you do,” Jackson says, shrugging. “Here, take this one.” He holds it out to her. “Maybe we can...make it a necklace or something? Then you don’t have to carry it around.”

Midnight stumbles back a step, gasping up at him. “Jackson, it’s it’s too precious – it was a gift from a god – ”

My eyebrows raise because...wait, what? Is that really true?

Why...why is a god interested enough in Jackson to give him such a powerful tool?

And if he’s got it...why isn’t he corrupted? Quietly I send out my wolf to sniff at his soul but...nope, nothing. Jackson smirks, sensing what I’m doing and glancing over at me. I just shrug.

“I mean, I’m not going to use it,” Jackson says, pointing over his shoulder at our bedroom. “If you don’t take it I’ll just throw it in the bottom of a pack at the back of our closet – ”

Midnight squeaks, lunging for the talisman. Jackson grins and lets her have it.

“Thank you,” Midnight says, pressing it tight to her chest, looking up at him with eyes that border on reverence. “I – I can never repay you – ”

“It’s cool,” Jackson says, reaching out and putting a warm hand on her shoulder. “I’m glad you have it. Feels right.”

She grins up at him, giving a happy nod.

“All right, cool,” Jesse says, smacking his hands against his thighs and standing up. “Well, if we have a way to get to the Underworld again...I guess it’s time to go.”

“Wait, what?” Midnight asks, turning to him in confusion.

“Come on, Mids,” Jesse says, gesturing for everyone to stand as well. We all obey, mostly out of curiosity, getting to our feet. ” Time for Ariel to have her long-promised reunion.”

I gasp as Marigold runs to Jackson, who scoops her up in her arms. “Really?” I say, my eyes misting already. “We – we can go see Juniper!?”

“Oh yeah!’ Midnight says, laughing. “Everyone hold hands!”

“Trust me, Ari,” Jesse says, grinning at me as Rafe steps close, taking Jesse’s hand. “I know you miss your sister but...Juniper isn’t even the biggest draw here. Not this time.”

“What?” I ask, spinning my head to look up at Jackson, even as I reach out and take the two hands closest to me. “Who, who else – ”

“Oh, just let yourself be surprised,” Jackson says, leaning down to kiss me on the forehead. 1

Before I can say anything else, the whole world tilts forward, and we disappear.

That evening, Midnight sits on the roof of the castle, thinking about...everything.

It was a nice day and all, first getting the darkness cleared and then going to the Underworld to see Juniper and Orion and the Tony-boy. But after they'd returned home, she felt like she'd just needed...space.

Space, and sky. When she'd lived all that time in the Land of Darkness she had nothing but sky – sky and desert and a yurt. And while she doesn't miss any of the rest of it – not really – the wide expanse of the sky...

Well, all that infinity had been nice, hadn't it? Calming, in its own way. And she'd wanted it again, now, when she feels so confused. So, she'd climbed as high as she could in the castle to get as close to that familiar dark spread of sky as she could.

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She has to admit though...the stars are a pleasant addition.

Midnight's wolf gives a little worried howl, sprawled out in her soul, her little legs too weak to carry her much or far these days. But Midnight smiles a little and strokes a mental hand over her wolf's fur, pleased to see her free and clear and happy. Excited now to have that for herself too.

The world just...open for her. Infinitely possible. Midnight smiles, looking up at the stars in the velvety black sky, full of hope. But beneath that hope curls...worry. Dread. Because she knows...

Well, I know what I want now, don't I? she thinks, sighing long through her nose. And to get it...I have to hurt the one who loves me most.

Midnight turns her head towards the creaking of the window, and then the footstep that sounds on the roof next to her.

“There you are,” Jesse says, strolling over to her with his hands in his pockets, a little frown on his lips. “We were worried for you, Mids. Are you okay up here?”

“I’m okay,” she says, giving him a soft smile.

His frown deepens, his eyes narrowing, suspicious. “You’re all...calm,” he murmurs. “I don’t trust it.”

She grins, patting the roof next to her. Her mate sits down with a sigh, looping his arms around his knees. They sit that way for a long time, just looking up at the sky together, basking in the cool air and the quiet and the solitude. But then he leans closer to her, nudging her shoulder with his, inviting – or requesting – for her to tell him what’s wrong.

“Jesse,” Midnight says on a sigh, dropping her eyes to the roof tiles. “I...I think I need to make some changes.”

He pauses for a moment. “All right,” he says, his voice low. “What kind of changes?”

