

# **The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy**

## **Read Chapter 131 - 150**

### **Chapter 131**

#### **Chapter 131**

Chapter 0231

“Um,” I say

say, feeling utterly awkward as I look between Ben’s slack jaw and Jesse’s appalled expression. I am suddenly very, very aware of Jackson’s forearm tucked neatly below my ass, holding me up against him, and the way that my leg intuitively curled itself over his hip, like it belongs there.

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Ben’s mouth drops open further as he realizes that this is not a mistake that I’m not fighting Jackson, demanding that he put me down.

“Get off of her!” Jesse shouts, starting forward, livid, raising his fist like he’s going to beat the shit out of Jacks.

Jackson snarls, taking a step away, holding me possessively to him as Rafe stands and jumps between my mate and my cousin.

“Whoa, whoa, Jess!” Rafe shouts, putting out a hand to stop our cousin in his tracks. “You don’t have all the information here!” Jesse obligingly skitters to a stop, looking between Rafe and me with his mouth open.

—

“What are you talking about!?” Jesse shouts, staring at Rafe in shock. “You’re just — you’re okay with this!? What the hell happened out there —”

“You didn’t tell them?” Jackson murmurs, turning his face to me with a little frown of confusion.

“Tell us what?” Ben asks, eager, sitting forward and resting his chin in his palm. His expression has turned from one of shock to delight at the drama unfolding before him.

“Um,” I reply, going still with awkward fear, having absolutely no idea what to say. “No, she didn’t tell them,” Rafe sighs, turning back to Jesse. “Though she should have –”

“What information am I missing here,” Jesse says, speaking fast in his outrage and growing panic. “Because, Rafe, I actually think you’re the one missing some facts – Ariel and Jackson cannot date, she’s already –”

“Jesse!” I shout, bursting into action in my panic and wriggling in Jackson’s arms, desperate to get down. “Shut up!”

“Shut up?” Jesse asks, sufficiently diverted but turning to me now, angry. “What...why do you...Ari!” he shouts, stepping towards me now as Jackson hesitantly lowers feet, but doesn’t let me out of his arms. “What the fuck is going on!”

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Ben just stares between all of us in shock and delight as Rafe sighs, shrugging at me. “It’s time, Ari. You should just let everyone know now – no reason to keep it a secret anymore.”

I open my mouth, not knowing what to say, feeling that Jackson is looking down at me with love and support in his eyes.

And then, just at the absolute worst moment possible...a little knock comes at the open door.

“Hey, guys, did dinner come up yet?”

We’re all completely silent as we turn to look at Luca, who cheerfully steps into the room and presses the door shut behind him.

“Is Ari here?” he asks, looking around.

And then his eyes fall on me, peeking out from Jackson’s other side, my mate’s arm still wrapped around me. Luca’s face falls slack, probably matching mine for shock and pallor.

Shit shit shit.

How am I not better prepared for this!?

Luca processes his shock faster than mine, instantly moving into rage.

“Get your fucking hands,” he snarls, taking a dangerous step forward into the room, his canines lengthening as he levels a murderous glare at Jackson, “off of my fucking mate.” “Wait, what?” Rafe snaps, taking an aggressive step towards Luca.

Jackson snarls in response, releasing me from his embrace only to tuck me protectively behind his back. “She is my mate, Grant,” he growls, and I can feel his rage pulsing through him now at the claim Luca is making on me.

The claim Jackson doesn’t know that Luca has every right to make.

“Stop!” I gasp, sensing the perilous edge that both of my mates are teetering on right now, about to tip into violence. I dart to the right, trying to get around Jackson, to meet Luca’s eyes, sending a desperate plea down both of my bonds to stop, to calm, to wait

Because both of them, I can tell, are on the brink of shifting. And neither is going to survive it if they tear into each other now.

“Ariel!” Luca snaps, “get over here!”

His words are desperate, a plea as much as a command. He’s asking me, publicly, to recognize him – to tell everyone who he is to me, what we are to each other.

Instinctually my feet move, and I step to Jackson’s side, eager to get between them. Jackson gasps, his hand reaching out, grasping my arm. “Ariel,” he stutters, shocked, “what are you

“Get off of her!” Luca roars again, taking another step towards us, his eyes locking on Jackson’s hand wrapped possessively around my arm.

## **Chapter 132**

### **Chapter 132**

Chapter 0232

“Luca!” Rafe shouts, just as Jesse shouts Jackson’s name, both of them baffled.

I shake my head at Jacks, begging him to understand as I keep moving forward, as I place myself between my mates. And the moment I step actually between them, holding out a hand, palm out, towards each, begging them to stop

I realize that it was a mistake.

I mean, I don’t know what else I could have done, but it was a mistake.

Because in that moment, each of my mates sees that I’m not denying the other. Luca’s eyes flash to Jackson’s just as Jackson’s move to his. There’s a brief moment of silence

before Jacks releases a horrible, desperate snarl. Luca roars in response before, in a flash, they both shift into their wolves.

Ben realizes what is happening half a second before everyone else, and he's the only one to move in time. My friend releases a shout, hurling himself up from the couch and leaping over the coffee table to tackle me to the floor just

as the two wolves crash into each other

above us.

And god, the sound they make –

The crashing roars they release sound unending, so loud in our tight stone room that it feels my eardrums will shatter. Ben wraps an arm around me, pulling me away, back against the stone of the fireplace as I cover my ears with my hands, tears slipping down my cheeks. I try to look, but god, there's blood-

And as each of my mate's emotions rage through me, I'm completely overwhelmed. I no longer have any idea which of my emotions are mine, and which are theirs scream, and scratch, and bite, and intercede, and stop them, and

– I want to

Somewhere, outside, I feel Ben wrap me up in a tight ball as more noise adds to the fury-

And suddenly, somehow, the feelings change shock and confusion adding to the anger, and a sudden

sense of shame, and restraint

–

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I open my eyes, my senses slowly coming back to me, and my face goes still when I see that there are four wolves in front of me now Jackson's scruff in his mouth, not biting him but a warning growl rumbling deep in his

Rafe's huge dark wolf snarling as he holds chest. Jesse's familiar brown wolf stands between Rafe, Jackson, and the fourth wolf, who is a lighter brown – almost blonde – panting and snarling his warning. But then Jesse shifts,

his hands out between them.

"This is done!" Jesse shouts, glaring viciously between Jackson and Luca. "Shift the fuck back! We are getting to the bottom of this, right now!"

There's a long pause as we all look around at each other before Jackson shakes himself, just a little, and Rafe loosens his grip on his neck. Luca shifts then, and my eyes go directly to him, groaning when I see his bloody lip, the swelling already starting around his eye.

I move, wanting to be next to him instantly, to check on his wounds – but Ben tightens his hands on my arms. "You stay...right here..." he murmurs in my ear. "For just a little longer, okay?"

Realizing that he's right, I stop, though I can't stop the whimper in my throat as Luca stares at me, appalled.

There's another flash to my right, and when I look I see Jackson getting slowly to his feet. He didn't come out of it as badly as Luca did, but I see his hand move instantly to his jaw, rubbing it like he's assessing the damage.

Rafe shifts a moment later, turning to me in his rage. "Ariel!?" he says, glaring down at me. "Is there something that you want to explain here!?"

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"Um," I say, glancing at Ben, who sighs and releases his grip on me. The two of us get to our and I look awkwardly around the room, tears welling in my eyes, not knowing where to begin. I feel so horribly selfish and overwhelmed because I know I need to tell them – all

of them.

It's just – I have no idea where to start...

"Ariel," Luca says, his voice desperate and heartbroken as he takes a step towards me. A snarl breaks from Jackson and my head whips towards him, but I see Rafe's hand out in a flash, catching Jackson in the chest.

"Stop," Rafe growls, glaring at the other Alpha who only he could probably hold back. "Let them talk."

I turn my head back to Luca, who is just staring at me, crushed. "Why...Ariel, why is he saying that he's your mate?"

"Because," I whisper, locking my eye with his. "Because, Luca...he is."

## Read Chapter 133

### Chapter 133

#### Chapter 133

Chapter 0233

The room is silent for a long moment and I'm shocked when it's Jesse's voice that breaks it.

"Whaaat the fuckkk," Jesse groans, turning in a tight circle and covering his face with his hands before dragging them down over his features and turning to glare at me, just as Rafe is.

The room explodes again into noise, everyone shouting at once, except for Jackson, who just stares at me, wary.

"Stop, stop!" I shout, putting my hands out again as tears slip from my eyes, my voice shaking. "Everyone shut up!"

To my surprise, all of the Alphas comply, going still and letting me speak.

I turn my head to look at Luca for a long moment, taking in every devastated line of his face, the shock and the heartbreak, all of which pulses down our bond as well, threatening to take me out at the knees. "Jackson is my mate," I say quietly, solidly, claiming him. Dread fills me now, and I know that it's only half mine as I turn to Jackson, seeing it on his face too.

Because he senses what's coming.

"But so is Luca," I continue, my voice hitching, my heart breaking as I look into Jackson's eyes. Because I know I know what it meant to Jackson to find me, to have me.

—

And I know what it's going to mean to find out that I'm not his. Or at least, not his alone.

"You're both my fated mates," I whisper, wanting to be perfectly clear as I send all the love I can down both of my bonds to each of them, hoping to communicate how much I want them, how each of them is precious to me. "The Goddess...she gave me two mates. She gave me both of you."

