

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

## **Read Chapter 221 – 240**

### **Chapter 0221**

#### **Chapter 0221**

“Well, that’s enough of that,” my mother says with perfect calm, standing and catching Jackson’s eye. He freezes for a moment and then steps back, standing up straight again.

Mom, ever-charming, turns a smile on the professor and thanks him for the news, ensuring him that Sinclair and McClintock will follow in a few minutes to be transported back. When the professor leaves, mom turns back to Jacks with an eyebrow raised.

“You’re going to have to get better at that,” she says quietly, gesturing towards the door. “If Ari is going to return to the Academy, you’re going to have to keep her secret, which means not aching all mate-y whenever someone comes to deliver perfectly normal news —”

“She’s not going back,” my dad says, stepping towards my mom with a glare.

Mom’s mouth pops open in surprise but then they begin to fight, the way they always do – with a great deal of heat and talking over each other. But Rafe and I just look away from them and towards each other, used to it, because it all turns out right in the end.

“Ooooookay,” Aunt Cora says, stepping away from the bed and coming over to us. “Why don’t I walk the two of you out,” she says, nodding to the big Alphas on either side of me. “Ariel will —”

“I’m not leaving,” Jackson says, frowning at Cora and reaching a possessive hand for me.

“Oh, sweetheart,” she says, grinning up at him and reaching a hand out to pat him fondly on the cheek, an action which I think shocks Jackson to the core. He stands stock-still, staring at Cora as she beams at him. “Yes, baby,” she sighs, “you are. Kiss your mate and come along.”

She takes his hand then, tugging on it, and Jackson looks at me a bit helplessly – I think as shocked at being bossed by a woman as he is at having someone call him sweetheart and baby. I

step close, reaching for him, and Jacks quickly lowers his head, pressing a quick kiss to my mouth. "I don't want to go," he murmurs.

"I'll be fine – I'll see you tomorrow," I nod at him, eager.

"Ari," he says, hesitating, looking at me like I'm going to die or disappear if he leaves the room.

"Jacks," I say, taking his face in my hands, sending all the faith and assurance I can down our bond. "We have to be normal, all right? Just...just for a little bit? I'll see you at school."

He sighs, shaking his head, but Cora tugs his hand again and he goes along with her, sending me looks over his shoulder as he heads for the door.

"Take care of him," I say to Rafe, catching at his hand as he, too, goes.

Rafe nods his assurance to me, but as Jackson and Cora slip through the door dad calls out his name. "Where do you think you're going?" he asks, crossing his arms over his chest, breaking the argument with my mother to apparently start one with Rafe.

"Um," Rafe says, going stock-still in the middle of the room. "To...school?"

"Think again, young man," my dad says, striding for the door and slamming it shut. "Royal dispensation – you, too, are staying overnight. Because we as a family?" he levels his gaze at both of us in turn. "We need to talk."

Rafe heaves a big sigh, closing the door after Cora takes an unhappy Jackson away.

As the next few hours pass, I'm very willing to let Rafe take the majority of the blame as well as dad's anger. Food is brought, which I eat ravenously, and Rafe sends me a few chagrined looks as the interrogation passes, but overall I know he takes it willingly – that he knows that I'm exhausted, and that it's already been a lot for me, today, to stand up to dad and introduce him to my mate.

## **Chapter 0222**

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And so I just curl up against mom at the head of the bed, listening to my dad and my brother fight about whether or not I should be at the school, and what the hell Rafe was thinking taking me there, and how I've survived so far. I can hear Rafe supplying information that Jackson told when they were away at the shower, apparently, about the

identity of the cadet who shot me with a crossbow and whether or not he has a further vendetta against me, but I quickly find myself slipping into sleep as I lean against mom.

“Come on, baby,” I hear mom murmur from my half daze. I blink into consciousness, realizing that dad and Rafe are still going at it, and then I look up at mom next to me. “Let’s get you cleaned up,” she says, unhooking me from the IV and tugging me away.

I nod, following her to the second door in the room, yawning as we pass through it and a few more doors before we enter a pretty utilitarian private bathing chamber. She helps me strip down and then I shower as mom fills me in, quietly and calmingly, on the gossip from home. Markie is fine – he doesn’t like school, loves sports, wants a pet squirrel more than anything in the world. Juniper hates everything, apparently, and won’t wear anything but black – dyed her hair black, too, in a fit of rebellion.

I smirk, thinking fondly of my taciturn little sister, missing her with a sudden intensity that surprises me. But I dry off with a scratchy towel and then pull on the supplied one-size-fits-all-Alpha pajamas – which, obviously, swim on me. But mom laughs and helps me pull the drawstring of the pants tight before leading me out into the hospital room again and back to the bed.