She bites her lip, anxious. “I...” But then she sighs, shutting her eyes, frightened and out of her element, but determined all the same. “Can I...can I tell you the long story?”

“Of course.”

She nods and takes a deep breath. “My whole life, Jess,” she says quietly, the words spilling off her tongue like they’ve been waiting there a long time. “I’ve been...just waiting for you to show up.”

He goes still but stays silent, letting her have the space.

“That’s...all Darkness ever said to me. It was the only thing that was important. That one day he would show me how to find you, and that it would be my job to bear your pups, and that we would raise them all to worship Darkness. And that you would love me and everything would be right. And I...I was so excited when Darkness finally came to me and took me to the place where I could shift to the Academy and spy on you.”

She takes a deep breath, opening her eyes and turning them to her mate.

“And you were...so great, Jess,” she whispers, her voice creaking, tears coming to her eyes. “I was...I watched you all for hours. And you were so funny. And you all...loved each other so much. I was so excited to take you home and make you mine.”

He swallows hard, getting choked up too.

“You weren’t what Darkness promised, in the end,” she whispers, dropping her eyes again to the roof.

He laughs a little, a strangled sound.

“Nah, you were better,” she says, sniffing, the tears finding their way down her cheeks. “You saved me instead of the other way around. And you brought me home and made me family. And gave me...so much. I love you so much, Jesse, I – I am so grateful -”

“I love you too, Mids,” Jesse says, slipping an arm around her and pulling her tight. “You don’t have to be grateful. You deserve...all of it. Everything.”

She nods, sniffing again. “Do you promise not to hate me?”

He goes still again. “What? I mean...I mean, yes, Midnight. I’ll never hate you – I couldn’t. But...why on earth do you ask?” “Because,” she whispers, shaking her head, her black curls bouncing lightly. “I’m going to ask you to let me go.”

“Midnight,” Jesse whispers, his arm tightening around her. “Wha – what are you talking about?”

“If you want to blame someone you should blame your mom,” she says, slightly snappy, turning her face up to him with a frown. He smiles a little at this, but it falls quickly away. “She – she told me that I can live whatever life I want. That I can have my own dreams. That I can do anything – absolutely anything. And that no one has any power to stop me.”

“Midnight, all of that is true,” Jesse murmurs, just staring at her. “But...what does that have to do with me?”

“Jesse,” she says, turning and taking his cheeks between her palms. “My whole life, all I’ve been told is that you’re my fate and you’re my destiny. And now that I know that there’s more...I want that. All of it. And it’s not that you’re not the best thing on the planet – because I think you might be?” Her voice goes all high and squeaky with pain. “But I...I want...I want to decide what my destiny is. I want to be free.”

“Midnight,” Jesse says, his voice breaking on the word. “What are you saying to me?”

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“I’m saying,” Midnight says, freely crying now, cupping Jesse’s face in her tiny hands. “That I – I don’t want to have your pups, Jesse. Ever. Ever. I don’t want them.” She shakes her head, vehement. “I think I’d be a bad mom. I’d leave them at the grocery store and forget they were there. I – I just don’t want it.” 1

He swallows hard, listening as she spills out her truth.

“And I don’t want to kiss you,” she continues, her little chin shaking as she stares up at him with her wide dark eyes. “And it’s not that you’re not handsome -”

He smirks a little at this, making her laugh. She smacks his cheek lightly with her palm. “You stop that, I’m being serious here

He does his best not to smile and nods, letting her know he’s listening, intently. To all of it.

“Jesse,” she says, sighing hard, her shoulders slumping. “I don’t want to be your mate. I don’t want to do the romantic stuff. I love you so, so much but...all of that?” she says, tossing out a hand to encompass the whole world. “I want that more. I want to be free. I don’t want to be tied.”

“I would never try to tie you, Mids,” Jesse says, lifting a hand to stroke over her hair. “Being a mate – it’s not like that – ”

“I know,” she whispers. “But I just...I waited my whole life to find you. And I wish...” her voice breaks now as she hangs her head, shaking it. “I wish I’d had a choice. I wish I’d had more freedom. I wish I’d had...more. And now I’ve got it – I’ve got everything at my feet – all the world, all the possibilities. And I want...that.”

“Mids,” Jesse says, his voice breaking with his heart. She lifts her head and cries harder when she sees him crying too. “You might...you might change your mind. You might not always feel this way.”

“I don’t want to ask you to wait for me,” she whispers. “And I don’t want to live my life by ‘maybes’ and ‘somedays’ anymore. I want...just me, in charge of me, making whatever weird choices I want, without worrying about who they affect and who wants me to choose what. I never got to choose. I want to choose. That’s...that’s what I want.”

