

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy

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No, the way I'm coming apart right now has...absolutely everything to do with this quiet moment, of being alone with Jackson in his dark room and knowing that no part of me is hidden from him right now. That I'm his, if he wants me, every piece of me, body and soul. And Jackson, to my delight, claims me. Eagerly, like I'm all he's ever wanted his whole life.

He gives me a small smile and holds my gaze as he lowers his face to my stomach. Then he dips his head and presses a soft kiss there, just below my navel. I raise a hand and run it through his silky hair, letting it slip through my fingers, just...adoring him.

And there's no need to pass any of these feelings down our bond - because it's all already open. What I feel, he feels. And to me, he gives precisely the same.

That little kiss to my stomach - it's as far as we go, physically, sexually. But the way that we connect as Jackson takes his time working his way all the way up my body, touching every inch of me, caressing my skin, noting every freckle and bend of my flesh, making sure every piece of me receives his scent?

God, I've never felt so connected to anyone in my entire life. So claimed, so wanted, so treasured.

When he's finished, Jackson gathers me into his arms in the quiet dark of his room and quietly slips the little diamond clips out of my hair. "These are very pretty," he murmurs, reaching over to put them on his bedside table. "But...tonight, I like you without. Just you, no adornments."

I give him my assent, agreeing, wanting to just be myself with him tonight. Nothing fancy, nothing extra. Just me, and my Jacks, and his arms around me.

I trace my fingers softly along his spine as he dips his head, pressing a kiss low on my neck, in that soft place just between my neck and my shoulder. And I smile, loving the feel of it. loving him.

And then my eyes drift shut, and I know his do too, right at the same time.

And just like that, quite simply,

We fall asleep.

When my eyes flutter open the next morning, I'm confused for a second, but then I break into a grin. Because even though I fell asleep on my side on the mattress, with my head pressed into one of mom's very expensive down pillows, I've woken up sprawled across Jackson's stomach and chest, just as I did during the Examination.

I smile, letting my eyes drift back shut, nuzzling my face closer to his bare chest and curling closer to him, even though that's a little impossible. Jackson's flat on his back, one arm wrapped protectively around me, the other flung out over the mattress. His mouth hangs open a little, adorably, as he breathes deeply. And I can feel each of those breaths raising, lightly, against my body.

Honestly, I should be waking my with a crick in my neck and sore muscles from such a strange position. But, really, I feel more rested and comfortable than I've maybe ever felt. Which is saying something, considering how much we all had to drink last night.

I'm basking quietly in the warmth of him in the still-dark room - Jackson has his curtains pulled shut, even though I can see a little sunlight peeking through - when I feel him twitch, slightly, and I feel him wake up. I grin at the sensation, which is so new and delightful, and only possible because our bond is so open to each other after last night. We're so connected to each other right now that when my little wolf turns her sleepy head and stretches out her nose, she rests it on Jackson's wolf's paw. His wolf grumbles sleepily and turns his nose towards her so their muzzles nearly touch.

I open my eyes again, and tilt my head up, grinning when I see Jacks peering at me a little blearily in the morning light.

Down our bond, I pass a warm and happy hello, pleased and quiet and comforted.

Jacks, to my surprise, just snarls and grabs me tighter to his chest, turning on his side and taking me with him so that we're laying face-to-face against the pillows. I burst out laughing as he shakes his head, pressing his eyes shut again.

"No," he murmurs, angry. "We're not up. It's not morning. You're imagining it - go back to sleep."

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"Noco, baby," I say softly, laughing and reaching out to stroke his cheek. "We have to get up! There's a whole day waiting for us. And pancakes. And coffee. And little raspberry pastries."

He groans, slipping a hand down my back so that it settles at the dip of my spine, pulling me tight against him so that our bellies are flush. A warm rush pulses through me as I loop my leg over his, because I love that - love how he wants every inch of his skin pressed to mine, just as I want it too.

"No," he mutters, stubborn, shaking his head. But then he pauses, considering. "Well, the raspberry pastries..we can have those. But someone can bring them here, and slide them under the door, and then we'll eat them in bed."

"Okay, baby," I whisper, pleased, still stroking his hair and his face. "Whatever you want."

A little smile grows on his lips when I say that, and his eyes open, moving slowly over my face. "I like this," he murmurs, nodding. "Waking up with you here, in my bed. We should do this...every day."

"You don't mind that I apparently sleep on top of you?" I ask, grinning.

"No, I like that," he answers, his voice all growly and rough.

"You don't mind me passed out on your chest? Collapsing your ribcage in the night, making it all hard to breathe?"

"You are light, like a sparrow," he murmurs, leaning forward to press a kiss to my cheek even as I laugh. "Plus, I liked feeling you there, when I would wake up. The weight of you - it makes you feel...very real. Not like a dream."

"Do I sometimes feel like a dream?" I ask, my voice wandering a little, my thoughts still sleepy and disconnected.

"You've always been a dream," Jackson replies, easy, like it's a fact. "It's only when I have you here, warm against me, that I have proof that you're real. That I didn't just make you up."

I smile, shaking my head, hardly able to take the sweetness of him as I wrap my arms tight around his neck and pull him as close as I can. Jackson growls again, liking it, turning again and taking me with him so that we get all tangled up in the sheets, so that I'm again laying on his chest and looking down into his face. My hair falls around us, a little, making a private curtain. He tucks one side back behind my ear, wanting to see me.

"I don't deserve you, Jacks," I say on a happy sigh, relaxing against him as I gaze down into his face. "No one does. You're too good and sweet."

"What a ridiculous thing to say," he murmurs, raising a hand to cup my cheek. "When we're all aware that you're way out of my league, Ariel."

I burst out laughing, shaking my head at him. "Jackson!" I protest, smacking him lightly on the chest. "Why would you even think that!?"

"Because you're a brave, talented, beautiful, charming princess who is clever as a fox. And I don't even know what a walk-in closet is."

I burst out laughing at this, tilting my head back and glancing over at the door to the closet, which I'm sure my mom has already filled with clothes. "Minor details, baby," I whisper, turning back to smile down into his face. "Knowledge of interior architecture aside, you're perfect."

Jackson grumbles discontentedly but wraps an arm around my shoulder, pulling me down so that my face rests again against his chest, where we started. Long moments pass and I feel my mind start to drift back to sleep, completely comfortable. Which is why Jackson's next words startle me so completely.

"I think that Luca..." he murmurs, awake and thoughtful, clearly musing aloud, "makes more sense than I do, as your mate, your match. At least on paper, as they say."

My eyes immediately fly open and I sit up a little, staring into Jackson's face.

"What?" I breathe, shocked, appalled. Because Luca is wonderful, but Jackson - I never, ever want him to doubt our connection. "What...where is this coming from, Jacks!? Why the hell would you say that!?"

He raises a hand to my cheek then, cupping it, looking at me a little sadly. "I saw everything last night, Ariel," he says, his words an apologetic whisper. "Every moment of the fight, and what you did to help him. And what you were like...with him. I saw...the way he made your smile."

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My heart sinks at the thought of it, of Jackson seeing..that.

Because he's not wrong-last night was incredibly important for Luca and I. Our bond now - it's deeper than it was before, stronger and more significant. And he's not wrong - Luca and I presented our relationship to the nation last night to the world. And even though I have no idea what it looked like from an outsider's standpoint or on television...

I do know that we came across as a strong couple, dedicated and powerful. A perfect match. How could we have presented as anything else, when so much of that is the truth?

But still...while the rest of the nation may have celebrated that - their champion paired up with their Princess - how did it look to Jacks?

"Tell me," I murmur, leaning close and reaching for his face, cupping his cheek in my palm. Jackson leans into it, closing his eyes as he speaks.

"I went to the restaurant, like I said, with the guys I used to live with. It was...fine. It was good to see them, I guess."