Dad and Rafe, I’m interested to see, have fallen silent and aren’t looking at each other.

“So,” mom says, overly cheerful. “Did we men come to any decisions about Ariel’s fate in the world without consulting her?”

Rafe balks a little bit, staring at my mom, because he has been fighting for me for the past few hours. She just winks at him, because the critique was mostly for my dad.

“Enough, Ella,” dad murmurs, massaging his temple with his left hand. “We decided to pick it up again tomorrow, after we’ve all slept on it. We’re not getting anything done here anyway.”

“Wow, you’re kidding me, I thought you were making such progress,” mom murmurs with over- cheerful sarcasm as she tucks me into bed. Dad just glares at her half-heartedly before turning to me, leaning down to give me a kiss on the cheek and then run his hand over my hair.

“I love you, Ariel,” he says, and I look up at him, hoping he can see in my face all the love I have for him in my heart – so much that it aches. His face falls a little then, and I smile, because I think he sees it. “I just want what’s best for you.”

“I know, pops,” I murmur, reaching for him, wanting a hug. Dad obliges me, wrapping me up tight for a long, long moment. And then he lets me lay back down in the bed, standing up. As soon as my head hits the pillow, my eyes start to drift shut.

“We’ll see you for breakfast, baby,” mom whispers, also leaning down to give me a kiss. “You just sleep tight for now.”

I murmur my assent, and then I’m asleep, the last thing I hear three sets of footsteps leaving the room, my brother’s whispered goodnight as he switches off the light.

## Chapter 0223

### Chapter 0223

When I wake up the next morning – or, at least, I think it’s morning – it’s not like this weird mountainous hospital room has windows – I smile, because I smell Jackson.

But then I frown, rubbing at my eyes, because...

I mean, I took a shower. His scent wouldn’t be all over me anymore, so why...

But then, when I follow my nose and peer over the side of my bed, I burst into a smile because I have my answer.

Jackson’s laying there, on a way-too-small mattress of all things, dead asleep. I grin, looking at him, wondering how the hell he got here and why he’s not back at the Academy yet, but...

Well, also, I just look at him. Because he’s so damn handsome, even with his mouth hanging open and his arm splayed out to the side, and so incredibly precious to me, even though we’ve only been bonded for less than two days.

Before I can stop myself, I crawl out of bed and drop down onto his mattress, curling up at his side with my head on his chest. Jackson jumps the moment I touch him, but he instantly calms when he realizes what happened. “Don’t scare me like that,” he murmurs, instantly wrapping his arms around me and pulling me tight.

I laugh. “Good morning to you too.”

“Yeah yeah,” he mutters, and I can almost feel him rolling his eyes at my insistence on a greeting. “How are you? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I say, though my stomach instantly growls in response. “Starving, but fine.”

Jackson frowns down at me and starts to sit up, like he’s going to go get me some food immediately, but I laugh and stop him with a hand on his chest. “Just stay still with me

for a moment, Jacks,” I whisper, wanting nothing more than to have a peaceful few minutes with him before the rest of the world catches up with us.

My mate lays back down and exhales like he’s exhausted, but also like everything, in this moment, is...completely fine. Which, honestly, is precisely how I feel.

After a few long minutes of just holding each other, our breathing slowly coming to match, our heartbeats synching up, I raise my chin to look up at him. “Jacks,” I whisper, curious. “Why aren’t you at school? And where did you get a mattress?”

He laughs a little. “I’m not at school because I refused to go.”

“What!?” I squeak, sitting up to stare at him. He tightens his arms, making me lay back down and relax.

“I wouldn’t go,” he says, as if it’s simple. “I wouldn’t leave without you. The professors got pissed, but what are they going to do, carry me? I’m bigger than they are.”

“Jackson,” I breathe, staring at him. “One night with me in the hospital is not worth getting kicked out of school –“

“I’m not getting kicked out,” he says, his voice completely unworried. “I’m just getting a demerit on my record.”

“What’s a demerit?” I ask, fascinated, worried.

“Who knows. Who cares.” He peers at me for a second. “Ari, I’m like...very good at this military stuff. They’re not going to kick me out and lose everything I can offer just because I slept in the wrong facility one night. I haven’t done anything bad.”

“I don’t like you arrogant,” I murmur, giving him a little smack on his chest that makes him laugh. “You have to follow the rules, Jacks – you don’t get a free pass just because you’re big and nobody can boss you around.”

“Oh, look who’s talking about rule breaking, little girl,” he mutters, his voice dry. And I go still but then burst out laughing.

“Okay, I’m properly shamed on that one,” I sigh, putting my head back on his chest. “But, where did you get the mattress?”

“Your mom did that,” he says, and I can hear the smile in his voice. “She found me curled up outside your locked door –“

“Jackson!” I gasp. He just grins down at me.