A sob breaks from Jesse as he wraps his arms fully around his tiny mate, pulling her close. She slings her arms around his neck and presses her face into his shoulder, crying hard. They hold each other that way for a long time.

“I don’t want to lose you, Mids,” Jesse whispers, his whole body shaking. “You’re...so incredibly important to me.”

“You’re not losing me,” she whispers. “I’ll still be family. Right? Would that be okay? I can be family just...not a mate?” “Of course,” he says, tightening his arms, terrified at the thought that she wouldn’t be. “Midnight Sinclair. I think...it has a nice ring to it. Family.”

Her face bursts into a wide smile, even pressed to his chest. “Yeah, I think I like that,” she whispers, nodding.

Jesse pulls back a little, taking a deep breath, looking his strange, wonderful little mate in the eyes, smoothing a hand over her hair. “If you’ve thought about it, Midnight. And it’s what you really want. Then...I accept it. Whatever you need.”

“Okay,” she whispers, smiling at him through her tears. Just the most...lovely, rich, warm smile. “Then...I reject you, Jesse Sinclair. I love you, but I reject you.”

He stills for a moment and then moans moans, falling forward against her as his wolf howls long and low. Midnight’s teeth howls in return before bringing her teeth to their bond and beginning to tear it away. Jesse and Midnight both sob, their bodies shaking in physical pain, their emotions raw and ragged.

“Please,” he whispers, his eyes pressed tight shut, groaning against the agony. “Just...leave a little, at the end, all right? So we’ll always have a connection. I can’t – I can’t bear to not have a piece of you – ”

She nods, not saying anything, biting her lip. Her wolf obeys, leaving just a thread of connection at the end – strong and bright and pretty, even as the rest of the bond falls away.

And then it’s done.

Jesse groans, letting her go and falling back onto the roof tiles, pressing his hands to his eyes, panting, tears slipping from beneath his palms.

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“I love you, Jesse,” Midnight whispers, watching him, her little mouth trembling, her entire body feeling weak.

“I love you too, Mids,” he replies. “Always.”

She nods once. And then disappears.

Midnight fights hard against her emotions as she flits through the castle, moving back and forth between the Land of Darkness and the halls, using her shadows to disguise her progress. She barely concentrates on the push and the pull of the magic, so instinctual is it to her. Instead, her emotions are almost fully drawn to her sweet wolf, who howls so miserably in her soul.

“I know, pup,” Midnight says aloud, sniffing hard. “We’ll go lay down soon. Just...one more thing.”

She appears outside the door she’s looking for, low and deep in the castle, and then takes one last breath, flitting to Darkness and then stepping forward so she can appear in the seamstress’s room.

Daphne shrieks when the demon appears. She skitters back and falls out of the little chair in front of the sewing table.

“Well, that’s a little dramatic,” Midnight says, frowning.

Daphne just pants, scuttling backwards like a crab, pressing herself up against the bed. Midnight sighs and rolls her eyes a little, deeply unsure as to why Jesse likes this one so much.

“Look, your boyfriend is on the roof and he’s all sad,” Midnight says, crossing her arms and looking up at the ceiling. She swallows hard, doing her best to appear very brash and tough so the girl won’t see that she’s been crying. “Also, I’m sorry I called you a whore. I’ve been assured that you’re...very nice. I hope we can be friends and that you’ll make me lots of uniforms.”

Daphne just continues to heave ragged breaths, staring terrified at the demon in her room.

“Okay well, I’m going to go,” Midnight says, pointing over her shoulder at the door. “But I rejected him, so he’s really upset. You should probably go to him to make sure he doesn’t throw himself off the roof or something.”

“What!?” the girl sputters, staring at Midnight like she’s the insane one now.

“I am very busy, I have to go learn Chemistree,” Midnight says, turning before she starts crying again. “Go find your boy!” She vanishes and starts off into the night, wanting very much to go to her bed and starting the long process of putting back together the shattered pieces of her soul.

Daphne continues to pant for a moment, staring at the empty space on the floor where the demon-girl stood just a moment ago, wondering if...if she just imagined it. But then she gasps as her mind gets over its terror and finally processes what the girl just told her.

“Shit,” Daphne whispers, pushing herself to her feet and stumbling to the door, yanking it open and dashing down the hall. Ten long minutes later, she pushes open the window at the top of the library and scrambles out of it, gasping in fear.