Silence again, for a long moment, before Jackson breaks it with a long moan that tears my heart to pieces. Because my stoic mate- if he'd had any choice at all in the matter, he'd never have made a sound, never have let anyone know how he feels. But this he couldn't help it.

A terrible sob rips from me as I watch Jackson turn away to face the wall, watch him cover his face with his hand, watch his shoulders shake as he tries to process everything. And the grief that ripples off of him in a wave – I stumble back a step, and only Ben reaching out to take me by the shoulders, to steady me, stops me from falling to the floor.

But that's not the end of it. God, crap, it's just the beginning.

"Are you fucking kidding me, Ariel!?" Luca gasps, stepping forward towards me, mad as hell. Jesse steps forward too, ready to intercede, but I put up a hand towards him. Because Luca's my mate – there's no way he'd consciously hurt me, and he has every right to be livid with me right now.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, shaking my head as I look up into his eyes. "I didn't know...how to tell you. Either of you. It was all so new and everyone thought I was a boy

—

"this is...this "Wait," Rafe says, and from the corner of my eye I see him step towards us, is real? Luca is her mate? I thought Jackson

"Jackson is her mate!?" Jesse counters, turning towards him, and the two begin a hurried, angry conversation, comparing notes.

I keep my eyes focused on Luca in front of me, even though half my heart is with Jackson across the room, who I can tell is...well, having a little bit of a breakdown. I hear footsteps behind me moving in his direction, and I know instinctually that it's Ben, being the good person that he is and going to stand with him.

"Ariel," Luca says again, softer now, still angry but staring at me with his own grief written clear on his face as he reaches out and takes my face in his hands. "You...you picked him? You claimed him? As your mate?"

"No," I say, shaking my head and wrapping my hands around his wrists. "Luca, I didn't do this – the Goddess did she...god, this is going to sound so weird, but she's my grandmother –"

## Chapter 134

## Chapter 134

### Chapter 0234

“What?” he sputters, disbelieving.

“It’s true, but it’s not important – but she picked Jackson, she picked both of you for me

“That’s fucking impossible!” Luca yells, dropping his hands from my face and throwing them out to the side. “You get one mate one

I don’t know who told you that you could have two, but they were lying, Ariel!”

—

“Actually,” Jesse snaps, pausing his angry conversation with Rafe to turn to us. Luca’s eyes. move instantly to him. “It’s not impossible. Their dad had two fated mates.” Jesse points between Rafe and me. “So,” he shrugs. “Family precedent. And all that.”

“Wait, what?” Rafe sputters, grabbing Jesse’s arm and making him face him. The two begin. to speak again in hushed tones as Luca stares at them for a second before he shakes his head. to clear it, turning back to me.

“Listen, if it’s real- and he just hasn’t tricked you into believing he’s your mate or

something,” Luca shouts, “I don’t even care how it happened! But you have to end it, Ari! Just reject him!”

My eyes on und

horrified at the suggestion.

Luca sees my reaction and his jaw drops. “You...you’re not going to reject him!?”

“Luca, no = ”

He groans, turning away from me like he can’t bear to look at me anymore, his whole body starting to tremble with the insane mix of emotions coursing through him right now.

“Luca, I can’t ”

—

“You can, Ariel!” he shouts, turning on me and clenching a fist between us but determined. “I don’t know what the fuck is going on here, but you and me!? We’re

not violent,



meant to be together! I don't care who the fuck that guy is, or what some Goddess said, you are my mate," he pounds his fist against his chest now with the words as his voice cracks, and tears start to slip down my cheeks as I feel every inch of how much he means them.

I shake my head, not knowing what to say as I press my hands to my heart. "I am your mate, Luca –"

"Don't you get it?" Luca says, softer now, coming close again, staring down at me desperate and devastated. "Don't you get how shatteringly in love with you I am? Ariel..." he shakes

his head, wrapping a gentle hand around my neck and pulling me closer to him. "I am yours, and you are mine, and that is the end of it. The end of everything of the entire fucking universe="

—

And then his hand tightens, pulling me closer so that he can kiss me. His lips move on mine like a promise, like everything is complete.

And my heart breaks, because as much as half of me sings to hear him say it – that he loves me, beyond just being mated to me –

The other half of my heart is storming towards the door now, devastated.

I pull my face from Luca's, a little cry on my lips as I watch Jackson tear open the door, watch him move swiftly through it. I move instantly towards him, needing to catch him, needing to explain

But Luca grabs my arm. "Are you kidding me!?" he shouts, appalled. "Ariel! Do not go him!"

"Luca!" I shout back, gesturing towards the door. "He's my

after

"Your fucking mate," Luca groans, dropping my arm and lifting his hands to knot them in his hair, at the end of his patience, maybe even his sanity. I stare at him, wanting to go to him as well, to explain further because he needs so much information, and he deserves it, I know that now-

But...

My eyes move again to the door, wanting to follow Jacks too because he deserves the very same thing. And as much as Luca is throwing a fit right now not that I blame him, it's a very well-deserved fit – I know that Jackson is taking this harder.

To Jackson, I was the one good thing in this world.

## Chapter 135

### Chapter 135

Chapter 0235

And now he thinks he's lost me.

And he's just...gone.

"Stay here, Ariel," Jesse says, and I jump when I realize that he's standing at my side. "I'll go after Jacks. Just....stay in the room, all right?"

"Jesse," I murmur, reaching for him, apology all over my face.

"It's fine," my good cousin says, taking my hand and giving it a little squeeze. "I mean, it's not fine, but..." he sighs, shaking his head. "We're fine, all right? Deal with your drama, I'll be back when I can."

And with that, my cousin storms off after my mate.

I turn back to Luca, who I'm surprised to see standing staring at me in a newly determined way, his hands on his hips. "I'm not doing this," he says, shaking his head, his voice set. End things with him, Ariel – I'm not...I can't do this. I love you too damn much to share you with that jackass."

Luca tears his eyes from me like he can't bear to look at me anymore and strides for the door, yanking it open and likewise starting down the hall. I stare after him with my jaw open – not because what he said is really that surprising or even unfair...

I just...

God, what the fuck just happened? How did the entire world just explode within the last five minutes – all

all my carefully veiled secrets, ripped open at once...

"I'll take care of that one," Rafe says, sending me a glance as he, too, strides for the door. " But don't even think that we're done talking about this, Ariel."

I don't say anything, just watching in shock as Rafe, too, passes through the door and slams it shut behind him.

And then the room is...absolutely silent. Stupidly silent, after everything that just happened.

God, what the hell, they transformed into their wolves for heaven's sake – they fought each other...

And now I'm just standing here in silence. With Ben.

I almost leap out of my skin when the dumbwaiter's absurdly cheerful bell sounds, but I don't even turn to watch as Ben quietly moves to the dumbwaiter and takes something out. Instead, I just stand and stare into space, trying to put the shards of my reality back together.

They know. My mates know after months of keeping it secret....

Now they just...know.

From the corner of my eye I see Ben carry whatever he took from the dumbwaiter quietly to the coffee table, but I don't pay attention to it. I barely notice, still staring at the door, when he takes me by the shoulders, and guides me over to the couch, and sits me down, and lays the green blanket over my knees, and puts a fork in my hand.

I only start to come back to the present moment as Ben lifts a knife to cut the ridiculous chocolate cake in front of us that reads "Congratulations!"

I sit in perfect silence, holding my fork, as Ben lifts a slice and puts it on a plate, sighing as he holds it out to me.

"Come on, Princess," he murmurs. "You need this."

I stare at Ben, blank, as I take the cake from his hand and settle the plate on my lap.

"If it helps at all," Ben murmurs as he cuts another slice and leans back onto the couch with it, scooping up a forkful and lifting it to his mouth. "I'm gay and in love with your brother."

I quietly watch as Ben takes a bite of the thick cake, chews it and swallows.

"Yeah," I sigh, turning to look down at my plate as I cut off the corner of my cake with the edge of my fork and lift it to my lips. "I kind of figured."

Ben just huffs a little laugh, taking another bite.

## Chapter 136

### Chapter 136

Chapter 0236

"Jacks!"

Jackson hears his name called behind him, but he doesn't register it, or doesn't care. Instead, he just continues to stride forward in the dark, not really knowing where he's going, just needing to get...out. Get away. Disappear into the night, into the wilds, into... whatever.

Any place but that castle.

Any place but here.

"Jacks! You asshole!" the voice comes again, closer this time, and Jackson's instincts make him pay attention to it, his wolf turning inside him to growl at whatever's coming. "Slow down! I know you can hear me!"

Jackson moves on, determined, but inside him his wolf turns again, raising his nose a little, a whine in his throat. Jackson pushes him away, but the wolf persists, pressing his snout into Jackson's hand. Come on, the wolf says, listen. It's Jesse. We like Jesse.

Jackson is the one growling now, insisting that he doesn't like anyone, but his wolf just nuzzles against his hand, sad, not wanting to run anymore. So Jackson sighs, and slows, and turns when Jesse's footsteps come near.

"What the hell man," Jesse says, bending over and panting a little, "I've been chasing you for like, twenty minutes!"

"Should have been faster," Jackson mutters, shrugging and looking away, shoving his hands deep into his pockets.

"Don't be a dick," Jesse growls. "I'm trying to be nice to you, the least you could do is let me."

“Nice to me?” Jackson huffs, turning to glare at Jesse a little. “Do you seriously think that’s going to fix anything?”

“Yeah, Jacks,” Jesse says, standing up straight and crossing his arms, “I think that being nice to you is just going to make Ariel magically not have a second mate. Obviously, that’s what I think.”