“She pulled me to my feet and yelled at me a little –“

“Which you deserved –“ I say, my brow furrowed.

“Yes, she looked just like that,” he murmurs, raising a hand to cup my cheek and making me grin. “But then, while she yelled at me, she dragged me off to where they keep the spare furniture and helped me carry this in here. And then she left your clothes and your notes and she left.”

## Chapter 0224

### Chapter 0224

He points to the end of my bed and I see my black Cadet uniform there, along with some folded pieces of paper. I grin, encouraged by the sight of my Academy Black, hoping to hell this means my dad will let me go.

I mean, I’m an adult now – my decisions are mine. But, if he really doesn’t want me to go he can absolutely blow my cover and just let the school know that I’m a girl. I scowl, hating it, but also trusting, deep down, that my dad will listen.

“Are you coming to breakfast?” I ask, looking down at Jackson.

“Hell no,” he says, shaking his head like I’m crazy. I laugh, grinning at him.

“One conversation with my dad was enough?”

“I need...a great deal of prep before the next time that I sit down with your father,” he murmurs, covering his face with his hand and taking a deep breath. “That was terrifying.”

“He was being nice to you!” I laugh.

“Ari,” Jackson murmurs, shaking his head even as he refuses to look at me, “I have a very different relationship with men in positions of authority – yesterday I almost had a heart attack when I saw you yell at the King. Where I come from, you’d have been killed for that –“

“But it’s my dad,” I say, frowning down at him.

“Yeah,” he says, taking his hand away with a sigh and looking up at me. “We don’t have those.”

“Oh, Jackson,” I sigh, lowering myself to his side and curling up with him again. “We’ll get Rafe to have some chats with you to teach you how to handle parents, and I’ll tell dad to be nice.”

“Tell the King to be nice,” he mutters, shaking his head in disbelief. “And he’ll just...listen to you.”

“Obey my orders, more like,” I mutter, smug, and he just laughs.

We lay still for a long time after that, chatting about nothing, when suddenly the door opens. I sit up straight with a gasp, but then relax when I see that it’s just my mom.

“Oh,” she says, coming around the bed and peering at us with her hands on her hips. “Well, this is very chaste. You’re just...laying next to each other. Honestly, Ariel, I’m a little disappointed in you –”

“Mom!” I gasp, horrified at her implications that Jackson and I would be, like, tearing into each other.

“Well, you’re my daughter, Ariel!” She says with a big sigh.

I shriek, covering my ears. “Far too much information, mother!” I shout, pressing my eyes shut, wishing to erase that information from my brain.

But before I can complete the task, my mom comes close and swats me on the head, laughing, before offering a hand out to Jackson.

“Come on, you,” she says, smiling at him, and when I look up at her I can see that she’s already welcomed Jacks into her heart completely and is deeply, deeply fond of my mate. “King’s up. You have to run off to school before he finds out where you slept tonight.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Jackson says, taking her hand but not really using it to get up, instead pulling himself to his own feet.

“Why aren’t the rest of you this polite?” mom asks, grinning at me as Jackson stands.

“Can you just yell at her or something?” I say to Jackson, turning my face up to his. “This is going to get old real fast.”

Jackson just looks at me, horrified at the idea. Mom laughs and stands on her toes to pat him on the cheek. “Off you go. Ariel will be along later today.”

Jackson says his goodbyes – to my shock – and after I get to my feet he leans down to kiss me chastely on the cheek before he goes from the room, again shooting looks over his shoulder at me like he desperately doesn’t want to leave my side.

“Seriously, Ari,” mom says when he closes the door behind him. “I kinda thought I’d be interrupting a major romantic scene this morning.”

“Well, you sort of were,” I sigh, looking over at her, and she smiles at me, tugging me close. “Just... the tamer sort.”

“Go on, baby trouble,” she murmurs, pressing a kiss to my other cheek. “Get dressed. We need to talk before breakfast, and we don’t have a lot of time.”

## Chapter 0225

### Chapter 0225

As mom sits down on the bed with a bounce as I quickly read through my notes – one from Daphne, apologizing profusely for her betrayal, and the other from Luca – just a quick scrawl saying he’s glad I’m alive and he’ll see me soon. Smiling, grateful for both of them, I move towards my clothes.

“So!” Mom says, grinning devilishly at me. “Are you sleeping with both of your mates, or just Luca?”

I freeze, turning to her, shocked.

Mom bursts out laughing and I scowl, picking up the hat on the top of my clothing pile and throwing it at her. “Mom! Stop doing that just to shock me!”

“Oh, come on,” she sighs, laying back against my pillows. “What’s the point of having a daughter if you can’t embarrass her about her love life. So?” She raises her eyebrows at me, clearly wanting an answer.