Jesse sniffs hard and turns his head towards the noise, going still when he sees her kneeling there, gasping for air, her hands pressed flat against the tiles. “Daph?”

“She -” Daphne says, staring at him, aghast and completely out of breath. “She – she said you were going to jump off the roof – ”

“What?” Jesse asks, starting to sit up. But then he groans, the physical pain of rejection radiating through him. “Oh, geeze.” “Jesse!” Daphne cries, crawling over to him. “Are you okay!?”

He sighs, closing his eyes and wiping at the tears on his cheeks, not wanting her to see them. “I’m all good.”

She snarls and smacks him on the shoulder.

He laughs and turns his head to her, giving her that dashing smile.

“You are not,” Daphne growls, glaring at him. “Are you going to jump off the roof?”

“No, Daphne, I’m not going to jump off the roof,” Jesse says, sighing and shaking his head, letting his eyes fall shut again.” But thank you for coming to stop me, if you thought I was going to. Means a lot.”

She groans this time, collapsing to the tiles next to him, letting her own eyes fall shut. “I’m not athletic enough for this kind of panic.”

“That’s okay,” Jesse murmurs. “You have other charms.”

She laughs a little and shakes her head, relief running through her, her wolf howling with happiness that he’s safe and okay. “Will you sit here with me?” Jesse asks softly. “Just...just until I can walk again?”

“Sure,” Daphne says.

He smiles and reaches out, slipping his hand over hers.

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She goes still for a moment and then laces her fingers with his, squeezes his hand. “We’re not dating or anything,” she snaps. “Just...because you got all rejected and stuff. I didn’t come running up here just because you’re single – I thought you were going to die -”

“Sure, you didn’t,” Jesse says, dry, nodding slowly, a smile curling his lips.

She laughs a little, turning her head to look at his profile in the starlight. "I mean it, Jess. I...stand by everything I said before."

"Okay, Daphne." Jesse says quietly. "I believe you. Let's just...see how it goes."

She nods, even though he doesn't see it, and then turns her face up to the night sky.

They lay there for a long time.

Neither drops the other's hand.

"Midnight?" I call, seeing the little figure crossing the grass, dragging her feet and looking down. I frown, standing from my place at Jackson's side on the little wicker loveseat that mom got us for our front porch.

Jackson looks up too, curious, and even Marigold lifts her head from her collection of toys on the front porch, a little stuffed tiger taking pride of place in her lap.

"Hi," Midnight calls, climbing up our front steps, looking a little wobbly. "Um, I rejected Jesse."

"What!?" I breathe, going quite still.

"Oh, heavens," Jackson murmurs. "Are you okay?"

"What happened!?" I gasp. Jackson gives me a little nudge down the bond that's equivalent to a dirty look, letting me know that that's not what's important right now.

Like hell it's not, I snarl back, shoving his little nudge away. Inwardly he laughs.

"Um, it's a long story," Midnight says, looking totally exhausted. She eyes the couch and the empty space at Jackson's side. "Can I...can I come sit down? For a little bit?"

"Of course you can," I say, reaching for her, ushering her over to the seat.

Midnight sits down and begins to talk softly to Jackson, telling him everything. I wait long enough to hear that she held on to part of the bond, and that Jesse is sad but okay, and that she sent Daphne to him. With a sigh and a glance up to the roof of the Castle, hoping Daphne found him, I head inside and make four big cups of cocoa.

After I bring them back out and pass them around, I curl up in Jackson's lap and listen to Midnight tell the whole story. It takes a long time, but by the end of it...

"I'm proud of you, Mids," I say quietly, giving her a small smile.

She looks up at me in surprise.

“I mean, I’m sorry that you’re hurting, and Jesse too,” I continue. “But...you’re going after what you want in this life. And not letting anyone else define that for you. I think that’s incredibly brave.”

“You did it too,” Midnight says, looking up at me, wiping away a tear or two and then taking a big sip of her cocoa. “You’re half the reason I thought I could.”

Goldie, I think sensing that her friend might want it, climbs onto the poor strained little wicker couch too and curls up in Midnight’s lap. Midnight smiles at her and hugs her close.

I smile at my new cousin, glad that she’s here, glad that she’s come to talk to us about it.

“Life...is about to go through some pretty serious changes, isn’t it?” Jackson says to both of us, even as he tilts his head up to smile at me.

I press a kiss to his mouth, probably more lingering than is polite, before I smile around at everyone. “Yeah,” I say, sighing and cuddling close to my mate, letting my eyes fall finally on our little girl while I send a mental pulse of joy and excitement to the twin bonds in my soul. “Yeah, it’s all changing. And I, for one, can’t wait for it.”