I smile a little, because Jackson has friends - friends outside of me and my family, even if he didn't know to count them as such. He cracks his eyes open and laughs a little, shaking his head at me. "Would you come down here?" he murmurs, tugging me close again and turning so that we're face-to-face again. "It's harder to tell when you're looming over me like an owl." "Yes, fine, I'll look up at you like an adoring little mouse," I murmur, pleased that he wants to be more casual about it. Because if he's more casual, it means he's not devastated. Right? "Okay, little mouse," he murmurs, pressing a kiss to my forehead before continuing on. "The whole thing was...fine, for a while. The television showed some screen shots and concentrated on you and your family for a bit - and I liked that."

"You did?" I ask, smiling a little.

"Sure," he says, nodding. "I knew the people on the TV. The guys I was with knew I'd been at the Academy, asked if I knew Rafe and Jesse. I said...a little bit."

I burst out laughing at the understatement here, considering that he's now basically part of the family.

"It felt like I had a secret," Jackson murmurs, still smiling a little. But that fades away when he moves on. "It was....harder. When Luca came out. And then he pointed to you in the crowd, and kissed his glove and held it out to you? And you...smiled like that?"

Jackson exhales all in a woosh, and my stomach sinks with guilt. I'm devastated, suddenly, to have put him through that.

God, what was I thinking? He told me he'd be watching-

"Don't," Jackson murmurs, and my eyes flick back to him. I frown a little - I hadn't even realized that I'd looked away. Softly, he strokes my face. "Don't feel guilty, Ariel. That's not... I'm not trying to make you feel bad."

"I know," I whisper, nodding. "And you should be able to tell me your experiences without worrying about how they make me feel."

He smirks at me, still stroking my cheek. "It's going to be hard sometimes. But I don't...want to keep anything back. I want to tell you the truth, all the time. Is that okay?"

Inod, meaning it, even if it means that it will hurt sometimes. Somehow, it feels the only way through. "Keep going," I whisper.

"The end was...really hard," Jackson says. "The whole bar was on its feet, shouting at the TV, and even the restaurant patrons came over to watch. When Luca went down, I didn't think they could scream any louder. But when you jumped out of the stands? God, the room exploded with cheers, and I thought I was never going to breathe again. The way you pounded on the mat? And called his name? And then he responded, and got up, and won, and it was clearly all because of you?"

Jackson exhales again and rolls away from me for a moment, covering his face briefly with his hand.

"Jacks," I say, even though...well, there's no meaning behind it. I slip my hand out, placing it solidly on his chest, wanting him to feel the corporeal reality of me right now.

Because I'm here. Right here. With him.

He feels the emotions behind my thoughts and turns his head back to me, nodding. "When you're here, Ariel? With me, and I can hold you and look at you? Everything feels different- makes sense, feels possible. It's only when I see you with him - see..well, see how much you love him..."

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I press my lips together and keep my gaze on his face, not letting myself look away. But also not denying, at all, the way that Luca and I feel about each other. Because I don't want to lie and Luca is..so important to me.

"So what do we do?" I whisper, desperate to make it better. I can't go on with Jacks feeling like this - I don't want to make him feel like this ever, ever again.

"I think... maybe I just don't need to put myself in positions where I see it?" Jacks says, tentative.

"What do you mean?" I whisper.

"I mean," he shrugs, "... think I want boundaries. You have your space with Luca, and your space with me, and...I think I'd like to know as little about the details about the time you spend with Luca as possible. I mean, within reason," he continues, giving a little frown. "It's not like I won't ever be in the same room with you two again, and hugging and holding hands seems....fine. I just.."

He exhales again, deeply, and looks up at the ceiling.

"Tell me," I urge, wanting to know.

"I really..kind of wanted to kill him," Jackson whispers, and I can hear the guilt in the words as he utters them. "And even though I knew that feeling was wrong, and that I'd never do it, and that it would only hurt you..." he turns his head back to me. "It was a visceral, bodily reaction to seeing someone connect with my mate, I think. I don't...like feeling that way."

"Okay," I say, nodding quietly, understanding. "I..um. I don't know how to work that out, precisely. But I will, all right? More boundaries. I promise. I'm sorry, Jacks."

"Don't be sorry, please," he begs, rolling back towards me and taking me in his arms just the way I like him to. "None of it is your fault. You're just...living the life you were handed, Ariel. You can't feel guilty about that." And then he wraps me up so safe, so secure, and tucks his head down against my shoulder as my heart breaks that he felt that way.

I comb my fingers gently through Jackson's hair then, humming softly to him, pulling up feelings of comfort and softness and assurance and passing them all down our fully open bond, hoping they help him relax.

"It got a lot better," he murmurs, his words muffled by his head still tucked down by my shoulder. "When you came and knocked on my door."

I laugh a little. "Oh, yeah?" He presses a kiss to that spot on my neck before he lifts his head to smile at me.

"Yes," he says, nodding. "I was...going a little crazy, wondering what you were getting up to with him all night. Partying, and having fun, and...dancing and stuff. All things I can't do."

I laugh a little harder now, shaking my head at him. "You can party, Jacks, everyone can party with as much liquor as we had. And I'm sure you're an excellent dancer."

He scoffs at me, lowering his head again and kissing that same spot like it's his, like he owns it. "I've never danced a single step in my life, Ariel."

"Yeah, but if you tried," I say, a tingling starting in my core as Jackson keeps going. continuing to press kisses to my skin all the way to the edge of my shoulder, and then moving down. "I'm sure you'd be great at it."

He flicks his eyes up at me for a moment before continuing to trail kisses back towards my throat, and then lower. "What makes you think that?"

"Because," I say, my voice a little breathier now, even as I smile and drift my fingers through his silky dark hair. "I've seen you move, Jacks, you're incredibly good at controlling your body. I'm sure you'd figure out rhythm in an instant."

He hums consideringly, but like he doesn't believe it, and my breath comes a little faster as he presses kiss after kiss down the center of my chest, and then down my stomach.

And then I can't stand it not any more my mouth jealous of every other piece of me that's getting attention when it is not. I sit up sharply, grabbing his shoulders, pulling him back up towards me. "Please," I beg, leaning back, pulling him with me.

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And my mate complies, wrapping a hand around the back of my neck as he brings his mouth to mine, where it belongs, and lays his body out on top of me. My leg hooks up over his hip, where it likes to be, and I kiss my mate rather desperately, with abandon. Half because want him - always want him, frantically want him- and half because I need him to know it.

A groan slips from between Jackson's lips as he presses himself tighter against me. He kisses me again and again, and with each kiss we sink deeper into each other as his palm slides hard against my skin, up over my rib cage to cup my breast for the first time. A shiver passes through me as he does, because even though I've been topless with him for hours now, this is the first time he's seriously acknowledged it.

I tilt my head back at the intensity of it, of Jackson's broad hand against me, of his calloused thumb rushing light across my nipple. He takes advantage, kissing my throat, running his tongue along the length of it. The shivers come harder now, more frequent,

as my hips press up against him, wanting him, wanting him badly, losing my mind with it, as I always seem to do.

And all the while, I'm thinking that Jackson - he's mine. And even if he has this ridiculous idea that Luca is the one who is right for me, that Luca makes sense in a way that he does not...

Jackson? He is mine, and I claim him, and see every inch of him as a match for me -

"I don't think that," Jackson says, pulling back a little, frowning down at me. I pant up at him, confused for a second and he shakes his head at me, wrapping his arms around me so that one is tight around my waist and the other moves up between my shoulders, cradling my head and trapping me against him in a way I love. "I don't think that Luca is right for you, Ariel."

I blink at him, a little surprised because usually, we don't do words down our bond. But guess it's so open now that he caught on - that he can feel what I'm feeling, even without words being put to it.

"Wait," I say, confused and honestly a little too much in a makeout-induced haze to think straight, "then what do you think?"