And, well, because I have been wanting to talk to her about this, I sigh and nod. But I have trouble looking at her as we broach this awkward topic, so I concentrate, mostly, on getting dressed as we talk. Mom, perhaps sensing the delicate nature of this conversation, doesn’t give me any flack about it.

“I’m not sleeping with either of them,” I say quietly. “Though, with Luca, things are...progressing.”

“Oh realllly,” she says, dragging out the word with interest. “But not with Jackson?”

“Well, considering that he’s known for like, thirty-six hours...” I say on a sigh, pulling on my pants. My mom laughs, understanding.



“But...” I hesitate as I buckle the button of my pants. “Things with Jackson are...intense.”

“Intense?” my mom asks, “what does that mean?” Her voice is gossipy – I think to put me at ease. Because if she were worried, or scolding, I’d definitely be too embarrassed to go on.

“I mean like...I am very attracted to him, mom. And it’s not that I’m not into Luca – I very much am. It’s just...different.” I look up at her before I turn my back, tugging off the pajama shirt and reaching for the black sports bra that Daphne made me. I smirk, wondering how she arranged to send this all in secret.

“Well,” mom says, her voice considering, “I think that’s kind of...cool, honestly. It sounds like things are different between you and your mates because they’re very different people. I think that’s normal, and good. Or maybe it’s just that the Goddess is keeping your life spicy.”

I scoff and turn to glare at my mom as I pull the sports bra down over my chest. “Oh, come on, mom, I sincerely doubt that the Goddess is paying attention, with all she has on her plate.”

“I wouldn’t doubt her,” mom says, raising her eyebrows and cocking her head. “But I think Cora was right – your dad is actually the one to be talking to about this.”

I groan, shaking my head. “Mom, I can’t talk to him about which of his fated mates he was more into physically.”

“Well,” she says, primly squaring her shoulders. “We already know the answer to that.”

I burst out laughing and she joins me.

“But seriously, baby,” she says, her face falling into more considered lines. “Your dad is more empathetic about this stuff than you give him credit for. You should try. He’ll have a better perspective than literally anyone else on earth.”

I sigh, nodding, and then look down at my feet as I bite my lip.

“Don’t worry,” mom says with a sigh. “I’ll tell him before you get home.”

I gasp, wondering if she, too, can read my mind. “You will!?”

“I’ll keep it secret through your finals so that he’ll let you stay to take them,” she says, pointing a warning finger at me. “But you bring those boys home for winter break, both of them. And your dad will be prepared to meet them. But you owe him that truth – especially after all this deception.”

I bite my lip, knowing that this conversation could go in two different directions, and not wanting to take either of them. Luckily, mom picks for me.

“Yes, Ari,” she says slowly. “This means you have to tell both of your mates too. I don’t know how you’ve been justifying it to yourself, keeping this secret all along. But it’s time to come out with it – to everyone you love.”

I nod, ashamed of myself, and my little wolf rubs herself up against my heart, warming it, supporting me. “I know,” I say, my voice soft. “It was just...very hard to find a time that made sense. But I’ll...I’ll tell them. And bring them home for winter break.”

“Both of them?”

“Well, Rafe might have to tie Jackson up and throw him on the train,” I say, lifting my head to meet her gaze. She grins, but holds back her laugh. “But, yes. I’ll get them there.”

“Good!” mom says, hopping up off the bed as I pull my shirt on and do up all the buttons. She comes to my side and gives me a kiss on the cheek. “Now, let’s go to breakfast and break it do your dad that you’re going back to the murder school where you’ve almost died like three times.”

## Chapter 0226

### Chapter 0226

“Mom,” I say, catching her arm and stopping her before she heads to the door. “Are you...are you mad at me?” My voice breaks a little on my question, my eyes smarting with tears as I look at her, worried.

“Oh, baby,” she murmurs, shock and concern suddenly on her face. “Why would you think that?”

“Because,” I say, heaving a little shrug. “We – we lied to you for months. And I did something really dangerous. And I almost died, and showed up all bloody with two mates – and it must be so weird –”

Mom laughs a little, taking my face between her hands and shaking her head at me. “Oh, sweetheart,” she murmurs, and then she nods. “If I’m being honest, I could have done without the blood and the near-death. But I’m not mad at you – sweetie, I’m proud of you.”

My mouth twists in sudden surprise, and my eyes fill with unexpected tears. “You’re – you’re what?”

“Baby,” she wraps me in a hug as she speaks, “you are doing something difficult that nobody has done before. And it’s kind of kicking your ass!” I laugh, tears slipping down my cheeks as I nod and hug her back.

“Yeah,” I reply, my voice shaking. “It kind of is.”