Jackson narrows his eyes. “You’re being a jerk, Jesse,” he growls, turning to walk away again. “Jacks!” Jesse groans, and Jackson tugs his arm out of Jesse’s grasp when Jesse grabs it.”

Don’t you get it!? I am being nice to you! This is what people do!”

“What?” Jackson asks, still walking but turning towards the slightly smaller Alpha to glare at him. “Do what? You’re not doing anything – you’re just bothering me –”

“Exactly!” Jesse exclaims, keeping pace with Jackson’s long stride. “That’s what people do! People who care about each other! When something shitty happens, you show up, and you’re just there!”

“That doesn’t do anything,” Jackson grumbles, discontent – but honestly, nothing, really, would work for him right now. Nothing can make this better – nothing will make this better.

Ariel – Ari – his mate. But she’s not really his, is she? He’d thought he’d had her, he’d thought for a blissful couple of days that she was his. That everything was going to be okay. That for once he had...like, a shot at this life, at this thing they call happiness.

But he never really had it, did he?

No, it was all an illusion. Because she was lying the whole time.

“Jackson,” Jesse sighs, grabbing his arm again and making him stop.

Or, well, Jackson agrees to stop – because Jesse...he’s not big enough to actually stop him. But they pause anyway, on the top of a hill, darkness all around. And Jackson hangs his head as he waits, because...well, where is there to go, anyway?

“This is me trying to do something, all right?” Jesse says, his voice softer now, his hand gentle on Jackson’s arm. “Something shitty happens, and even though they can’t do anything about it, the people who care about you show up. And they hang around. So, please. stop walking away from me and let me do that for you!”

“Why?” Jackson growls, not getting it.

To iu

be there!” Jesse exclaims, throwing out his hands. “To show you that I care, are, that you’re not alone! To...stop you from throwing yourself into a ditch, or whatever!” Jesse pauses, staring at Jackson, waiting for him to respond, but Jackson just stands perfectly still, staring at him. “Or to throw you into a ditch, if you keep being an asshole about it.”

At this, Jackson huffs a laugh.

“So would you stop running away?” Jesse mutters, crossing his arms now, a little cold in the night air now that he’s not running around after the big devastated Alpha. “I’m trying to... be here for you.”

“Fine,” Jackson says with a shrug. There’s a long moment of silence. “So, what do we do

now?”

“Whatever you want,” Jesse murmurs. “Walk. Sit. Just...exist, if you want to. Or you could...

talk to me about it.”

Jackson stares at Jesse like he’s insane if he thinks that’s going to happen, and to his surprise Jesse bursts out laughing, taking a step forward and clapping a hand on Jackson’s shoulder. “Jacks, seriously, I need you to tell me...did you grow up under a bridge or something? Why don’t you know how to let someone comfort you?”

And Jackson sighs, a long, deep breath, and just looks down at the ground.

And Jesse sighs with him, realizing that...well, that the answer is because nobody ever has comforted him. And Jesse’s heart, like Ariel’s, absolutely breaks for this guy.

“Come on, you weirdo,” Jesse murmurs, pushing on Jackson’s shoulder warmly and turning him a bit. “Let’s do a little walk. You don’t have to say a damn word to me. I’ll just...be here.”

## Chapter 137

### Chapter 137

Chapter 0237

Jackson nods, and to Jesse's surprise, lets him walk by his side.

They walk for a long time. Jackson is surprised, after a while, at how quiet and stoic Jesse is. Jesse doesn't sigh or moan that he's bored, like Jackson thought he would. He doesn't complain, or fuss, or anything. He just walks quietly at Jackson's side as they circle the castle, losing themselves in the woods and then along the cliffs that border the northern edge, that overlook the candidate barracks below.

When Jackson pauses at the edge of the cliff, looking far, far north, peering into the dark, Jesse clears his throat.

Jackson scowls, looking over at him. "I thought you said we could not talk?"

"Listen, I tried," Jesse says, bursting into a grin. "You called my bluff on this one, Jacks. That is the longest I've ever been quiet in my entire life."

"And wasn't it nice?"

"It was horrible," Jesse groans, tilting his head back. And Jackson can't help but smile, because Ariel does that too when she's being dramatic.

It's a lot less cute when Jesse does it...but he smiles anyway.

"So," Jesse says, looking north in the same way Jackson does, into the dark. "I've been thinking about it, Jacks, and I gotta say...I'm kind of disappointed in you."

"What?" Jackson seethes, turning on this guy who just professed to want to help him. Jesse doesn't flinch, just continues looking north. "I mean, is it really all that bad?"

Jackson groans, lifting his hands to his face and pressing the heels of his palms lightly against his closed eyes. "Unbelievable," he mutters, starting to get pissed for real.

"No, but seriously," Jesse says, "think about it this way. What is so good about being mated to my stupid shrimp cousin, anyway? I mean, she's not that great."

Jackson drops his hands, gaping at Jesse, "She's not a stupid shrimp, Jesse," he bites out, furious. "She's amazing, that's what was so great about it! She's smart, and she's funny, and she's nice – and she's beautiful – and she...she gets me! She's pretty much the only person in the entire world who gets me. And she's brave, and I like being around her, even though I hate everyone else you included!"

"See?" Jesse says, breaking into a grin and pointing a finger at Jackson's chest. "That was a test, and

you passed. Ari is all those things, and if you didn't recognize how amazing she is I wouldn't let you date her."

Jackson's mouth drops open. "You can't...not let me date her."

"Yes I can," Jesse mutters, waving a dismissive hand, "I can do anything, I'm a Duke. But that's not important. What is important is that you recognize how great it is that you get

Ariel as your mate you're the luckiest bastard to ever walk to earth, to have had the

—

Goddess tie her to you. Now." Jesse nods, moving on like they're figuring out a math problem. "What's so bad about sharing her with Luca?"

Jackson pauses, looking for the trick in Jesse's question.

But even as he looks for it, he knows what the answer is. He stays quiet, not wanting to say it.

"May I venture a guess, as I suspect you ran through your daily quota of words with your last answer?"

Jackson just scowls at him.

"No, you're right, your weekly quota," Jesse says, nodding and clapping a hand again on Jackson's shoulder. "Jacks, what sucks about it is that you have to share her. With Luca, of all damn people. But having to share her – does that

does that mean you lose any of the good things?"

Jackson takes a long moment before he sighs, looking down at the ground. "No," he murmurs, rueful, "I don't lose any of the good things just because he's her mate too. But I...I might lose... her..."

God, the thought of it. Tears prick at Jackson's eyes again, and he grits his teeth against them, getting sick of all this damn crying. What the hell is with that, anyway? He never cried this much in his life, and now he's mated for three days and spends half the time wiping salt water off his cheeks.

Jesse, to his credit, pretends not to notice Jackson's manly sniff, the way he brushes beneath his eyes with his wrists. Instead, Jesse pretends to look at a particularly interesting star for precisely as long as it takes for Jackson to pull himself back together.

"I get it, Jacks, I really do," Jesse says, quiet, still not looking at Jackson. "The idea of losing her... it's probably killing you. But there's no faster way to lose her than to storm out of rooms and let Luca have all the time he wants with her. Luca is charming as hell, man. He's going to wrap Ari around his finger without you there to stop him."



Jackson's jaw drops as he stares first at Jesse and then up at the castle, realizing that Jesse is

right.

"I know you're scared you're going to lose her," Jesse says quietly, "but Jackson – you're acting like you already have. If that's your girl, Jacks? Then go and get your girl. Don't let Luca take her. But also, why are you so afraid that Luca's going to get her, anyway!?"

## Chapter 138

### Chapter 138

Chapter 0238

"Because!" Jackson bursts out, tossing out his hands. "It's Luca fucking Grant, Jesse! Even I had heard of him, and I haven't heard of anyone! And he's...he's good with women! And he can talk to her, and make her laugh! And he's like...good looking, or whatever! How the hell am I supposed to compete with that!?"

Jesse stares at Jackson for a long moment before a slow grin starts on his face.

Jackson scowls, hating him a little bit. "What?" he snaps. "What are you smiling about? Are you laughing at me? Seriously!?"

"I'm not laughing at you, Jacks," Jesse says, shaking his head but continuing to smile. "It's just you have no idea what you have going on, do you? This bridge you grew up under, did

—

it not have a mirror?"

Jackson just stares at Jesse for a long moment before he cocks his head. "Because...was that a... compliment? Hidden beneath all of those insults?"

"Listen," Jesse says, reaching an arm around Jackson's shoulders and pulling him close like he's sharing a deep secret, "I'm going to speak plainly, so pay attention – because this doesn't happen often. But Jackson – women like you."

"How can women like me – I don't know

I don't know any women –

“Fine,” Jesse says, grinning, clearly enjoying himself. “When you get to the Capital, and you hang out with all of the girls we’re going to introduce you to? They’re going to like you. Like, a lot – in a romance kind of way. They’re going to like you as much as they like Luca, or more. But none of that matters, because Ariel really likes you, man! Despite all the odds, and in a way that I truly do not get – you make her laugh, just as much as Luca does!”

Jackson lifts his eyes just a little, remembering that they did laugh a lot that night during the Examination, remembering how good it felt to make her laugh. Jesse’s grin deepens. “Luca Grant doesn’t have anything you don’t,” Jesse continues. “Okay? So...stop acting like it’s a done deal. I had to stop Ariel from chasing you out of that room tonight and leaving Luca Grant behind. That is... not insignificant, Jacks. And it’s the only thing you need to be concentrating on right now.”