He shakes his head again, staring at me intently, like it's the most important thing he's ever said. "I said that Luca looks like he makes more sense for you, on paper that you seem like the better match, I think that Luca's done a great job of convincing the tabloids that you're a perfect pair," he says, smirking a little now. And I can't help it, I smirk a bit too. "But that when it comes to the reality of you, Ariel? All of your complexities? All of your twists, and turns, and the woman you're growing into, the person you'll become?"

I go a little still in his arms because...what is he saying? Does Jackson really see me this way?

His smile broadens, and then he nudges his nose against mine, wolfish and heated and sweet. "He can't handle you," he whispers.

My face breaks into a challenging grin. "What, McClintock," I murmur. "And you think you can?"

"Yeah," he whispers, instant, with a smug little grin. "I think I can, Clark. I think I'm going to enjoy...handling you."

I groan then, and basically grab him, pulling his face to mine and making him kiss me again. My mate laughs and complies, laying me back down flat on the bed and kissing me hard, and fast, matching my desire and my desperation.

Because that's what I am now, for better or for worse-just.. desperate for Jacks, to feel him, every inch of him.

My body sings, and I let him feel it, when he slides his hand long down the length of my side, dipping behind me and grabbing a handful of my ass. He groans, tucking his head down against my shoulder like he can't handle it, but his body moves forward despite him. Jackson, in a break from his usual restraint, lets his hips shift forward so that I can feel every long, hard inch of him, pressed tight between my legs.

And then, groaning deeply, Jackson flexes his hips just once, sliding the length of his cock against me. And when I feel how thick, and heavy, and ready he is -

I fucking lose my mind.

I wrap both of my legs around his waist then, panting, my head tilted back so that Jackson has full access to my neck, bared before him. He licks me there again, and then presses his teeth against the soft skin, his canines just slightly extended to points. And I know - I know he wants to mark me.

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Wants to sink himself deep into me, and bite me, and mark me as his own, and fuck me for hours - because I can feel it down the bond - and I want that -

I want it right now, immediately-

My hand slips down between us, pushing hard at the waistband of his pajamas -

But then I go still, my mouth gaping, as Jackson groans and pulls away from me, whispering my name.

I go still, staring at him for a second, not knowing-

But when I see the apology, and the hesitance on his face...

And I realize that Jackson is not going to be fucking me today...

I groan, and cover my face with my hands, and tilt my head slightly away from him. "You. Are. Killing me, McClintock," I whisper.

"I know, and I'm sorry," he replies, laughing a little bit and shifting his hips away. My wolf howls, outraged, desperately unhappy, jumping up and nipping his wolf hard below the jaw. But his wolf just growls, and takes her ruff lightly between his teeth, giving her a little shake. She glares up at him, but complies, behaving, even as a growl rumbles in her chest.

I shift my hands down from my face, staring at him, still panting a little. And he's still there, mostly on top of me, staring down at me and smiling his apology. But the lower half of his body has been shifted away, which is not what I wanted at all.

But honestly, why?

I don't understand, and I shake my head, and I know he feels it - my plea for an explanation.

"Don't take it that way," he murmurs, reaching out and petting my cheek softly. "I want you too, Ariel. This is not at all one-sided."

"Um!" I snap, sitting up a little to stare into his face. "It's feeling a little one-sided at the moment, Jacks!"

He grins at me, I think a little pleased at how much I want him, but he nudges me down the bond and urges me to feel everything that he's feeling too - and as I do, I see that he does want me as badly as I want him - that he's just as consumed by lust.

He's just way, way better at controlling it.

*Stupid warriors," I murmur, falling back on the pillows with a sigh. "And your stupid discipline."

*Espionage is supposed to be disciplined too," he reminds me, pressing a kiss to my shoulder.

*Selectively! When they have to be!" I reach out for him then, taking his face in my hands, making him look at me. "Why, Jacks? When I want to, and you want to...why wait? What's the point?"

"I want it to be right, Ariel," he says softly.

And when he says it that way so sweet, so simple...

Gad, I feel like such a jerk.

"Stop!" he bursts out, laughing, smiling and shaking his head at me. "Stop feeling so guilty - I'm the one putting the brakes on things. I should be apologizing to you."

"Well, yes, obviously, you should," I growl, crossing my arms and giving him a glare I don't mean. He grins at me, and leans forward to press a kiss to my lips. "Jackson," I murmur, wiggling down on the mattress so that I'm closer to him, so that I can stare up into his face. "If I'm rushing you, and you want to wait, then of course I'm okay with that. But...can you help me understand?" I shake my head. "I don't get it."

"I just...don't want to move so fast," he murmurs, pressing a kiss to each of my cheeks. "We have time - plenty of it. And I could pose the same question to you. Why are you in such a rush to lose your virginity?"

I laugh a little, finding the question a bit ironic coming from him. "What, and you're not?"

Jackson hesitates for a second, staring at me.

And then I gasp, and go perfectly still for a second, staring up at my mate.

"Ariel..." he murmurs, tilting his head to the side, almost awkward.

"Oh my god!" I gasp again, sitting up fast and nearly banging my head against his in my scramble to press myself hard against the headrest of the bed as I stare at him, gathering the sheets up to my chest in my shock.

Jackson sits up too, giving me a little grimace and shrugging his shoulders, just slightly.

*Jackson..." I whisper, gaping at him. "Are you...are you not a virgin!?"

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"Um..." Jackson says lightly, looking uncomfortably to the side - a move he stole from me, I don't fail to note

And I gasp, even louder now, just staring at him, completely agape. Then, I find myself.

*Jackson!" I sputter, leaning back to kick him with my foot. Not because I'm pissed - I just can't believe I didn't know this! "What the...!"

"What!?" he says, laughing and lifting his head to look at me again, snatching my foot out of the air as I attempt to land a second blow. "You can have another mate, but I can't have a past!"

"Um, you can't have a sexual past, when your whole vibe is being Mr. Women Are So Scary and I can't even talk to them! Jackson!"

He bursts out laughing at my description of him, but I just continue to stare, flabbergasted.

*Seriously, you can't even talk to the waitresses at your job in the city, but you've had sex before!?" I shake my head, totally not getting it.

"Okay, okay," he says, still holding my foot in his hand as he leans forward and puts a hand on my shoulder. "I get it - this was...unexpected. But you knew I'd kissed someone before - that I knew a girl."

*Kissing and sex are very different, Jacks," I growl, tugging my foot out of his hand and tucking it beneath me.

He shrugs a little, like perhaps it's not, and I just stare at him, wondering if I know him at all. And then I sit up straight, my feelings hurt all of a sudden because -

I mean, because it would make a lot more sense to me if Jackson didn't want to have sex with me right now because he was a virgin - like me - and wanted to ease into it. But there was another girl whom he was willing to go that far with...

So...

Wait. Why...why won't he have sex with me?

Did he... oh my god, did he like her more?

Did he like her MORE!? Was she hotter than me!?

Oh my god. Was she funny? If she was funny...I'm going to flip out.

*Stop," Jackson says, tightening his hand on my shoulder, sensing all of my feelings down the bond. His face falls into serious lines as he stares at me, hard. "Stop all of that, right now. None of that's true, Ariel."

"Well..." I say softly, kind of adrift emotionally and starting to get upset. I tighten my fists around the fabric of the sheet, holding it closer to me. "What... what is true?"

"Come here," he whispers, opening his arms to me even as he twists so that his back is to the headrest too. I do as he urges, climbing into his lap and letting him wrap me up, trusting him completely even if I am confused and a little dismayed. "I'll tell you everything, if you want to hear it."

*Of course I want to hear it," I breathe, still staring at his face. God, am I even blinking anymore? Have I forgotten how to blink?

*Do you want to hear it?" he asks, grimacing a little. "You get...a little jealous, Ariel."

I scoff a little, thinking that that's a little bit of a baseless claim.

"The waitresses?" he urges, raising an eyebrow at me.

Instantly, my eyes narrow. "What, was she a waitress? Wait - did they make a move on you last night?" I snap, sitting up straighter. "Which one? Was she pretty? Where does she -*

But the way he smirks at me makes me stop mid-harangue. And I snap my mouth shut, and scowl, and lean back against his arm.