“Me too,” Jackson says, pressing a kiss to my cheek.

“Me too,” says Midnight, closing her eyes and resting her head against the loveseat.

“Me too,” says Marigold, grinning up at me.

And I smile right back, because even if her answer is the same as the others and she probably doesn’t know what it means, it’s by far my favorite.

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Jesse sighs, glancing at his watch and then looking to the door, an undrunk glass of champagne in his hand. “Where the hell is your damn sister?”

“Your damn cousin,” Rafe murmurs, draining his glass and then pouring himself another.

“You’d better stop that,” Jesse says, turning his head to Rafe with a frown. “There won’t be any for Ari at the rate you’re going-

”

Rafe laughs, shrugging. “Her fault! She was late! She knows the rules.”

Jesse grins at Rafe and then turns his eyes to the chaos of the roof, which has kids running all over it. “Didn’t we pick this place because it was quiet and secret? So that the three of us could have a moment alone every Midwinter?”

“Yes, we did,” Rafe murmurs, frowning around at the shouting, laughing kids. “But that was before your ex-mate created the ultimate kid fort and gave the pups free reign.” He raises his glass towards Midnight’s converted yurt, in and out of which all the children run, laughing and playing even as the hour grows late.

As the pair watch, Seraphina growls and chases Marigold back inside, where a waiting Mark snatches her up into his arms in a pretend attack. The little girl shrieks with delight as Seraphina jumps up and down, shouting that it’s her turn.

“Don’t blame Midnight,” Jesse murmurs, smirking at the yurt. “First, because it was your mom that converted it into the kid paradise it is. And second because Midnight is getting... powerful. She’ll probably kick your ass.”

Both turn their eyes to where Midnight stands across the roof on a little wooden block, smiling down at Daphne, who kneels at her feet. Daphne laughs at something Midnight says, her eyes crinkling with joy, even as she plies her needle to hem the head-to-toe black outfit that she made Midnight as a gift for Midwinter.

Ben, Elias, and Pippa stand at Midnight’s other side, curiously watching Daphne’s process and chatting softly. Pippa presses a sleeping Bianca to her chest, the little girl – nearly one year’s old – slumped with exhaustion, her head on her mother’s shoulder. 1

“Why does Mids even need a spy disguise,” Rafe murmurs, laughing even as he sips more of the champagne. “She just...sinks into the shadows anyway.”

“Because she looks cool,” Jesse says, grinning over at the girls and watching as Midnight experiments with pulling up the hood and lifting the fabric that covers her nose and mouth. Even though he can’t see most of her face anymore, he can tell by the shine in her black eyes that she’s desperately pleased.

“It is very cool,” Rafe concedes. He turns to Jesse. “How are things going with Daphne, anyway?”

Jesse beams, bright and shining. “Fantastic.”

“Still no bond?”

Jesse shrugs, tearing his eyes from his girl and turning to Rafe, giving him his full attention. “Nah, but...same feeling like there should be, like we’re waiting for it to snap into place any moment. But what about you?” he asks, leaning against the counter and

giving Rafe his sneakiest grin. "I noticed Maryam wasn't at the festivities yesterday or today."

Rafe groans, tilting his head back to stare up at the sky.

"Did you forget to invite her?"

Rafe snaps his head back up, glaring at Jesse. "Of course I invited her."

"How rude of her not to come," Jesse says, grinning so wide it crinkles his eyes half shut. Rafe just groans, shaking his head. "So, seriously...it's not going well?"

"It's...going." Rafe says, clearly not comfortable getting into it. "Just...she's a very challenging person, Jess."

"Sometimes the challenging ones are the best ones," Jesse murmurs. "Keeps you on your toes. Nice and spicy."

Rafe smirks, his voice dropping low as he glances at his cousin. "You have no idea."

Jesse bursts out laughing and smacks Rafe's arm. "Tell me!"

"No way!"

"Tell me!" he smacks again. "Right now!"

Rafe hisses in pretend pain, leaning away to throw Jesse off the scent, but Jesse just laughs harder and smacks his cousin again. "Hi! Hi!"

They both turn towards Ariel's voice as she stumbles out the door, a little tiny form strapped to her chest. "I'm here now! I'm sorry! Who's telling who what!? Tell me too!"

"No, forbidden!" Jesse says, pointing at the baby in its sling. "We said just the three of us, no offspring!"