Jackson turns his head slowly to look back into Jesse’s face, shocked at the weird wisdom of

guy who always seems so flippant, so easy.

this

How...how does he know precisely the right thing to say?

“I’m here for you, man,” Jesse says, tightening his arm and giving Jackson’s shoulders a squeeze. “I’ll even give you a pep talk every day, if you want it.”

“Why?” Jackson asks, baffled about why Jesse is being so damn nice to him right now.

“Because I like you, you idiot!” Jesse laughs, punching Jackson on his arm in playful frustration. “Because you’re my friend, even if you don’t yet realize that I’m yours!”

“Wait, but like...why?” Jackson asks, smiling a little more and shaking his head. “Why do you like me?”

“Oh my god,” Jesse groans, laughing more and dropping his arm from Jackson’s shoulders. Jacks...you seriously need some therapy. I like you because you’re a good guy, and you’re interesting, and you’re...well, you’re so weird that you make me laugh even when you don’t mean to. And also because you’re obsessed with my cousin, who I also like. And because we have the same stupid hobbies of running around and punching things. Why wouldn’t I like you?”

“So, you don’t just....like me because I’m Ariel’s mate?” Jackson’s voice is so hesitant that it breaks Jesse’s heart again.

“No, I’d probably like you more if you weren’t,” Jesse murmurs with a smirk, working hard to hide his impulse to wrap Jackson in a bear hug. “Because now I have to worry about walking in on you guys making out and stuff, which is...not ideal for a friendship.”

Jackson laughs, he can’t help it, and then he nods once, decided. Then, to Jesse’s shock, he starts to stride away, a new confidence in the set of his shoulders.

“Wait!” Jesse calls after him, hurrying to catch up. “Where the hell are you going!?”

“I’m going...” Jackson hesitates, looking between Jesse and the castle, “I’m going back, Jess, to get my girl! Like you just told me to!”

“Oh my god, you weird foundingling, don’t do that now – you’ll look desperate!”

“What!?”

“You’ve got to let her sweat a bit!”

“Whatttt the hell,” Jackson moans, covering his face with his hands for what feels like the thousandth time that night. “Why am I supposed to make her wait!?”

“Because, Jacks,” Jesse says, slipping an arm around his shoulders again and making him slow his pace to the castle. “Ariel did you dirty over the past few months, you need to let her feel a little guilty about it, even if just for a night! If you just barge in there and tell her it’s

all okay, then she’ll get the impression that she can do that whenever she wants.”

## **Chapter 139**

### **Chapter 139**

Chapter 0239

“How do you know this shit,” Jackson mutters, shaking his head, letting himself be led.

you

“You handle kicking the shit out of the bad guys,” Jesse says, giving Jackson a broad grin. “I’ll handle the girls. Besides, Rafe and I reserve the right to yell at Ariel tonight. We’ve known her longer, we get first dibs. You come to breakfast at our place tomorrow before the train leaves – really give her a piece of your mind then.”

"If you say so," Jackson sighs, his eyes moving upwards to the window he knows is hers or, at least, the one closest to the nook in which she sleeps. There's still a light on, which means she's still up.

"Trust me, Jacks," Jesse says, giving him a little squeeze, "I wouldn't do you dirty. We're friends now, after all. Best friends."

"Don't push it," Jackson grumbles. But as the pair walk back into the castle Jackson has to admit... the whole friendship thing, it does have its perks. Even if it involves a lot more talking than he'd prefer.

"So, how'd you know?" Ben murmurs, sitting at the other end of the couch while I stretch my legs between us. He digs into his half-eaten third slice of cake with abandon.

"Benny, my love," I sigh, lifting another forkful of chocolate icing to my mouth

"You'd better be careful with that word –" Ben says, pointing his fork at me with a wink. "Men have been beaten tonight for expressing lesser sentiments –"

"Oh, shut up," I murmur, rolling my eyes and kicking him, which just makes him laugh. Ben – he's really been an angel over the past hour or so, cajoling and teasing and being sweet to me by turns, all in the effort to get me back to myself, to make me realize that no permanent damage has been done. After all, all I did was tell the truth.

In...absolutely the most disastrous way possible.

—

Because I didn't even tell the truth I was so much of a coward that I couldn't even tell my mates the reality of our situation – I had to wait for them to just stumble upon it. God, what the hell is wrong with me –

"Don't go

there," Ben murmurs, leaning back against the arm of the couch now, as Luca so often does, and tapping my foot with his fork. "You're betraying the cake, and the insane piece of gossip I just handed you, if you just...ignore it and delve into your despair. Honestly, Ariel, I gave you my best distraction. Sooo? How'd you know?"

"Because," I sigh. "You laugh at all of Rafe's jokes, Ben, and he's not that funny."

Ben goes still and then bursts out laughing. "Yes, he is!"

"No," I say, smiling and shaking my head at him. "You're just listening to him with your love earmuffs on. My mom does it to my dad, from whom Rafe gets his sense of humor."

“Man,” Ben says, hanging his head back, shaking it. “Both of our greatest secrets, which we thought we were doing such a good job of keeping to ourselves, revealed by our laughter...

what are the chances of that.”

I grin at him, but then I lean forward and cock my head. “Benny,” I say, and he lifts his head. to smile at me. “Why did you keep it a secret? I mean, you know that I’d never judge you for it, right? And I have no idea if Rafe or Jesse knows, but I know they wouldn’t care –”

“Even if they wouldn’t care, Ari,” Ben murmurs, smirking a little as he pushes his cake around with a fork, “it would...change things, between us.”

“Do

you think so?” I murmur, curious, and pleased to be distracted from my own drama, even if just for a minute.

“Yeah, I think it would be different,” Ben says, definite. “I mean...Rafe. He’s not interested in

“I don’t know,” I say honestly, raising my eyes to Ben’s face even though he doesn’t look up. “We’ve never talked about whether or not he swings both ways. Though, Ben, I...I don’t think so. Of course, I could be wrong, but...”

“Nah,” Ben says, flicking his eyes up to mine with a little smile. “That’s my impression too. Looks like you got all the luck

huh? Two gorgeous men for you, me...nothing.”

“Benny,” I murmur, leaning forward and rubbing a hand across his knee. “If you...try to pretend you’re jealous of me right now...I’m going to kill you.”

Ben’s face just lights up with a smirk.

## Chapter 140

### Chapter 140

Chapter 0240

“One, Ariel Sinclair,” Ben says, laughing, “if you tried to kill me, I could take you.”

I laugh too, grinning at him.

“And two,” he continues, and my face falls along with his as real sorrow appears in his eyes, “if you’re asking me if I’m jealous of you having two of the most eligible men in the nation so upset that you’re not singularly in love with them that they’re ready to kill each other?” He leans forward, a bit intent, a bit sorrowful. “Yeah, babe. I’m jealous.”

“Oh, Ben,” I murmur, setting my plate of cake aside on the coffee table and leaning forward to him, reaching out. “It will be all right – it will all –”

“It won’t, though, will it?” Ben murmurs, taking my hand and looking down at his knees as he squeezes it, sweet and sorrowful and hopeless. “Not if I...if I want him...”

I squeeze his hand back, not knowing what to say, but the door opens and we both turn to it, both of us sighing to see an exhausted Rafe walk through.

“Dafo

“What is this,” Rafe murmurs, his eyes flicking over my hand held in Ben’s, the half-eaten chocolate cake on the coffee table. Ben and I...we really didn’t go easy on it, did we? “A third mate?”

“If only I were so lucky,” Ben sighs, standing up and then bending over to give me a fond kiss on the cheek.

“Thank you, Benji,” I murmur, looking up at him with true gratitude, not yet letting go of his hand just yet. “For being so nice to me.

“Anytime, Princess,” he murmurs, patting my cheek and then standing up straight, looking up at Rafe, the man he loves. “I take it my presence is no longer required?”

“Unfortunately for her,” Rafe murmurs, patting Ben on the shoulder with true gratitude, we need some family time for the next couple of hours.”

“Hours!?” I exclaim, appalled.

“Oh, hours,” Jesse, says, coming silently through the door in a way that would impress an Espionage cadet. “Absolute hours, baby trouble.”

And so Ben makes his way towards the door, preparing to leave us alone.

‘Come to breakfast, Ben!’ I call after him, knowing that the morning meal will be served in

rooms tomorrow instead of the Hall so that we all have time to pack. Neither Rafe or Jesse counter me, but after the door clicks shut, my cousin and my brother level their glares evenly on my face.

And I know that I'm in for it now.

"Oh, sit down, you big idiots," I grumble, shoving myself into the corner of the couch and making plenty of room for them. "Eat some cake while you yell at me. It's really good."

Jesse, taking me very seriously, cuts himself a slice and sits neatly across the couch from me in Luca's usual spot that Ben just vacated. "And aren't you interested, young lady? In the status of your mate, after I spend so much time consoling him just now?"

"Of course I'm interested, Jesse," I bite out, getting angry at him for teasing me when he knows I'm obviously dying to know how he left Jackson. "Don't mess around with it."

"And which mate would you like an update on first?" Rafe asks, all innocence, curling his legs beneath him and sitting on the floor next to the couch as he reaches for the cake that Jesse slices, puts on a plate, and holds out to him. On the surface Rafe's being glib, but beneath...

Beneath it all? I can tell he's mad. Really, really mad.

I sigh, not answering my brother, knowing that it was a rhetorical question anyway. And also, that they wouldn't have come back to the room if Luca and Jackson weren't relatively fine.