"Don't get me wrong, Clark, I like it when you get a little jealous," he murmurs, his smirk deepening as he rocks me a little. "But...you're not going to like some parts of this story. And it can wait, or...I don't have to tell you at all."

"Oh, you're telling me this story, sir," I say, snapping my eyes up to him, knowing that the mystery of it will keep me up at night if I don't know all of the details right now.

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"Okay," he says, his smirk softening to a smile. "But...I mean, are you mad? That I'm not a virgin, like you?"

"Wait, how do you know I'm a virgin?" I ask, narrowing my eyes.

He sniffs the air around me. "I can tell by your scent."

"What!?" I screech, eyes wide.

But he just laughs at me and shakes his head, and I shriek again and smack him on the chest when I realize that he's kidding.

*I just... put the pieces together, Ari. I think you've had a sheltered life and Jesse would have teased you about it in front of me if you'd had a serious boyfriend before. He wouldn't have been able to resist that bait. And I think if you'd slept with Luca...he'd have let me know."

I sigh, realizing that that's right. That Luca absolutely would have used it as leverage against Jackson - wouldn't have been able to resist it in the same way Jesse can't resist a good tease.

"So," Jackson continues, shrugging again. "Just...an educated guess. But...I mean, are you? Mad?"

"No, Jacks," I say instantly, suddenly sorry that my reaction made him think that. "I don't care that you've had a history. I'm just... surprised. When Daphne came into the room that time you were ready to bolt - and she didn't even want to sleep with you -"

"Yes she did," he murmurs, dry.

I burst out laughing and smack him again, not bothering to mention that she did think he was cute - second only to Rafe, in her estimation. "Shut up," I growl, jealousy rankling in me a little at the thought. "But seriously? How did this happen?"

"It was... at the Community," Jackson says quietly, getting started on the story. "Her name..." he hesitates, "Do you want to know her name?"

I consider it for a second, and then nod.

"Her name was Tasha," he continues, holding my gaze. "And it was all...really strange."

"Okay," I say, feeling oddly half tense and half calm. I lean back against his arm a little, still clutching the sheets to my chest so I have something to hold tight in my fists. "Tell me everything, Jacks."

"Okay," he murmurs, and then he leans forward to press a long kiss to my lips, passing all his love and assurance and adoration down the bond to me before he starts, letting me hold onto it while he speaks so that I know that the story itself changes nothing.

When he pulls away he looks at me curiously, asking if I'm ready for it. And I nod.

"It was....spring?" he says, taking a deep breath, his eyes going a little far off as he gets started. Jackson shakes his head at the memory. "About three years ago. That's...all I've got, time-wise. Time works differently in the Community than it does here. We don't have...calendars. No weeks, no months. Just days, following one after another, and then seasons of course. But even those aren't marked by holidays, so," he shrugs, blinking and focusing on me again. "It's... hard to tell when things happened, or what's coming up."

I nod, urging him to continue.

"When I got to the city," he says softly, musing, "I thought you all had such a ridiculous mania for tracking time. Like everyone's on the same clock, down the second?" he

shakes his head, frowning. "I mean, why? I still think that, a little bit. But I also realized that... that perhaps the Community took away time as a further way to control us. You can't make plans to meet up with people, or to escape, if you've got no way to plan when that happens. Except the moon, but..."

He sighs, and hangs his head a bit, and I reach out to put my hand on his cheek.

And then raises his head to look into my eyes, his face a little sad, and he begins to tell me everything.

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"I knew it was spring," he murmurs, his head still hanging as he gets back on track, "because the riverbank was seriously muddy. Like, I kept slipping in it, couldn't keep my footing, annoying as hell. In winter, it's frozen solid. In summer, it's so dry that the dirt...puffs up in the air."

He sighs, raising his eyes to mine, and shrugs. And I smile a little, a small part of me really liking the idea that he told the passing of the year by how difficult it was not to slip and fall face-first into a river. But I don't say anything, just letting him continue.

*They sent us out, one day, to collect wood, of all things." His face screws up in confusion. "And you have to understand, Ari, like....we didn't collect wood - not me and the guys from my barracks. We were warriors at this point - not even in training anymore. Our jobs were to eat, and to... work out, and spar, for lack of better terms. And to keep the barracks clean. I was never given chores outside the barracks like collecting wood - not unless it was an emergency or something."

He continues, then, telling me about how the elders sent them out into the forest to collect firewood, instructed to bring back as much as they could carry.

*I was collecting by the stream," he murmurs, his eyes going distant as he remembers, "and I was getting...pissed, because all the wood was wet, because I knew it wasn't going to be any good in the fireplace. And then, suddenly... she was there."

*Tasha?" I ask, a little breathless.

His eyes focus again on me. "Yeah. She was just there, in the woods with me. Like she'd just appeared or something."

"What did you do?" I ask, my voice quiet like I'm trying not to spook him.

"I dropped...everything," he says, laughing, covering his face a little like he does when he's embarrassed. I grin, watching him, not able to help it. "I was just so shocked - everything I was holding went right to the ground. Scattered - into the mud. She...laughed at me."

Jealousy swells in me at this because....I mean, it's cute, isn't it? A girl and a boy meet in a forest, and my sweetheart Jacks reacts exactly as you thought he might.

*I tried to back off, to run, but she...she stopped me. Called out to me, told me to stay. Called me by my name. Called me Jackson."

I see something there, about how that means something to him. But I don't press.

*She came close then, and took my hand, and told me to stay with her for a little bit. But Ariel," he shakes his head now, and his voice grows low like he's still afraid. "When I said, before, that women were forbidden - I mean forbidden. I knew that this wasn't allowed. I knew that even talking to her was off-limits, and here she was, saying my name? She took my hand..."

He takes a deep breath like it's hard to tell, and I scootch closer to him, wanting him to feel my support. Because I can tell that this isn't easy for him and also, that he's never told anyone this before. Update first at [NôvelDráma](#). Org.

"She was really, really nice to me, Ariel," he says softly, and I nod, because I believe him. I clench my teeth and close down the bond a little because I don't want him to see how incredibly sorry it makes me - that a girl was nice to him, and that it meant so much. It shouldn't... shouldn't have to be so hard.

"How was she nice?" I whisper, urging him to tell me more.

"We sat down by the river, and she held my hand, and asked me questions about my life. It got easier, because she kept laughing at me - but not like, in a bad way. Laughing like she thought I was cute, laughing at...how anxious I was. She told me to relax, that it was okay. And I started to believe her, and I got to ask her some questions too. She told me that she liked...cooking? And birds. And the color yellow."

He smiles at these details and I can't help it - I smile too. Because even if I am jealous - and I have to admit that

I am very, very jealous - I want Jackson to have held the hand of a girl who likes yellow, and birds, and cooking.

"It happened fast after that," he says, hanging his head a little, I think maybe liking this part less. "I...didn't understand it. She kissed me, and then...she moved my hands? To touch her. And I did. And then, faster than you'd think, our clothes were off, and.."

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He shrugs, stopping there, perhaps sensing that I don't want all the details. Or wanting to keep them for himself. But I don't begrudge him that.

I frown a little, though, at this phrasing. "So..." I say carefully, softly. "Did you not..."

"If you're asking if I wanted to," he murmurs, lifting his eyes to mine. "I did. That wasn't...the problem."

"Was there a problem?"

"No," he replies, earnest. "I mean, I liked it. I liked it a lot. We did it again, a couple more times after that day. They sent us out into the woods more often, and we'd collect wood, and sometimes she'd be there and sometimes she wouldn't. But when she was there, I was thrilled - and she was happy too, I could tell. We got closer, enjoyed each other's company, liked..." he sighs, and shakes his head a little like he doesn't know how to explain it. "We liked the physical stuff too I know we did."