“But look at you,” she says, pulling back and beaming into my face. “Look at you, baby! You’re kicking its ass too! You are finding your way, doing something you’re passionate about, and you’re succeeding. Ariel, my love,” her own eyes fill with tears now, “I’m so proud of you. I’d scream it from the rooftops for everyone to hear if it wouldn’t get you instantly kicked out.”

I laugh, and hug my mom again, and then we take a few moments to wipe my tears away before we head off to breakfast. Before we go, I tuck the little notes left on my bed into the back pocket of my

Cadet uniform and prepare to go negotiate with my dad, the King.

Breakfast goes better than I thought it would, right from the start. It’s a short, unfrilled affair – just the four of us gathered around for coffee, and some toast and fruit, at a little folding table in the back hall. Cora isn’t here, unfortunately – she headed home after patching up some minorly-wounded cadets and sending Jesse off with a kiss.

As I pour my coffee, I realize that my mom has probably been up all night – that after I fell asleep she probably spent every minute rushing around from room to room, healing all the cadets who were injured in the Examination. I see the signs of it now that I look for them – the slight circles under her eyes, the yawn she hides with her hand.

But I just smile, and don’t call her out – because even though mom is full of jokes and would just brush it off, I know that she has the biggest heart of anyone in the world.

I resolve, again – for the thousandth time – to try to be more like her.

“So,” dad says, his voice all business as he offers me the basket of toast, which I grab perhaps too eagerly, loading up my plate with a serving size that is more like Rafe’s usual breakfast than mine. “We’re going to strike a deal.”

“We are?” I ask, crumbs spilling from my mouth as I speak with my mouth full.

Rafe just smirks at me, and I give him a little glare before I chew and swallow, focusing on our dad.

“Despite what you all think,” dad says, looking evenly around the table at us, “I do listen to you, and I am reasonable. I am not pleased with the fact that we were lied to, and that Ariel was put into an unnecessarily risky situation.” He levels his gaze at me now, and I sit up straighter, as I always do when I’m in trouble with dad.

“But,” he continues, and I go very still, hope beginning to swell in me. Dad folds his hands, continuing to look at me evenly. “I am aware that you have proven yourself at this Academy, Ariel. You have...passed the tests that weeded out other candidates, tests that were as much about cleverness as they were physical prowess – about finding out how to pass, even if your physical makeup didn’t make that easy for you.”

I frown a little bit here, my mind wandering to consider that I wouldn’t have been highly ranked enough to enter the academy or to pass the Examination if it hadn’t been for Jackson. That Jackson really did pull me through.

Is there something wrong with that, though? Is there a rule that every Cadet at the Academy must be a lone island of physical strength? Is there nothing useful about having good friends, and the right friends?

My dad continues talking, though, and so I push the question aside to mull over later, uncomfortable with it but needing to concentrate.

“So here’s what we’re going to do,” dad says, reaching out for an orange and beginning to peel it as he begins to lay out our plan.

## **Chapter 0227**

### **Chapter 0227**

“There’s one last trial before you’re fully enrolled,” dad says slowly, peeling his orange in one long strip. “And that is your academic finals. If you pass those, then I won’t fight you on returning to the Academy.”

I gasp, thrilled, leaning forward to thank my dad with all of my heart.

“But!” dad says, holding up a finger. “I won’t have it a secret anymore – not from the officials, and not from your professors. At least, those you work with. If you pass your finals, we will have a word with each of your professors. And if they refuse to work with you...” he shrugs, meeting my eyes. “I’m not going to force them, Ariel. And you shouldn’t seek to either. It is...too dangerous a world, to not be working with people who are betting against you.”

I bite my lip, considering it quickly, my mind sweeping over the Captain, and Neumann, and Alvez. The last of the three, obviously – rather indecently, if I’m being honest – does not have a problem with working with a young woman. But the other two...

“And,” dad continues, focusing on the fruit, “the boy who shot you – Wright? He has not yet gone through his tribunal for attempted murder –”

My eyes go wide as I consider that...well, yeah. That Wright broke the rules when he shot me in the stomach.

"So," dad continues, flicking his eyes to me. "I want you taking no risks, Ariel. Your tests, and the room. Those are the only places I want you until we get that boy out of that school."

"Okay," I say suddenly, giving a terse nod. "Okay, I accept it."

"All right," dad says, nodding seriously and looking down at his fruit and fighting his smile.

I take a second to look around at Rafe and mom, who are both beaming at me with excitement, but then I can't help it – I'm up out of my seat with a shout joy and throwing myself at my dad, wrapping my arms around his neck.

"Thank you, daddy," I whisper, and a rush of warmth and joy runs through me when my dad wraps his big arms around me, hugging me back. "I love you so much."