"Why didn't you tell us, Ariel?" Rafe asks, more serious now as he looks down at his plate and shakes his head. "You know we would have supported you –"

"That's a lie, Rafe," I snap, a little angry myself now – because it's not like I did this out of complete selfishness. It's not like I didn't have my reasons. "You would immediately have sent me back to the Palace if I told you on the first day that I had two mates in the barracks." Rafe looks up at me and turns his head, considering this for a second. "All right," he says. Touche, Princess, I absolutely would have. But to let it get to this? To get to here? I mean, fuck, Ariel, you introduced Jackson to our parents as your mate two days ago –

"Which was not a lie!" I protest.

"You did?" Jesse gasps, leaning forward and staring at me. "Ohhh, Luca's going to be pissed

"I introduced Luca too," I mutter, glaring at him over my cake. "To mom.

"Oh, so mom knows!?" Rafe asks, turning wide eyes up at me.

“Yeah, mom knows,” I sigh, listening to their forks placidly scraping their plates. “She’s going to tell dad before we get home.” I hesitate for a second, not knowing whether I should ask. “So, are you guys like...mad at me?”

“Yup,” Jesse answers immediately.

“Ariel,” Rafe sighs, and I turn my eyes to him. “I just spent an hour consoling your devastated mate. Luca is wrecked over this and I’m not trying to discount Jacksons’ feelings in this, or yours, but fuck, girl” he shakes his head. “Seriously? You couldn’t have told us, Jesse and me, so that we could be there for you? Help you figure out how to break it to them? So that we could be prepared for this and not have to shift into our wolves and tear ourselves to pieces to defend you? I mean, Luca is really messed up

## Chapter 141

### Chapter 141

Chapter 0241

My lip starts to tremble as I listen, tears again stinging my eyes, but Jesse leans forward.

“Rafe,” he murmurs, glancing between us. “Slow down a little, man. I mean, if we’re aware of what they’re feeling, then she’s aware of it double – she can feel it all down their bonds. And that, on top of her own feelings?” He shakes his head, holding Rafe’s gaze, willing him

to listen.

Rafe takes a deep breath and sighs, pushing his cake around on his plate, clearly thinking it through. In the end, though, he looks up at me. “Can you seriously feel everything they feel?”

“Not everything,” I murmur, my voice tight as I look down at my plate. “Not unless the emotion is really intense, or they send it to me deliberately. And not...across great distances. Only when they’re nearby, or in the room. Like I can’t feel them now.”

“Weird,” he murmurs, quietly eating his cake as he puts his thoughts together for a second. Jesse does the same.

After a long moment, Rafe breaks the silence.

“I just wish, Ariel,” he murmurs, truly hurt, “that you’d trusted me enough to let me know. I’d have told you, after all.”



My nose starts to sting at the true sadness and hurt in his voice, and then my throat gets tight. I blink fast, not wanting to cry, because I know that they have every right to be mad at me, but...

Well, the tears start to fall down my cheeks anyway.

"Aw, come on Ari, don't do that," Jesse murmurs, leaning forward and putting a warm hand on my knee. "We can't yell at you if you're crying, and we're not anywhere near finished."

"I know," I murmur, brushing frustratedly at my cheeks with the side of one hand. "I'm sorry, I'm really sorry –"

"No, I'm sorry," my brother murmurs, setting his plate on the coffee table and getting to his knees as he reaches for me, wrapping his arms around my body and pulling me into his lap. "I'm sorry, sis. I'm fucking livid with you but – god, fuck, I'm sorry you bore this alone. I'm sorry – I wish you'd have let me be there for you."

I cry harder, letting myself be overwhelmed by my grief and confusion, knowing he'll see me through it. Knowing he's strong enough for that.

"Oh, let her go, Rafe," Jesse murmurs, scootching closer and reaching out to put his his own plate on the coffee table, laying himself down on the couch so that all of our heads are very close together, so that we can talk and hear each other in barely more than a whisper, if we so choose. "We can't get all the gossip if she's crying like that."

"The gossip?" I ask, wiping my away all my tears, kind of appalled.

"Oh, all the gossip," Jesse murmurs, yawning and turning his head to grin at me. "Jackson's fine, by the way, thanks to yours truly. Going to show up here to breakfast tomorrow, newly determined to try for your hand. In exchange for your genuine gratitude, my love...I will accept the whole damn story. Right now."

"Same," Rafe says, giving me a solemn nod. "Luca's pissed as hell, and while...well, while he's not precisely prepared to grovel for you...he'll be here in the morning. So, madam trouble? The floor is yours."

And so, with a sigh, I unfold myself from Rafe's arms and sit on the floor next to him, beginning to tell them the whole story.

"Well," Rafe says, about an hour later, his eyebrows raised. "Actually, in retrospect, I'm glad I didn't know any of this. I would much rather have broken up one wolf fight after finals than have had to worry about this the whole term."

"Such empathy in my big brother," I say, lowering my eyelids into a half-hearted glare and reaching out my fingertips to give him a shove.

Rafe grins at me, chuckling a little, as Jesse lays on the couch next to us, staring at the ceiling, his head cushioned on a pillow.

“Honestly, Ari,” my cousin says, his voice more thoughtful than it usually is, “laid out like that I’m not sure you could have done it very differently. The only place you really seem to have fucked up was when you didn’t plan this evening – you just let both of them show up here, expecting dinner. It was a powder keg, ready to explode, but the rest of it?” My eyes are wide as I watch him shrug, desperate to know what he’ll say next.

## Chapter 142

### Chapter 142

Chapter 0242

“Yeah,” Jesse says, considering, assessing. “Yeah, Ari, with all of it – I think you did as well as you could.”

“Really?” I ask, kind of shocked.

nueves to him. “I mean, you had to get to “Yeah, I agree,” Rafe says with a sigh. I turn know them first to know if you even wanted to tell them you were their mate. And then you certainly couldn’t have told one before the other. And if you had told me, I definitely would have gone running off to mom and then dad would have pulled you out of school. The way

you

handled this was messy but...” he shrugs again. “I get it.”

“Oh god,” I mutter, putting my face into my tired hands with a shaky sigh. “That...that makes me feel so much better.”

“Maybe you could have used the dreamscape,” Jesse murmurs thoughtfully, “and pulled them both in. And then they couldn’t have hurt each other physically, just their dream bodies...”

“Well, in retrospect,” I say, crossing my arms and giving him a little glare, “sure, that sounds great, Jess.”

“For your next mate,” he says, waving a flippant hand. “Now you know.”

I smirk at him, but turn my head back to Rafe when he speaks next.

“Tomorrow’s going to be hard, Ari,” he says, peering at me thoughtfully. “They’re going to ...they’re going to really lay into you for this. And I do think you owe them apologies and explanations but...I don’t think you should let them make you feel too horrible about it.”

“Really?” I ask as Jesse turns, propping himself up on his elbow to hear what Rafe has to say.

“Yeah,” Rafe says, nodding seriously as he looks between us. “I mean, you’re not just some mean girl who is dating two guys and not telling them about it. You didn’t pick this – you didn’t even pick them! The Goddess gave you these mates, and I think it’s pretty clear that she wanted you to have them both at once.”

I perk up a little to hear it said this way.

“That makes sense,” Jesse says, nodding as well. “The Goddess put all three of you on this road together, and just because Luca and Jackson don’t like it doesn’t make it your fault. You have to remind them of that, Ari- and if they give you any shit about it, then we’ll remind them too.” He raises his fist, smacking it against his other palm with a smirk, letting me

know precisely how he intends to remind them.

“Yeah, don’t let them push you around,” Rafe says, frowning now at the idea. “Luca, especially, is going to try to convince you to turn away from your bond with Jackson. But you have every right to explore your bonds with both of your mates, to figure out why the Goddess picked them.”

Jesse nods to himself, deep in thought, speaking his ideas as he figures them out. “I mean, mates are supposed to be a gift – and she’s your grandmother, for heaven’s sake. I don’t think you should be ashamed of this, or feel bad about it, or try to stop it, Ari.”

“I agree,” Rafe says, looking at me evenly. “I think it would be a mistake to reject the

—

Goddess’ gift like that I think she’d be pissed, and you’d do yourself a disservice. I think you should explore it. While being as fair as you can to Luca and Jackson, of course. It’s not carte blanche to be a jerk to them.”

A deep well of warmth runs through me as I begin to smile, staring at my brother, who is so sweet, and so supportive. Tears again spring to my eyes.

“Oh geeze,” Rafe says with a sigh, reaching out and wiping at my cheeks with his thumb as the tears start to spill out. “What’s all this about? What did I say now?”

“Nothing,” I laugh, shaking my head and tilting it back while I sniff. “You’re just being really nice to me.”

“Of course we’re being nice to you, Ari,” Jesse says with a yawn, reaching out to ruffle my hair like he used to do when we were kids. “You’re our little baby trouble. We love you. We’d be bored without you.

I grin at the two of them, resting my head against the couch and letting my eyes fall half-shut, so grateful to the two of them for their love and their friendship and their eternal.

support.

## Chapter 143

### Chapter 143

Chapter 0243

“We got your back, Ariel,” Rafe murmurs, patting my knee. And then we spend the next few hours talking softly, letting our thoughts wander, none of us really making a move to go to bed. Instead, slowly – perhaps simultaneously we all fall asleep curled up next to each other like we used to do when we were kids. A puppy pile, mom used to call it.

And I think of that, of my mom, and my family, and how much I love the rich warmth of them as I fall asleep next to my two best friends.