"That's good, though," I murmur, reaching out a hand and lightly tracing my fingers through his hair. "Isn't it?"

"Yeah," he says. "I just...I mean, after...actually, I don't now how long it lasted. But it just stopped. They sent me out into the woods still, but I just gathered wood, and brought it back, and she wasn't there anymore. I never heard from her again, never...I mean, I don't know what happened to her."

My heart sinks, worried now. Because...what the hell is going on in his world, that his girl was able to find him for a season and then disappear? Was she some kind of magical fae? Some figment of his imagination?

I watch him carefully and we're both quiet for a long couple of moments.

"How do you feel about it?" I ask quietly, not knowing precisely how to feel myself and wanting his guidance. Because, on one hand, that sounds like....well, kind of like a perfectly lovely and acceptable way to lose your virginity. Two young people meeting in the woods, attracted to each other, not really knowing what they're doing and it just...happens. Update first at NôvelDráma.Org.

But somehow, I know that it's more complicated than that for Jacks.

"I feel really weird about it, Ari," he murmurs, looking down at his hands. "I feel torn. Because, on one hand, she's a really nice girl and I'm grateful to her for being so kind to me. Like, you can't understand what it was like - we didn't even know we were unhappy in the barracks, not really, because...we didn't have anything to compare it to. But those handful of hours, stolen with Tasha in the woods..." he looks up at me now, and the sheer emotion on his face almost bowls me over. "She made me to want more, Ariel. She taught me to want more."

I nod, letting him know that I understand - or that I'm starting to. I sense, though, that there are so many layers to this - a depth of complication and emotion that I can't even get to, because not even Jackson has gotten there yet.

"What's the other hand?" I murmur, continuing to run my fingers through his hair.

"The other hand," he says, his voice dropping a little in anger. "Is that... didn't even....know what was happening. I was so embarrassed when I found out."

I frown at him for a moment, not getting, and he inhales deeply, figuring out how to explain.

"I hadn't had sex before, obviously," he murmurs, staring off into the distance. "But I had done...stuff. To myself... you know. When I was alone."

A little blush creeps onto his cheeks, and I smile a bit, continuing to stroke my fingers through his hair, because it is weird to talk about masturbation with people. Such a personal thing - something we're taught to keep hidden away, Jackson probably more than anyone else.

"So," he continues, taking a breath and moving briskly on, "the sensations themselves weren't really a surprise. Though, sex is..." he puffs out a breath and raises his eyebrows, like sex is just a whole other world from getting yourself off alone in bed.

I sigh a little, because I wouldn't know, and Jackson smirks as he glances at me. "Sorry," he murmurs.

"No, don't be," I say, a little sarcastic. "I mean, I tried to find out this morning..."

He laughs and glances at me, but I murmur assurances that I'm just teasing him, and he nods, continuing, his spirit a bit brighter.

"What were you embarrassed about?" I prompt, wanting to know.

Jackson exhales a long breath.

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"I was embarrassed," he says, looking away from me again. "Because...when I came to the city and started watching TV, people of course talked about sex casually - that husbands and wives did it, and mates, and boyfriends and girlfriends. But...they talked about it like it was this big thing - especially losing your virginity, how intense and emotional and special it was. And I was so interested because I was like...well what the hell is that? What's sex? What could it be? And then I saw some movies that showed people actually having sex..."

His words fade off, and suddenly it all snaps together. "Oh," I say, sitting up a little straighter. "And you realized that you'd...you'd done it before."

"Yeah," he says, looking down at his hands. "And I felt... I don't know, kind of robbed? Not by Tasha - but by the Community, by my education. I should have known that it was...important. That it was big. That it's not something that most people casually do by the river, but it's something that a lot of people understand as an act that...brings people together. People who love each other."

We're both quiet now, and my hand slips down from his hair, down his neck to rest on his shoulder. I study him carefully, his handsome profile, his powerful frame. Physically, he can withstand so much. And yet it's this - these small, stolen things that truly break him down.

"Did you love her?" I ask quietly, curious. And as I ask it I realize that I won't begrudge him if the answer is yes. That instead I might even be happy - I will have wanted him to have that love in a world that took so much away from him.

"No," he answers, looking at me seriously. "I liked her a lot, Ariel, I was really fond of her. But what we had, how I felt about her?" He shakes his head softly. "It is... nothing compared to..." he gestures to me now, to the bond between us. And I nod, accepting it, understanding.

We stare at each other for a long time in the dark of Jackson's room, both of us feeling the complexities of this thing, feeling a sorrow for everything that was taken from him, and joy for what we've found now. Update first at NôvelDráma. Org.

Because no matter what came before, we have each other in this moment. And I again feel that fierce protective instinct well up in me, like if anyone comes for my baby Jacks - lays a single finger on his emotions, I'm just going to rip them to shreds.

"Come here, baby," I murmur, dropping the sheet from my hands and opening my arms to him. Jackson obeys, letting himself lean over lightly until he topples into my arms. I laugh a little, working hard to stay upright as the full, not insubstantial weight of his upper half comes to rest against me. But I prevail, and stay upright, and hug him close, tucking my chin against his head.

Jackson sighs, long and steady, and in it I feel a thousand things. Feel the relief in having me to talk to, in unburdening himself. And worry, that I won't fully understand, or that he didn't tell it right. And sadness, in having to remember it at all, this part of his life that he's so eager to leave behind.

"Don't leave it all behind, Jacks," I whisper. "It's still your history. It's still yours."

"I'm not sure it is, Ari," he murmurs. "It was so...calculated. So controlled. I think it's theirs."

I don't counter, not knowing how much good it will do. But, I do quietly - in a secret part of me that I hope Jackson can't hear or feel - determine to talk to mom about getting him a therapist. Because my sweet Jacks - he's been through the ringer, hasn't he? And as much as I want to be here to listen and hold him through all of it, I know that I don't know enough to help him through some of the more complex emotions.

But there are, I know, some things I can do to make it better.

"I know you don't want me to apologize anymore," I say quietly, my arms firm around him as I kiss the side of his head again. "But...I'm sorry if I pressured you too much to go too fast. I didn't think about what it might be like from your side. And that's not fair."

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"Yeah, I absolutely do not want you to apologize for that, Ari," Jackson says, turning a little so that we're face-to-face again, so that I can see his frown. He sits up straighter, wrapping an arm around me. "I don't want you to think I don't want to have sex with you. Because..." he raises his eyebrows now and looks at me seriously, "Believe me when I say that...I want to."

I grin a little at the way his voice got all low and gravelly when he said that, but I don't tease him about it. Instead, I just nod and put a hand on his cheek - because I do believe him. I can feel it, down our bond, that it is not just me. That he wants me just as bad. He just...needs more time.

He turns his head a little, kissing my hand before looking back into my eyes. "We just have time, right? I kind of want to..." he grins now, I think feeling like it might be a little tacky, "to date you. And let it grow. And...you know. Get there when we get there."

I burst into a grin, leaning close. "You want to date me, Jackson McClintock?" I say in my best high school girl voice, because it's just too adorable to not tease him about. Just a teeny, tiny bit.

"Yup," he says, grinning right back at me, holding me tighter. "I want to date the hell out of you, Ariel Sinclair. And then, when we get to the sex," he shrugs, like it's no big deal, "it will... mean something. Won't just be something we do because our bodies wanted to, or whatever. Is that...okay?"

"Yeah, it's okay," I whisper, leaning close and pressing my forehead against his. "Um...can we still make out and stuff?"

"Yeah," he says, smiling deeply at me and tugging on my hips so that I'm basically in his lap again. I squeal a bit, because it's my favorite place to be. "We can make out, Ariel. And...stuff."

As if to prove his point, Jackson kisses me slowly and deeply, in the way he knows I like best. And I lean back against his arm and let him take control, kissing him back languidly, enjoying the feeling of his mouth and his tongue pressing against my own, especially now that I know that this is as far as it's going to go right now.