"I believe in you, baby," he says, pulling back to smile at my face, his own filled with a thousand emotions I couldn't even begin to name. "I always knew you were tough, that you'd do big things. We're...we're very proud. You know that, right?"

"Yeah, dad," I say, grinning at him – feeling so, so incredibly lucky to have him as my dad, and my mom as my mom, and my brother as my brother. "Don't worry. I know."

"Good," he says, setting me on my feet and gesturing towards the table. "Then eat up, because your marksmanship final is today, and you'll need your strength."

"Today?" I gasp, my eyes going wide. "Wh-what!?"

"Yup," dad says, his mouth twisting up at the corner. "Part of the joy of Examination is the second surprise – that immediately after it, your finals begin. Hope you studied, trouble."

I look over at Rafe to see that his face is likewise pale.

"Holy crap," he says, his eyes meeting mine. "We – we have to go."

I throw myself back into my seat and begin eating as fast as I can. Rafe matches my pace as I slurp down my coffee and stuff toast into my mouth along with strawberries, melon – whatever will fit.

My parents just grin at each other over their plates, eating at a leisurely pace.

I haul my butt up the final two flights of stairs to our level, my head hanging back on my neck, my eyes almost shut in my exhaustion. The past thirty-six hours...

I mean, honestly, the past ninety-six hours if we're counting the examination –

Or, wait, is it seventy-six? Or one-twenty? I groan again, hating my brain for trying to do more math as I slog towards our bedroom door. God, I feel like my brain has gone through a meat grinder.

The past day and a half has been insane with finals. Rafe and I barely showed up, via helicopter, in time for our afternoon tests. I burst into the marksmanship final panting, but on time, and the Captain shook his head at me but let me participate. I passed, of course – it's my stronger of the my two examined subjects, and the Captain patted me on the back with a proud smile after it was done.

I almost passed out, though, when I was told that my Chemistry examination was twenty-four hours later. That night I was a mess, trying to cram the entire textbook into my head. Jackson came by the room, of course, worried – but Rafe and I managed to convince him to go away, to let me study. I think it was only the sheer anxiety in my eyes that made him agree to it. And thank god Jesse wasn't there when Jackson came – because I could not – absolutely could not – manage any more revelations with this exam looming.

## Chapter 0228

### Chapter 0228

I was similarly frantic that night in the dream state with Luca. He clasped me in his arms, desperate to hear my story, to know that I was safe. I told him, briefly, what happened, and then begged him to let me go, to sleep, because I absolutely could not turn my mind away from the Chemistry test I knew was waiting for me the next day.

Luca kissed me so softly, so sweetly, and said of course – that he's rooting for me, and he can't wait to see how well I do. And then we ended the dream with him wishing me the best of luck, though he assured me I didn't need it.

So, of course, I woke up just riddled with guilt. Because Luca – he's been so, so sweet to me, and I am keeping a very real secret from him now. Somehow it was different when Jackson was just a mate – a vague, unreal connection. But now that Jackson knows, and that we've acknowledged each other, and we've bonded?

God, but it's different.

All of these thoughts and memories weigh me down as I head down the hallway to my door, as I twist the handle and push my way inside.

Both Rafe and Jesse cheer the moment I step into the room, but their cheers fade awkwardly when they see how wrecked I am.

“Oh, jeeze,” Jesse says, striding across the room and immediately shutting the door and wrapping an arm around my shoulders. “Honestly, Ariel, you looked better post-examination when you were all covered in blood.”

“That’s because I had hope,” I moan, letting him lead me over to the couch, where Rafe is waiting with my favorite green blanket. As soon as I sit down he lays it over me, tucking it in at the sides. I smile up at my big brother, loving him.

“Was it that bad?” Rafe asks, anxious, looking down as he stands next to me. “Did you fail?”

“I don’t know,” I sigh, shaking my head. Because it certainly feels like I did. The test was...insane. But what happened before it?

“I got...spooked,” I sigh, shaking my head.

“What?” Jesse asks, confused as he sits down on the coffee table.

“Well,” I say, looking between them and hesitating, because this news – they’re not going to be very happy about it. “The other cadets – they wouldn’t give me a test booklet, at first. Kept passing them to each other around me.”

“What?” Rafe hisses, going still.

I nod, looking down as I continue. “Neumann asked what was going on and one of the other cadets spoke up, saying that I failed the Examination and shouldn’t get to sit the exam.”

Rafe and Jesse gape at me, appalled. I take their silence as the invitation it is, nodding and moving on. “They said I was carried over the line, that I rely on my...my royal connections to get through, and apparently now on Jackson, and that I don’t belong here.”

“What the fuck did Neumann say?” Jesse asks, already livid.