Because I get to see the rest of them tomorrow.

And I can barely wait.

I gasp awake when the door flies open behind me, spinning and blinking and trying to figure out if I’m about to die

“I did it!” Ben shouts, giving a whoop of excited joy as Rafe leaps to his feet, his chest heaving with anxiety. Jesse just groans, turning over on the couch and burying his face in his pillow as I clasp a hand to my throat, trying to figure out if I had a heart attack. “I passed my finals! I get to stay!”

“Too bad you’re going to die in like four seconds, Ben!” Rafe snaps, scowling and striding over to Ben to snatch the piece of paper out of his hand. Ben ignores Rafe, dancing around the room as he pumps his fist in the air.

“I get to stay in school! I passed – I’m an Ambassador now, for real! Or at least, on my way to it!”

“That’s amazing, Ben, I’m very happy for you,” Jesse murmurs into his pillow. “Now shut up. Go away.”

I smile as I watch Rafe collect himself and smile at our friend, reaching out to grab Ben and wrap him into a big hug as he murmurs his congratulations. I grin at Ben, who peers at me over Rafe’s shoulder, watching him take a surreptitious sniff of Rafe’s scent as they break their quick hug.

I push myself to my feet as well, wincing as my stiff muscles unfold. God, sleeping on the floor – what a stupid idea

“Congrats, Ben,” I say, holding open my arms as I cross the room to him. Rafe lets him go and Ben steps to me, wrapping me in a hug and rocking me back and forth. “I’m so happy for you!”

“Did you get your results?” he asks, eager, looking down at me.

“Um, I don’t know, you kind of woke us up,” I say, looking towards the door. “How did you find out?”

“Slipped under my door this morning,” he says, letting go of me and striding for the still-open door, looking for a piece of paper. He sighs and turns to me, shaking his head.

I scowl, flopping down on the couch and making Jesse yelp when I land on the back of his

calves.

“Oh, you baby,” I mutter, “that didn’t hurt.”

“Be gentle with me,” Jesse whines, still burying his face in the pillow and pretending to be asleep. “I’m very delicate and you kept me up all night talking and I haven’t had any coffee

I laugh, smacking him on the back even as the dumbwaiter’s bell rings. I turn towards it, eager. “Sounds like coffee’s here anyway.” Even as I watch Rafe and Ben walk eagerly to the dumbwaiter, I can’t help the anxiety that rolls in my stomach.

Why did Ben get his results, but not me?

Is it just because he's on a different track?

Or... is it because I didn't pass? Is a different note coming soon, telling me to pack my things for good? Is it going to be –

"Is there enough coffee for one more?"

My head spins immediately to the door at the sound of Luca's voice, my eyes going wide. Jesse immediately sits up, his sleepy façade gone as he looks at Luca levelly, clearly

wondering – as I am just how upset he still is, and if he's volatile.

I go completely still, waiting for Luca to give me a sign about how this is going to go.

## Chapter 144

### Chapter 144

Chapter 0244

tmove.

As I anxiously study Luca, waiting for his but I can't help but notice how good he looks. Luca's freshly showered, dressed in the Cadet black that makes him look so sharp, his hair falling a little into his face in a way that just begs me to touch it, wanting to push it back. His lip is a little swollen and a bruise spreads beneath his left eye, but I don't know something about it really works for him. He just looks tough and sexy and a little dangerous in a way that I really, really like.

"Don't worry," Luca says with a smile as he puts up a defensive hand, smiling around at us in a way that makes his dimples flare. I melt, just a little...

Because god, he's just so cute-

"I'm not going to flip out," Luca continues, shaking his head at himself like he's disappointed in how he acted last night. "I'm just...here for breakfast. As promised."

Luca steps into the room a little more as he closes the door, his eyes moving over Ben and Jesse and Rafe before falling on me like that's the only place they want to rest. I hold his gaze, a little smile on my mouth. Because, I mean, I really am happy to see him – I'm always happy to see him.

But...what do we do now? Do I...should I get up and hug him? Throw myself into his arms, which is what I really want to do?

"Hey," he murmurs, the corner of his mouth turning up in a smile that's just for me.

"Hi," I whisper back, though I know he can hear me. A quick pulse of joy and anxiety and apology and warmth comes down the bond, letting me know that he's still conflicted but that he's really, really happy to see me.

I grin, because I feel the same way.

"Of course there's enough coffee!" Rafe says, his voice booming and making me jump as he steps around me and plops the silver coffee pot on the table with a loud thump, clearly intent on breaking the vibe between Luca and me. "So," he says, straightening up and putting his hands on his hips. "Rumor has it that you've been secretly dating my sister for months. Are you going to be nice to her today?"

And I burst into a grin when I see Luca grimace a little as he runs a hand through his hair, because I suddenly realize that Luca's been keeping a secret too. This whole time, he's been secretly dating his friend's sister which I'm pretty sure is against the rules, when it comes to guy friendships.

—

"Of course I'm going to be nice to her," Luca murmurs, looking around Rafe and finding me again, taking in my wide grin. Ben laughs as he moves to the coffee table, carrying plates of pastries and cups for the coffee.

"Good," Rafe says, the words carrying a great deal of weight. "Ariel?" he says, turning to me. I sit up in surprise. "Go get showered and changed you're a mess.

I squeak in appalled surprise, but when I look down at myself I realize that he's right. I am very rumpled. And if we're going to have a nice big chat, I'm going to want to look and feel. my best.

"Fine fine," I mutter as Ben offers me a cup of coffee made just how I like it. "But if you all eat all the breakfast while I am gone, I'm going to be mad!"

"No promises!" Jesse calls after me as I carry my coffee into the bathroom and work on making myself more presentable.

About twenty minutes later, when I draw the curtain back from my nook, freshly showered and changed with my hair braided onto my head but not yet tucked beneath my cap, I jump when I realize that Luca is leaning against the fireplace about a foot to my left, clearly waiting for me to come out.

“Hi,” he murmurs, immediately slipping an arm around my back and tugging me to his side, lowering his face to my hair and taking a long, slow sniff of my scent. “I like this,” he murmurs, “your scent by itself, not all mixed up with Jesse, of all revolting people.”

I grin, pleased despite my anxiety, leaning into him and putting a hand on the hard muscle of his stomach, looking up into his face. “Still mad at me?”

“Livid,” he whispers, but the way he smiles, and tugs me closer...I have to bite my lip, because I think it means we’re going to be okay. I tilt my chin up, wanting nothing more than to-

## Chapter 145

### Chapter 145

Chapter 0245

“Enough of that,” Rafe calls from across the room where he’s tossing what few personal possessions he has into a backpack. “Hands off, Luca. Still my sister.”

“Still my mate,” Luca calls back, but his voice is cheerful as he pushes himself up from the wall, letting his arm drift from behind my back so that he can grasp my hand as he tugs me over to the sitting area. Ben’s there too, his already-packed backpack at his feet, but he stands when we approach, going to pretend to help Jesse pack and giving us our space.

“So, I’ve been thinking about it,” Luca says, sitting down on the couch and pulling me with him so that we sit close together.

“Yeah?” I ask, encouraging him to go on. I turn towards him, taking his hands in mine, listening closely. Because I want, desperately, to know what he’s thinking – how he’s feeling about all of it.

“And,” he murmurs, reaching out a hand to tuck a strand of hair back from my face, “we still have to talk about...about you keeping this from me, Ariel. That was deeply unfair, and I ...I think it’s going to take a while for me to trust you again.”

I nod, understanding, listening to him and holding back my opinion on the matter. Because I do think that I was in a hard place with that it would have been horribly unfair to Jackson if I had told Luca that Jackson was my mate before I even told Jackson. But...that’s not really important now. Instead, I just want to hear Luca, to understand how he feels.



"But I didn't lie last night," Luca murmurs, his pretty brown eyes intent as he squeezes my hands. "I'm in love with you, Ariel – you're my mate, you're...you're everything to me. I'll do whatever it takes to make this right with us."

"Luca," I breathe, leaning closer, completely overwhelmed at how good he's being. "Thank you – I feel the same way – I'll do whatever it takes too, you're so important to me

"So, you'll reject him, then," Luca murmurs, tucking that same strand of my hair back again, his fingers warm as they caress the shell of my ear. "And then we'll move on! It will be amazing, Ariel, I promise I'll do everything I can to make you happy, everything, and we'll be so –"

I sit up straight, rigid, staring at him unblinkingly. Because wait...what? What is he asking me? What...did I agree to something? "Luca," I say, putting a hand out between us, my palm flat as it presses against his chest. "Luca...no..."

"No?" he asks, likewise sitting up straight and staring at me. "No to...no to what?"

"Luca," I whisper, horrified, leaning closer. "Luca, I'm not going to reject my bond with Jackson..."

"What!?"

"Hey!" Jesse says, shoving Rafe's armchair ridiculously close to the couch and flopping down into it. "This seems sufficiently intimate and complicated and like you might start yelling at each other! Thought I'd join in!"

"Get out of here, Jesse," Luca growls as Rafe comes around the couch and stands on the other side of the coffee table, his arms crossed. "This is between me and Ariel."

"Oh, I'll go," Jesse says calmly, raising his eyebrows and holding Luca's gaze for a pause before shifting his eyes to mine. "If Ariel wants me to."

I bite my lip, hesitating, because...I mean, even though Luca is right that this is between us...

God, but I have trouble saying no to him. And quite frankly, I do want my brother and my cousin's support.