And inwardly, I smile, because....I mean, because it's kind of amazing, isn't it? I thought that Jackson and I were close, incredibly close, so deeply bonded that it couldn't get more intense. And yet here we are, not having sex after I've been mostly naked in his bed for an extended period of time, and it's...

It's deeper. It's better. And I'm so terribly in love with him that...god, I just don't know how to manage it.

But as Jackson's arms tighten around me and he leans me backwards just a touch further, I smile. Because I know he's going to be there to help me.

I'm losing myself completely to Jackson, my mind going to that hazy space it always does when he kisses me for any extended period of time at all, when suddenly my wolf leaps to her feet inside of me.

Oh no, she murmurs, her legs going stock straight as she stands, staring, feeling the wave of him coming down the hall towards us.

Because he's close now, and we can feel him, feel the anger and the pain and the horror and the dismay radiating off him like a cloud.

Jackson's wolf, feeling my wolf's movement, likewise jumps to his feet, a growl rising in his throat. Jackson and I both start in the same instant, pulling apart just an inch and staring, shocked, into each other's eyes the moment before the pounding begins on the door.

*Shit," I whisper, my head spinning towards the noise.

*Ariel!" Luca shouts, continuing to pound as he does. "Ariel, get the hell out of there! Right now!" My eyes go wide, and Jackson's growl rises in his chest, his throat, as he holds me tight.

I glance over at him. "Jacks," I whisper. "He's going to wake the whole palace - guards are going to come running if we don't get the door right now."

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Jackson stares at me for a second and then nods even as he growls, pressing a last kiss to my cheek before standing up and striding, of all places, towards his dresser.

Frantic to make the noise stop - honestly, the way Luca's shouting my name and slamming himself against the door, I think he's actually trying to knock it down - I roll off the bed too and scurry for the door.

Ariel, I swear to god, if you don't open this door and get your ass out here -

I'm almost there, my eyes on the handle, but Jackson grabs my arm as I go.

*Jacks!" I gasp, staring up at him, not knowing why he's stopped me.

"It's my room, Ariel," Jackson bites out, holding out the gigantic t-shirt and pair of pajama pants to me. I stare at them for a second before I realize what he means that I should, obviously, put them on before answering the door topless in my underwear.

I nod eagerly and take the clothes from my mate, pulling the shirt over my head and then stumbling as I try to get the pants on. The whole time, Luca continues to shout and to pound on the door. "Jackson!" I protest, glancing anxiously towards the sound. "Open it!"

"My room," Jackson snaps - obviously not mad at me, but at god damn Luca raising a racket at his door. "I'll answer it when I'm ready. I never had doors to close growing up, and now that I do, I'm damn well going to enforce my right to boundaries."

Something about that - about Jackson letting Luca wear himself out at the door because it's his and he and I can do as we please behind it - makes me burst into a grin. Hastily, I finish pulling the pants up over my hips and pull the drawstring tight. The pants are still ridiculously large - at least double the fabric that I'd usually use - but ...well. I'm covered now, aren't I?

Jackson nods once, brushing a hand over my hair, and then strides to the door, pulling it open in a single swing.

"What the fuck do you think you're fucking doing!?" Luca snarls, stepping immediately into Jackson's space and glaring up at him, completely livid. I take a step back, my eyes going wide, when I realize that his canines have elongated - that he's ready for a fight.

"You're the one in your girlfriend's parent's house," Jackson growls, stepping forward to glower down at Luca, "embarrassing yourself by making a god damn racket." Update first at [NôvelDráma. Org](#).

The growl that builds in Luca's chest is a dangerous one, and I see his hands ball into fists. My eyes go wide because after last night? I definitely know what those fists can do, even when a guy is much bigger than he is, like Jackson.

*Luca!" I shout out, desperate and livid at once.

His head whips to me and he immediately abandons his issue with Jackson, stepping towards me, angry. "Ariel, god damn it -"

But before he can get any more words out his own eye go wide and he stumbles back a step, his hand flying to his mouth, covering his nose. "Oh...oh my god," he murmurs, falling back a few more steps like he's been shoved." Oh my god!"

"What is it?" I gasp, looking around frantically. I take a step towards him but he puts a hand out towards me, palm flat, begging me to stop.

My head snaps to the left, because suddenly Jesse is flying down the hall, skidding to a stop outside Jackson's room and almost tripping over his damn feet in his hurry. "What the fuck!?" he hisses, looking frantically into the room and then to his right as Rafe comes barreling down the hall after him, his eyebrows so high they're basically in his hairline.

"What's wrong!? Is everyone okay!?" my brother gasps.

"We're fine!" I shout, stepping towards them, reaching for them, desperate to pull them into the room and get the noise out of the hall.

"You're okay!?" Jesse gasps, staring at me, tugging Rafe into the room after him and then turning to glare at Luca, who is pale and breathing hard, his hand still over the

lower half of his face. "Luca! What the fuck! You cannot go screaming like that in the palace unless someone is literally dying - Uncle Dom is going to kill you -"

"Oh my God!" Rafe says, taking a step towards me, wide-eyed.

Jackson takes a step too, looking frantically between me and Rafe as I look shocked at my brother, both of us trying to figure out what's wrong.

"What?" I gasp, starting to get scared.

Honestly, why is everyone acting so insane!?

*Ariel..." Rafe breathes, stepping towards me and reaching for me. "Did he...did Jackson mark you!?"

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"What?" I gasp, swatting his hands away.

But Rafe ignores me, reaching for my shirt, tugging back the neck on either side, looking for a bite, the signal that Jackson has claimed me as his mate, officially, incontrovertibly.

"Rafe!" I growl, shoving him away from me - god, sometimes, brothers are so damn annoying and have no sense of personal space. "No, he didn't! Why would you even think that!?"

"Um," Jesse says, staring at me wide-eyed and starting to laugh a little now. I narrow my eyes at him, adding cousins to the critique I just made of brothers. "Ariel... because you smell like you've been marked."

"What?" I gasp, my hands flying to my neck. I mean...no. But that's ridiculous. I would have known. My eyes fly to Luca, who is slumped against the bed, his head hanging, his shoulder shaking.

"He's right," Rafe murmurs, leaning closer, sniffing me. "You smell...all over of Jackson. But... mixed, the way a Luna's scent changes when she's been marked. What..."

But then Jesse laughs again, a huge guffaw this time. I gape at him, appalled, not knowing what's so funny. Especially as-

My eyes shift to Luca again, who is just staring at me, horrified. And as I watch, he actually gags, turning away from me and pressing his eyes shut.

*Jesse!" I shout, my gaze passing over Jackson - who stands stock still and a little freaked out - as I look back at my cousin. "What the hell is so funny!? Tell me! Now!" I stomp my foot, getting mad and very overwhelmed.

"Ariel," Jesse says, stepping closer to me and shooting a grin at Jackson over my shoulder. "Did he... did he scent mark you?"

"Um," I say, looking at Jesse and then at Jackson, who still stares around at us, freaked out. "Is that...bad?"

Jesse bursts out laughing, tilting his head back to the ceiling, and to my shock Rafe goes with him. Luca makes no improvement, turning his head away from me and shaking it like he's devastated. My eyes lock with Jackson's and I can tell we both don't get it.

I lose my temper, striding over to Jesse and giving him a hard shove. "Jesse!" I shout. "Stop it! What's so funny about this! You used to scent mark me all the time - every day! What's the big deal!?"

*Ariel," Jesse sputters, still laughing and taking my cheeks between his palms once he recovers his balance. "I marked you with my wrists over your major glands - your wrists, and your neck. And that was enough to fool everyone - to cover your scent, convince everyone that you were someone else. The way you're smelling right now?" He sniffs the air around me, delicately, and then bursts out laughing again. "Damn, he gave you the full business, didn't you?"

I gasp a little, looking over at Jackson, who just...shrugs.

"Why did you do that!? Rafe asks, turning to grin at Jackson. And my shoulders start to unwind for a second because...well, Rafe's smiling. So...I don't think it's anything...bad.... Update first at [NôvelDráma. Org](#).