“He took my side,” I say, raising my eyes and looking between them. “He slapped a test booklet onto my desk and said that I didn’t break a single rule – and just because none of them was clever enough to convince a bigger cadet to build them a chair, and declare them governor, and carry them over the finish line, it didn’t mean it was wrong for me to use my resources wisely.”



I take a deep breath, carrying on. “And then, when they insisted it wasn’t fair, Neumann called them out. He said that if Jesse Sinclair,” I say, looking at my cousin significantly and letting him know that

Neumann really did call him out by name, “had been carried bleeding across the finish line by the crown Prince that nobody would have countered it. That everyone would have called it noble, and applauded, and happily mark both of you as passing with flying colors”

Rafe and Jesse go still, looking at each other before returning their gazes to me. “He’s right,” Rafe said, nodding solidly. “That’s exactly what would have happened. What happened next?”

I sigh, shaking my head, wondering if I should even get into it.

## **Read Chapter 0229**

### **Chapter 0229**

#### **Chapter 0229**

I sigh, shaking my head and moving on with it. “Neumann told all of my classmates that they were all being shitty people, that they were jealous, and that they were kidding themselves if they thought that trying to knock me out of the running because I’m physically the smallest and weakest was ever going to do them any favors, because they’re next on that list.”

Rafe works hard to keep from bursting into laughter, so I do it for him. My brother and my cousin join in, even as I shake my head.

“I mean,” I say with a shrug, “it was good to have him stand up for me – but it’s all stuff I’ve been thinking this whole time, isn’t it? That I don’t belong here, that I’m too small, that I’ve literally only passed both the candidacy test and the examination because Jackson helped me with both. And it sucked to have my classmates say it out loud, to suggest that I shouldn’t even be allowed to take the Chem final.”

“They just knew you were going to kick their ass in that too,” Jesse says, leaning forward to put a hand on my knee. “They are just jealous, Ari. This whole time they’ve been patting themselves on the back, telling themselves that they’re tougher than you, sneering at you saying you’d be the first to go. And here you fucking are, thriving.”

“I know,” I sigh, looking between them. “But...I mean, I wouldn’t be thriving without Jackson. Or you two. I’d be dead.”



“Neumann’s right,” Rafe says, sitting down in his chair and considering it. “There’s nothing in the rulebook that says you can’t rely on your friends to help you. Everyone just assumes you have to muscle through it all alone. When in fact, the best plan is probably to gather a strong group of people with a lot of broad skills.” He smirks at Jesse and me. “Which is...kind of what we did. Which is cool, I think.”

“Oh yeah, I’ve been so helpful to you two,” I say, sitting back with a sigh, still feeling kind of crap about it all.

“You did help, Ari,” Jesse says, leaning forward with a warm smile. “You are the reason we met Daphne, the love of my life, who is obsessed with Rafe. So, thank you for my burgeoning heartbreak.”

I laugh at my cousin, sensing his joke and his sarcasm. “Yeah, I introduced her, and then she poisoned us,” I groan, covering my face with my hands.

“Yeah, we’re going to have to...see what else you can bring to the group, Ari,” Rafe says, obviously kidding and laughing along with us.

The door opens, and Ben comes through, moaning in the same way I was. “I’m dead,” he mutters, shaking his head and leaving the door open behind him as he comes and slumps down on the couch next to me. “I am death, and I’ve departed my body, and now I’m a ghost. Can you see me? Am I corporeal?”

Jesse grins at Ben and pats his knee too. “Your finals go as bad as Ari’s did?”

Ben frowns and turns to look at me, considering. “Worse, by the looks of it.”

“Did you fail?” I ask, anxious. He barely skirted through the Examination, I know, and my mom had to wound a broken wrist and a twisted ankle before sending him back here. That, combined with a failure...

God, it could be close.

“No way of knowing,” Ben sighs, resting his head back on the couch. “Hey, do we have any more of that wine that knocks you out for twenty-four hours? I could really use some of that now.”

“Yes, can we get Daphne back up here?” I ask, looking longingly at the door, kind of wishing that she would come. I haven’t seen her yet since I’ve been back – and I know she’s upset about her role in the Examination, that she thinks I’m mad at her. The two of us really need to take a minute to chat and renew our friendship.

“Why don’t you go get her, Ari?” Rafe says, stretching his hands over his head. “Bring her up – tell her to bring real wine this time. Finals are over, after all, and it’s our last night here. We could use a little celebration.”

“Go and get her,” I murmur in confusion, frowning at my big brother. And then my mind flashes to the fact that I just walked back from my Chemistry final alone. Though it didn’t bother me at the time...I mean, why was I allowed to do that, when my brother and my cousin have basically been flanking me the entire time we’ve been here? And considering that someone just tried really hard to murder me in the Examination? “Wait, what’s going on?” I ask, looking around at them. “Why is... why am I suddenly allowed to walk around alone?”