"Ariel," Luca growls, leaning closer to me and glaring, "are you seriously going to let them budge in on this!? This is our personal relationship! This is between you and I, and you're going to –" 1

"Let us advocate for her?" Rafe interrupts, his voice smooth and a little mad. Luca gapes, turning towards him. "Intercede? Not let you bully her, when she's emotional and

clearly wants to do things to help you feel better, even when they're not in her best interest?"

I feel a great deal of relief that my family is helping me, but it mixes awkwardly with the sinking pit in my stomach at making Luca feel so bad. God, crap, but this is horrible.

"Bully!?" Luca spits out, dropping my hands and staring at Rafe, truly offended. "Are you seriously saying that I would stoop so low as to bully the woman I love!?"

"You're kind of doing it now," Jesse says, a little dry.

## Chapter 146

### Chapter 146

Chapter 0246

I lift my eyebrows in surprise as Luca turns to stares at Jesse, appalled at the accusation. Jesse continues, either pretending not to notice or not caring.

"I mean," Jesse says, turning his palm up as he talks it through, "unless I'm mistaken, you've never told her that you loved her before, right? At least not before last night. And now you're throwing that word around a lot in a situation where you're actively asking her for something. It might not be bullying, but it is a little manipulative." Jesse grimaces and gives a shrug, and I can tell that he's genuinely not happy to have to deliver the message.

But my jaw drops a little when I realize that...that Jesse's kind of right on that one. Luca is pulling out the 1-word at the same moment when he's asking me for something really big.

"I can't believe you're accusing me of not loving her, of saying that just because I want something –"

"We're not accusing you of that," Rafe says, his voice gentler now. "We're just asking you to play fair, Luca. And to let her make her own decisions about what's right for her. Even if that's not what's right for you."

"So, you're all going to take his side," Luca snaps, drawing away from me now and standing up, clearly wanting a little space. "When obviously I am the better match for Ariel – I can handle her life as a Princess, I'm already your guys' best friend, I'm completely dedicated to supporting her through this Academy thing and have been for months. How can you not be on my side, after all of this!? We're – we're fucking friends!"

"They're not taking Jackson's side," I say quietly folding my hands in my lap and looking up at my mate, my heart sinking because I know he feels so betrayed. "This isn't about sides,

Luca."

"Screw that, it is about sides," Jesse snaps, standing up to glare at Luca. But I watch as his face softens, as he forces himself to be kinder. "We're not on Jackson's side, but we're not on yours either, Luca. We're on Ariel's side."

"Always," Rafe says, his voice likewise gentle and a little sad. "Always Ariel's side, Luc. I'm... I'm sorry if that's not what you want to hear, but she's my sister."

"My best cousin," Jesse adds, and my heart swells with love at their support.

"And quite frankly," Rafe continues, his face a little grim. "As her mate? I'd prefer it if you were on her side as well."

Luca just stares, slack-jawed, at his two best friends before looking down at me. I bite my lip, heartbroken and awkward, my fingers twisted together in my lap. We stare at each other for a long time, and down our bond I feel him questioning, apparently unable to put it into words right now, wanting and needing to know what it is that I'm asking for in this moment.

"The Goddess gave me both of you, Luca," I say quietly, hoping to hell he hears me on this. "Rafe and Jesse and I – we talked about it last night. And I think it's right – I'm supposed to have two mates, she gave me both of these bonds for a reason."

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I shake my head, hating that I'm disappointing Luca, but so incredibly grateful that I have my big Alpha brother and cousin here to support me because if it was just me and Luca? I'm not sure I could find the courage to do this to deliver the words that I know are going

going to break his heart.

"What are you saying?" Luca whispers, slow, taking a step closer to look down into my eyes.

"That I'm not going to reject my bond with Jackson," I whisper, staring up at him, needing him to hear and understand it. "Not just because you want me to."

Luca groans, tucking his face against his hands like it's the worst thing he's ever heard. I'm immediately on my feet, putting a hand on his arm, unable to just sit and watch him

grieve like this. Rafe takes a step forward like he's worried Luca will snap, and shove me or something, but he doesn't.

Instead, Luca just takes a moment to understand, his body trembling slightly beneath my hand. I stand steadily next to him, letting him process it, bearing witness to his pain. And when he's ready, Luca drags his hands down from his face and looks at me again. "I don't know if I can do this, Ariel," he whispers, shaking his head at me. "I don't know how to do this."

## Chapter 147

### Chapter 147

Chapter 0247

"Neither do I," I whisper back, taking a step closer. To my surprise, Luca lifts his arm and wraps it around me, tucking me in against his side, where he likes me. "But we can figure it out together."

Luca murmurs something I don't quite hear, raising a hand and cupping my cheek in his palm, staring down at me as he shakes his head in awe and frustration.

"I'm still your mate, Luca," I whisper, sending all the warmth and assurance that I have down the bond. "That hasn't changed. You still mean the world to me."

"It has changed, a little," he murmurs, studying me. "You know that I really do love you, right? That I wasn't just saying it to...to manipulate you. I just...I love you so damn much, Ariel, I'd do anything to keep you."

"I know," I murmur, nodding and pressing my cheek closer into his palm. "I know, Luca. I know."

He lowers his face then, pressing a kiss to my mouth like he can't help it, just as a knock comes at the door.

"Oh, what the hell," Rafe sighs, turning towards it. Luca tightens his arm around me as Jesse steps to my side, taking the hat off his head and shoving it towards me.

Rafe moves to the door and I pull the cap on, taking a small step away from Luca even though he clearly doesn't want to let me go. When I nod to him, Rafe pulls open the door. And my eyebrows arch nearly to my hairline as I see who is standing there.

“Good morning, Cadets,” Dr. Neumann murmurs, his hands folded neatly behind his back as he nods around to each of us. His eyes settle on me, though, and he gives a firm nod. “Cadet Clark? If I may have a word?”

My hands start to shake a little with the anxiety of it because...because why is he here? Ben... Ben got his pass results on a little piece of paper...

Oh

my god.

If you fail, do they have to deliver the results in person? Do they have to

“Clark?” Neumann says, raising an eyebrow, and I realize that I haven’t moved at all – that I’ve just been staring at him. He turns slightly, tilting his head towards the hall, an invitation.

“Um, that’s okay,” I say, taking a few steps forward so that I’m standing in front of him, but not going out into the hall. “They can listen, I don’t mind.” Because if he tells me that I failed, I am definitely, definitely going to need my family to catch me when I fall to pieces. Neumann sighs, crossing his arms and narrowing his eyes at me. “You and your social life, Cadet Clark. It’s what’s holding you back, after all.”

My stomach drops and I hang my head, because that can only mean...

“I came to tell you that you came out with the top marks in the Espionage class, Cadet Clark,” he says, his voice brisk, words clipped.

I freeze, because....

I mean, I have to have misheard him, right?

My head snaps up and I stare at my professor, completely shocked.

“Top marks on the Chemistry examination, top marks in your marksmanship class.” He raises an eyebrow at me. “Far and away, our highest-ranking Cadet this year in our program.”

“But I...” I sputter.

“You’re a very promising student, Clark,” Neumann says, and my face bursts into a smile when I see the corners of his mouth beginning to turn up, realizing that he’s rather enjoying his little prank. “We will be expecting great things from you in the spring, and if you could just concentrate instead of having so many dinner parties you could truly make a difference in this world and in this war

But Neumann doesn't get any further in his scolding, because I let out a little shriek and throw myself at him, wrapping my arms around his waist and giving him an impulsive hug. Thank you!" I gasp, desperately happy and thrilled and excited all at once. "Thank you so much, Dr. Neumann!"

He freezes for a second but then he lets out a slow chuckle and, to my surprise, gently places his arms around me and gives me a little squeeze. "All right, Cadet, that's enough affection," he murmurs. "I'm your teacher, after all, not one of your many friends."

I laugh, loosening my arms and smiling up at him as I take a step back. "Why were you so mean to me all semester!?" I ask, impulsive.

## Chapter 148

### Chapter 148

Chapter 0248

Neumann laughs at my inappropriate remark, shaking his head. "I was hard on you to push you,

Clark. You work harder when you're terrified. Someone has to herd you along towards your potential, after all," he looks around the room now, glaring a bit at my friends and my family, who all beam at me. "These ones, I suspect, pet you a little too much."

"Thank you, sir," Rafe says formally, coming forward, but Neumann just waves a hand at him, turning his attention back to me. I grin, a little pleased to have a professor pay more attention to me than Rafe, who is usually the golden boy.

"Don't listen to what those other Cadets said at the final test, either," Neumann says, stern.

"Do you

hear me on that? Half of them failed anyway, so they don't know what they're talking about. You're very promising, and we're incredibly excited about your future in the department. Not every successful cadet needs to be a bastion of physical force in order to be useful to the nation's military. Understood?"

I nod eagerly, tucking my hands behind my back and straightening my shoulders, bolstered by the fact that he believes in me. And, quite frankly, the fact that half my classmates failed

out.

Jerks.

“And,” Neumann says, leaning forward to speak softly to me now, conspiratorial, “if any King has any particular objections on the matter, you can tell him that I said that. And that if he has any

questions about your aptitude and potential, that he can ask me directly. I want you here in the Spring, Cadet...Clark.”

My mouth drops open a little as I realize that Neumann... knows. He has perhaps always known.

“Don’t disappoint me,” my professor finishes, giving a sharp nod and then turning away and striding down the hall. “I wish you all a happy winter break!” he calls to us, “get it out of your systems, children! When you return in the spring, I will expect you to work!”

I stare after him, shock and thrill pulsing through me.