"I don't know," Jackson murmurs. "She...smelled like him," he says, gesturing over to Luca, who still won't look at me. "...fixed it."

Rafe and Jesse burst out laughing again.

"What!?" I protest, stomping my foot. "Why is it so bad!?"

"How did you know how to do it, if you didn't know what the result would be?" Jesse asks, grinning at Jacks, clearly delighted and scandalized.

"I don't know," Jackson says awkwardly, covering his face with his hand, embarrassed. "I just...did what my body told me to do. I don't know!"

"Why is it baddddd," I groan, between my teeth, glaring between my brother and my cousin now.

"It's bad," Luca barks out, "because you smell fucking awful."

I gasp, staring at him, horrified by his words.

"Oh, she does not," Jackson murmurs, dropping his hand to glare at Luca.

"Do I smell awful?" I ask, whipping my head to Jesse - because he'll tell me. He won't sugar coat it, either.

"No, Ari," he says, smiling a little more gently now as he puts a hand on my shoulder. "You just smel...like Jackson now. A little bit. Like Jackson and like you - honey, cloves, and pine needles. It's not bad."

"Oh," I say, my eyes going wide, and then I shoot Jacks a little smile because....I mean, that sounds kind of nice.

Luca mutters angrily, but he turns towards us now, apparently over his nausea.

"It doesn't smell bad," Rafe says, grinning wickedly at me now. "But...I mean, everyone's going to know what happened here."

"What.." I ask, my words faltering. "What do you..."

And then my mouth falls open in horror as I register what my brother is saying.

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Chapter 0375

"Ariel," Jesse says, tightening the hand on my shoulder as he grins at me. "This isn't going to wash off like my scent markings in the Academy did. Jackson's.... in your pores now. For a couple of days, every Luna you meet is going to be begging to see your new mark, and every Alpha is going to be giving you some distance, lest Jacks bites his head off."

Luca just stands, tense, against the bed, his mouth pressed shut and his throat working like he's fighting strong nausea. But I can't pay attention now, turning to Jesse, desperate for more information. But Rafe interrupts.

*And dad," Rafe says, his grin deepening, "is going to flip."

"What!?" I shriek, totally freaked out now, looking between them and then over at Jacks. "But I! We didn't! I don't have his mark! We just..."

I groan, and drop my face into my hands, mortified.

Because Rafe and Jesse are too polite to say it, but what they really mean is that I now smell like Jackson and I were up fucking all night, consummating our mating bond and making it official.

But we weren't!

"Why does scent marking even exist," I moan against my palms. "If it does the same thing as giving someone your mark?"

*To claim someone before you mark them," Rafe says, and I lift my head in time to see him giving a little shrug. "Or to..." he laughs a little here, "claim a second or a third person, as part of your harem, when you've already given your mark to someone else. I mean, an antiquated use considering that polygamous relationships aren't really a thing anymore but," he shrugs, "I can see how it would make sense."

I groan, tilting my head back, thinking that that hits a little too close to home in this case and Jesse and Rafe laugh. Gently, not cruel, but seeing the humor in it in a way that I can't just yet.

"I'm so glad this is all so fucking hilarious to everyone," Luca snaps, and when I turn my head to him I see his shoulders still trembling slightly as he glares around at each of us in turn. "Now could everyone please fucking leave, so I can have a conversation with my mate about why she left the me at the club early last night, claiming she was tired, only to climb into McClintock's bed and apparently stay up for hours?"

My mouth drops open in shock at the accusation in that. Update first at [NôvelDráma.Org](#).

But even as it does, my mind turns to my sneaky wolf who pretended to be sleepy last night, who now turns in a guilty circle inside of me, her head hanging low. Instantly, I snap the bond shut to both Luca and Jackson, not wanting them to know her role in this.

But Jackson lifts his eyes to me, and I realize that...I may have been just a little too late on that one.

"Too fucking far, Grant," Rafe snaps, stepping forward towards Luca and coming immediately to my defense. "You have no idea what happened last night."

*Clearly," Luca growls, gesturing towards me and keeping his eyes locked on mine. "I do."

Jesse stands awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck, looking at me out of the corner of his eye. "It doesn't look great, Ari," he murmurs.

And I sigh, and hang my head. "It was.... not my intent," I murmur, trying to walk a fine line here between making Luca feel better and honoring the time I spent with Jackson. Because... I mean, both are important.

*Do you understand how this makes me feel?" Luca says, his voice still snapping with his anger as he steps towards me. He stares at me with such hurt in his eyes, pain all over him, that my lip begins to tremble, my shoulders to slump. "On the biggest night of my life, Ariel - a night when we came together in such an important way? You leave early, to go to bed with him."

I look up into Luca's eyes, feeling absolutely terrible, and I opening the bond between us just a little so that he can

feel it too - feel the truth of it. Because I do understand, now that I see it that way. Yesterday, last night, were so important to Luca - so important for us.

And from his perspective, it kind of looks like I tricked him - like I pretended to be tired, and left early, just so could climb into Jackson's bed.

But that's... that's not at all what happened.

Luca groans, burying his face against his hands and turning away from me, like he can't bear to look at me.

*I came home," I say carefully, my eyes fixed on his back, my voice shaking a little as I try to explain. "And Ben walked me to my room. And before I went in, I decided to...come and check on Jacks. To see how his night went."

I flick my eyes to Jacks, because that is...an understatement. But he nods to me, letting me know that he understands that I'm walking a fine line.

Chapter 0376

Chapter 0376

"That's it," I say, finishing up. And Luca turns back to me, glaring a little, seeking more than that- wanting an apology, for me to say that I regret it, that I did him wrong.

But I lift my chin, just slightly, and don't say anything else. Because I don't regret it - and I didn't do anything wrong. I am sorry that I hurt his feelings, and that it came out looking like I betrayed him.

But.

I don't regret it, and I'm not lying. My wolf's intentions aside - because those are her own business - I didn't do anything to betray Luca. Not a damn thing.

Luca studies me for a long moment, still clearly angry and feeling betrayed. Then he takes a single step towards me, looking at me hard. "Did you fuck him last night?"
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My mouth drops open as I stare at him, appalled.

The room bursts into noise as Jesse shouts "whoa!" and Rafe storms forward, snapping out Luca's name. Jackson growls, low and resonant, but he tucks himself against his bedroom wall, his arms crossed, his head down, clearly working very hard to not engage and to let me handle it.

Jesse and Rafe stand steady at my sides, glowering at Luca, but Luca doesn't look at either of them. He just keeps his eyes fixed on me.

"No, Luca," I say, crossing my arms and lifting my chin. "I didn't."

My wolf nips at me, hard, reminding me that I very much wanted to - and that I would have - and that I wouldn't have the opportunity to be so high and mighty about this if Jackson had given me what I wanted.

But, well. This just proves that Jackson was right, doesn't it? It's better to have waited, instead of having this be the fallout. If I had lost my virginity this morning and had the follow up be this huge fight? It would have ruined it, for sure.

Luca stares at me, hard, for another long moment - and then something snaps in him, and he drops his arms, and drops his head, and stumbles back a step, sitting down hard on the edge of Jackson's bed, completely defeated.

I let out a little gasp of dismay and feel Jesse and Rafe loosen beside me, no longer angry now that we see how much of Luca's anger was a front - how much of it was a desperate fear that he'd lost me, that Jackson had marked me, claimed me, and that we were finished.

But now that he sees that... that nothing has changed - not really...

*God damn it," Luca whispers, his voice trembling. "...I can't do this..."

"Luca," I groan, stepping quickly to his side. He wraps an arm around my hips, leaning his head against me, even as he turns his face away slightly, I think....well, I think still not really able to handle my temporary change in scent.

"I can't do it, Ariel," he murmurs, and I raise my hands to his head, cupping it in my palms and holding him close." If I have to worry about this constantly? About being by your side at every moment, because if I don't, you're going to run off to his bed?"