## Chapter 0230

### Chapter 0230

“Because,” Jesse says, patting my knee and then getting up, “you’re safe now, Ari. Nobody’s going to mess with you.”

“What?” I ask, my eyes following him as he moves over to his desk, writing something down on a piece of paper. “What are you talking about?”

“You don’t have to worry about Wright anymore,” Rafe murmurs, flicking his eyes up to me and then down to his notebook he pulls onto his lap, where he’s started making a packing list so that we can go home for winter break. “He’s under full guard until his trial. Plus, everyone’s scared shitless of Jackson now after his display at the bridge, which we’ve all heard about. So, we don’t have to stalk you so much.”

“What these two are leaving out,” Ben stage-whispers to me, loud enough so that Jesse and Rafe can hear, “is that they also kicked the shit out of Wright at the warrior finals.”

“What!?” I gasp, appalled.

“We only kicked the shit out of him a little bit,” Rafe says, holding up two fingers held very close together in front of his face. “Just...a teeny tiny amount.”

“Rafe!” I shout, grabbing a pillow and hurling it at him. “You shouldn’t have done that – you should have just let dad and the authorities handle it! This could get in the way of the investigation!”

“I don’t know why you’re surprised,” Jesse calls on his way to the dumbwaiter with a note, blasé. “Did you think we were just going to let him get away with it?”

“It’s not your job to administer justice!” I shout, throwing out my hands.

“Well, whatever,” Rafe sighs, completely ignoring my outrage. “We weren’t even the first ones to do it, by the looks of things.”

“What?” I gasp.

“He had bruises everywhere,” Ben says, nodding and gesturing to his face. “Looks like Luca got to him, used him as a punching bag to practice his left hook.”

“Luca,” Rafe says, lifting his head and looking at Ben with a frown. “Why would he have done that? It was Jackson, obviously.”

“Why would Jackson have done it?” Ben asks, frowning back. “He did us enough of a solid carrying Ari across that field and up the mountain. Why would he do more?”

“Because,” Rafe says, frowning at him, confused. “He’s —“

“So!” I shout as I jump to my feet, trying to cause as much disruption as possible as I see that this is getting into dangerous territory that I absolutely do not want to touch.

“We’re...we’re packing!? Winter break starts tomorrow? How are we getting back to the Capital?”

Ben just watches me carefully, but Rafe looks up at me with a frown. “By train, Ari. Why do you never know these things?”

“Why do you know them?” I ask, putting my hands on my hips and frowning at him.

“Seriously, are you getting like, text messages from the rail lines? Updates from mom and dad?”

“Ari, you know I don’t have my phone back yet —“

I’m pleased, honestly, that Rafe and Ben are so sufficiently distracted. But it’s all a waste, because the moment I get Ben talking about his own winter plans — he’s coming to the Palace with us, I’m pleased to hear — a sharp knock comes at the door followed by the sound of it opening.

I barely — barely! — have time to turn before Jackson is halfway across the room. And I only have a half second to gasp before I’m up in his arms, held close to him as he presses a swift set of kisses

first to my cheek, and then to my lips. “How are you?” he murmurs, staring into my eyes, and I can feel his joy at holding me in his arms again thrumming through him. “How did Chemistry go — did you pass? You passed — of course you passed.”

His joy and the very physical pleasure of being swept up in his arms would be infectious, irresistible, even...if I wasn’t aware of every eye in the room currently on us.

“What...” Jesse barks out, and Jackson and I both turn our heads towards him. My mate makes no move to put me down. “What the hell is going on here!?”

## Chapter 0231

### Chapter 0231

“Um,” I 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.

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 me to my feet, but doesn’t let me out of his arms. “What the fuck is going on!”

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 0232**

### **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 – I want to scream, and scratch, and bite, and intercede, and stop them, and –

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 –

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 – Rafe's huge dark wolf snarling as he holds Jackson's scruff in his mouth, not biting him but a warning growl rumbling deep in his 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!?"

"Um," I say, glancing at Ben, who sighs and releases his grip on me. The two of us get to our feet 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."

## **Chapter 0233**

### **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, Ariell?" 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 –"

"Wait," Rafe says, and from the corner of my eye I see him step towards us, "this is...this 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 0234

### 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 go wide, 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 – not violent, but determined. "I don't know what the fuck is going on here, but you and me!? We're 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 after him!"

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

"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 0235

### 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 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 0236

### 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 just be there!" Jesse exclaims, throwing out his hands. "To show you that I care, 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 0237**

### **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 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 0238**

### **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 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 this guy who always seems so flippant, so easy.

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 foundling, 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 0239**

### **Chapter 0239**

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

“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 0240**

### **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.

“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 –”