And then, slowly, I turn to stare around at the group of Alphas standing in the quietly beaming at me, waiting for me to process my surprise.

room, all

“I passed!” I shout, punching my fists up into the air, my eyes squeezing shut in my joy.

A roar goes up in the room and suddenly I’m swept off my feet. I laugh, hugging my brother

back as he spins me around, and then I’m passed from arms to arms as everyone hugs me, and kisses my cheeks, and tells me how wonderful I am and how they’re not at all surprised. I laugh the whole time, barely able to process it, almost knocked out in my wonder and surprise and joy.

I’m still laughing, dazed by the joy of it, when someone clears their throat at the door.

us.” I turn, a huge smile on my face, to see Jackson standing there, frowning around at us. What’s going on here?”

“Just got the news,” Jesse calls over to him, and I can hear in his voice that he’s pleased and proud. “Ariel passed! Top marks in Chemistry – top student in the Espionage unit.”

A wide smile spreads over Jackson’s face. “What,” he says, slowly, looking around at everyone. “And you guys are like, surprised?”

I burst into a smile, pleased as hell that Jackson's completely unperturbed by the news that he never, ever thought for a single second that I wouldn't pass.

Finally, his eyes land back on me. "Get your ass over her, Clark," he growls, beckoning me with a wave of his hand. I laugh and suddenly my feet are flying across the room. I throw myself into Jackson's arms, where he wraps me up and lifts me off the floor, turning me once in a circle as he holds me tight.

"So proud of you," he murmurs into my ear, which makes me squeal a very tiny happy noise. "My clever little spy."

I laugh, grinning down at him, running my fingers through his hair and losing myself a little in his blue eyes.

My smile fades, though, when I hear Luca's rough snarl across the room.

"For the second time in as many days," Luca snaps, "get your fucking hands off my girlfriend." I turn my head, knocked out of my mental bubble where only Jackson exists, to see Luca taking a menacing step towards us.

## Chapter 149

### Chapter 149

Chapter 0249

To my surprise, Jackson makes absolutely no move to put me down. Instead, he just looks at Luca evenly for a second. "Your girlfriend?" he asks, the words low and light with disbelief. He hums considerably and then turns his face back up to mine. "What do you think, Clark?" he murmurs, nodding over to where Luca stands, not bothering to look his way. "That your boyfriend over there?"

I can't help it then, loving the assurance in his voice, the calm way he dismisses Luca's jealousy. A slow, happy smile spreads over my lips as I stare down at him, not saying a single word regarding whether Luca's my boyfriend or not.

Because honestly, I don't know.

But Jackson's right – Luca doesn't get to boss him around on this, does he?

"Didn't think so," Jackson murmurs, low enough that maybe only I hear him. But then he grins at me and lowers me to the floor as Luca strides to my side, grabbing my hand.



“Okay, okay,” Rafe says, stepping forward with a sigh. “Clearly, clearly we need some ground rules here.”

And I sigh, glancing up at both of my mates, before crossing the room to Rafe’s side.

Because my brother is right it’s time we got some things straight and I might need some physical distance from them to do that.

“What are you even doing here?” Luca growls at Jackson, his arms crossed as they stand about a foot apart.

“Came for breakfast,” Jackson says, giving a calm shrug. “I was invited.” He glances at Jesse now, who grins at him.

“Coffee?” Ben asks, starting to pour Jackson a cup.

“Sure,”

“Jacks says, crossing the room to take it from him.

“Look, can we cut this bullshit,” Luca snaps, clearly worked up. “What is all this happy family nonsense!? Are we all just going to pretend that McClintock and I didn’t try to kill each other last night? That we’re not going to do it again if we don’t get this two–mate nonsense figured out!?”

“I’m not going to kill you,” Jackson says evenly, taking a calm sip of his coffee. I blink at him, a little surprised, wondering where all this confidence came from. This is, in some ways, a very different Jackson than the grief–stricken wolf who stormed out of here last night. “Are you going to kill me? Or...try?”

Luca sputters, not wanting to seem like the aggressor now that Jackson has proclaimed himself neutral. Then Luca grits his teeth, storming over to Jackson. Rafe grabs the back of my shirt, not letting me go to them, knowing that my first instinct is to stand between them, to negotiate.

“Let them figure it out,” Rafe murmurs when I look back at him. “This, weirdly, is not actually your problem.”

“Yes it is,” I mutter, crossing my arms. “I’m going to go from two mates to none if they tear each other to pieces.”

Rafe laughs lightly, but we both just watch as the argument unfolds.

—

“You think I can’t see what you’re doing?” Luca snaps, glaring into Jackson’s face. “You get to come in here all calm, pretending you’re fine with this, looking like the good guy – making me look like the bad guy. But I’m the only one being honest here – you don’t want her with me just as much as I don’t want her with you.”

“True,” Jacks murmurs, shrugging and looking down at his coffee before taking a sip. “But, getting into a fist fight isn’t going to fix it.”

“Sure would be fucking nice though,” Luca growls, his hands balling to fists, “to knock you into next week – ”

“Enough –” Rafe says, stepping forward now with a frown. I gape at him a little, pissed. What happened to letting them figure it out!?

He glances at me with a tiny shrug before turning back to Jackson and Luca.

“So,” Rafe says, his voice calm and considering, “despite your insistence on fighting, I want to point out that you two actually...agree.”

“What?” Luca asks, his face screwed up in a confused frown as he turns towards Rafe and me. I look up at Rafe, my face mimicking my mate’s.

## Chapter 150

### Chapter 0250

“You just said it,” Rafe says with a shrug. “Luca, you have admitted that you don’t want Ariel to be with Jackson. Jackson, you agreed, saying you felt the same way – you don’t want her to be with Luca.”

All three of us just stare at Rafe like that’s obvious. Actually, all five of us if you count Ben and Jesse too.

“Well, I mean, I think it’s kind of simple,” Rafe says with a sigh, heading to the couch and lifting his coffee off the table as he sits down like this is the most casual conversation anyone has ever had. “If that’s what you guys want, you just have to decide where your boundaries are.”

“What?” Ben asks, confused. We all turn to him and he puts his hands up. “Sorry, sorry,” he murmurs. “I’m just...I’m too involved. I’m sorry. I’ll shut up.”

Rafe laughs a little, but nods. “No, you’re right, I can be clearer. But honestly, I think it is really simple. Ariel?” he says, and I stand up straight, a little wary about what’s coming next. “You declared this morning that you’re not going to reject your mating bond with Jackson just because Luca wants you to, right?”

“Right,” I say instantly.

“Really?” Jackson asks, and I turn my head to see a wide smile on his face. I smile back at him, sending a sense of faith and happiness down our bond, as well as a very tiny scolding that he should be at all surprised. His smile deepens.

“And,” Rafe says slowly, drawing my attention back to him. “Are you willing to reject Luca, because Jackson wants you to?”

“No,” I say instantly, my hand going to my chest, my heart breaking at the very idea. My eyes move to Luca’s and I can feel his own horror, his incredible sense of impending fear and loss. I shake my head, fervent, letting him know that I would never. Slowly, he grits his teeth and nods, believing me.

“Okay,” Rafe says, nodding again and turning back to the boys. “Well, is either of you willing to break your bond with Ariel?”

“No!” they say in unison before turning to glare at each other, I think a little pissed to finally agree on a point – any point – in this complicated manner.

“Okay, cool,” Rafe says, giving a shrug and lifting his coffee to his mouth. “Then, obviously, we have to find a way to deal with this. Figure out where your boundaries are and...how to live with this situation as it is – because clearly, you’re all stuck in it.”

“Look at you, cousin,” Jesse says, pleased as he sinks into his armchair with a donut in his hand, taking a bite. “What are you, on Therapy track, instead of Warrior? That was good.”

My eyes narrow at Jesse. Donuts? Where the hell did he get one of those?

Rafe just grins at our cousin before Luca steps forward, pissed.

“No way,” Luca says, shaking his head and jutting out a hand. “I see what you’re doing here – this is...this is all what Ariel wants, but what I want is important too. I don’t – I don’t want to live like this.”

“Valid,” Rafe says, nodding to him. “So, tell us what you want, Luca.”

“What I do not want,” Luca says, glaring at Rafe and then at me. “Is a polyamorous relationship. I do not want a girlfriend who has another boyfriend. I can’t...I can’t live like that.”

“Well, then that sounds like your boundary,” Rafe says quietly. “What about you, Jacks?”

Some of Jackson’s confidence has left him now that he’s not dealing with a confrontation with another Alpha and is instead doing what is probably his least favorite thing in the world: talking about his emotions. “Um,” he says, lifting a hand to rub anxiously at the back of his neck. “I don’t know. I mean...whatever...”

My eyebrows go up because...well, did Jackson just admit that he’s okay with me having two boyfriends?

“No, Jacks,” Jesse says, his mouth full of donut as he points an accusatory finger in Jackson’s direction. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?” Jackson growls, clearly displeased to be countered.

“You’re lying to be easy, to make Ariel happy,” Jesse says, perfectly casual like Rafe is. I blink, my eyebrows going up as I look at Jackson again, surprised to see him scowling and looking away. “I saw you last night – you were devastated at the idea of her being with someone else. Tell the truth, Jacks – that’s what we’re trying to do here. Get it all out on the table so we can figure out what to do.”

Ben sits down on the couch next to Rafe, watching everything unfold like a television drama. I sigh, scowling and crossing my arms, feeling oddly out of place and like a pawn. I mean, don’t I get a say in this?