Luca looks up at me now, and the heartbreak in his eyes, on his face...

Tears spring to my eyes and I shake my head at him, feeling absolutely terrible. I never, ever want him to feel this way.

But...

I mean, how do I balance this? How do I do it?

"I thought it was bad, Ariel," Luca says, his eyebrows going up as he tells me the truth - every bit of it. "When I came in here, and checked your room, and saw that your bed hadn't even been slept in? Because I knew where you were - knew immediately - but..."

TABLARUS

I gape a little down at my mate, realizing that what he's saying is that...that they've actually been out all night, that they're just getting in now, and that the first thing he did was come to my bed. I glance at the clock, wondering how the hell they're still up, how on earth they look so sober.

But as I glance over at Jesse, and see him leaning his arm on Rafe's shoulder, his eyes dropping a little, I see that it was all adrenaline. That they're exhausted and also a little tipsy.

"Luca," I murmur, stroking his hair, about to tell him to go get some rest, to go to bed.

*No, let me get this out," Luca says, frowning up at me. "Ariel - when I came in here, and thought that he'd marked you?" he shakes his head, his face again going pale. "...I thought I was going to die. Literally...die."

I clench my teeth, my heart breaking again anew.

Chapter 0377

Chapter 0377

"But he didn't mark me," I whisper.

"But he might," Luca says, his brows going up.

And I don't say anything - not a word. Because honestly, this morning? If Jackson had offered me his mark, I'd have taken it. It was that intense, that real between us. It always has been.

But...how can I tell Luca that without breaking his heart?

How can I tell Luca that I want his mark too? That I want both of them, not one or the other?

I just stare down at my gorgeous, heartbroken mate, and sigh. Because I don't know what to do.

"I don't know if I can do this, Ariel, Luca whispers, his eyes drifting shut. "If you're sleeping with him - or close enough to it that he's scent marking you, which we all know is this incredibly intimate act...I don't know if I can do this."

My lip starts to shake with dread, with horror. Because..I mean, is Luca rejecting me?

I look up, frantic, at my brother and my cousin, not knowing what to do. Silently, I beg them for help, beg them to intercede - because

I am at the end of my rope here. And I'm terrified that I'm about to lose my mate- and if I do, my heart will shatter into a thousand pieces right here in Jackson's room. Content belong to NôvelDrâma. Org.

"Okay!" Rafe says, stepping forward, his face tense, his mind clearly racing.

Jesse slowly lifts his arm from Rafe's shoulder, looking around, worried. Jackson stays quite still at his place against the wall, not moving an inch.

I start almost to pant with worry, not knowing what my next step should be.

"What if," Rafe continues slowly, clearly thinking it through as he goes, watching me with anxiety all over his face, sensing that I'm out of answers and desperate for a solution. "There were...limits."

"Limits?" Jesse asks, a little under his breath as he raises a hand to rub his eye. "What are you talking about?" "Well," Rafe continues, spreading out a hand. "Luca...is having trouble dealing with the idea that Jackson might mark Ariel. So....what if we agreed that...he won't."

My mouth falls open and Jackson snaps his head up, growling a little at the thought.

*And!" Rafe amends as Luca looks up at him, at all of us. "Neither will Luca. No marks. Not...not until Ariel makes her choice. Which," he says, looking hard at me now, "is still the plan. Yes?"

I groan a little, inwardly, at the truth of that statement. Because, I mean, we only made that agreement a few days ago, but in that short time my bonds with both of my mates have only grown exponentially. The idea, now, of letting either of them go?

I mean, honestly, it feels....absolutely impossible.

But still, I agreed. I promised.

"Yes," I whisper.

"No marks," Luca says, murmuring a little as he considers it. He sits up a little straighter next, looking me straight in the eye. "And, no sex."

I huff out a sound of horrified protest, turning to stare at him. Because what! Who the hell is he to...! And why!? What!?

"Actually, that makes a lot of sense," Jesse says, his voice thoughtful.

I spin to stare at him now, making a repeat of the same squeaky, huffy noise.

"Seriously!" Jesse says, looking at me with a great deal of empathy but speaking plainly so that I can understand his point. "Sex with wolves always creates a bond, but with a mated pair? Apparently, it like...cements something. Intensifies the bond, makes it incredibly hard to break. That's why sex and the marking are...you know. So frequently...done together." His words fade off awkwardly at the end there as he realizes that he's not really talking theoretically, but instead about his very real cousin being marked by her very real mates. Both of whom are in the room.

"He's not wrong," Rafe says, and I turn in time to see him shrug. "And...I think it would take a great deal of pressure off the situation. Neither of them," he says, gesturing between Jackson and Luca, "will be worried about the other cementing his bond to you, or giving you his mark, because...it's not on the table."

I slowly close my jaw, which I now realize has been hanging open and stare at my brother, who nods slowly to me, silently begging me to see that this is the solution I'm looking for.

"If you're going to choose anyway, Ariel," he says softly. "Then....why not wait."

Chapter 0378

Chapter 0378

*Plus, then you can't get knocked up," Jesse murmurs, rubbing his eye sleepily again. "Which...you know, is just convenient. What with...going back to school in a week and a half. Don't want to... bring a... baby....even if it's just on the inside..."

*Shut up, Jess," I sigh.

"Yup, you got it," he murmurs, his exhaustion clearly taking over.

I take a deep breath as the room falls quiet, closing my eyes for a second and pulling myself together. Because...mean...

Honestly, I don't think that this is the solution that I'm looking for. The solution that I want is one which allows Luca and Jackson to be okay with each other, with both of them being in my life. But today Jackson already asked for limits - asked for me to not be affectionate with Luca in his presence.

I scowl, opening my eyes as I realize that here Luca is - barging into Jackson's room. Quickly, I look over at Jacks, but he's still got his head down, studying his feet. I smirk a little to see him standing there bare-chested in his pajamas, just looking so...cute.

But then I turn my eyes over to Luca, who likewise isn't looking at me, and my smile falls away. Because he's my mate, and he's heartbroken, and...if this is what he needs? Content belong to NôvelDrâma. Org.

Then why on earth would I deny it?

I step forward to him quickly, softly, and run a hand over his hair. He looks up at me, his pretty brown eyes wide and sad. "Is this really what you want?" I ask softly.

"No," he says, hardly more than a whisper. "But...it's what I can handle, until you..." he glances over at Jackson now, and some sort of grace makes him put his final two words in my mind instead of saying them aloud. Pick me, he says, holding my gaze. Until you pick me, Ariel.

I sigh, and purse my lips, and give him a little nod before taking a step away.

*Jacks?" I call, wanting him to consent to it too.

He lifts his head to look at me and I open my end of our bond so that he can feel what I feel, and he can send me whatever it is he wants me to know. "Are you okay with this?"

He just gives a little shrug, reminding me down the bond what we agreed to this morning - that it doesn't make much of a difference to him anyway, since we already took sex off the table on our own. I also get the sense that it's all the better in his book if I'm not sleeping with Luca to boot.

I smirk at him a little, and the corner of his mouth curves. But he just gives me a nod, and it's done.

"Fine," I say, throwing up my hands a little bit. "The sex ban is...in effect. No sex, no marks. What fun for me."

Jesse laughs a little bit, and I turn to give him a little smile, glad that someone is still willing to find a little humor in this situation.

"Come on, Luc," Jesse says, reaching out a hand for Luca as he yawns. "You're beat, I'm beat. Let's go find a place to crash."

Luca hesitates, glancing at me, clearly wanting to go back to my room with me, but Jesse just gives him a pretty smile.

"Come on, Luca!" Jesse insists, tugging on his arm. "I want a snack first and you pick out the best snacks. Let's go." He says the last two words more solidly than the others, letting my mate know it's not an option.

Luca sighs and stands. He hesitates and then brushes a hand over my hair, looking down into my eyes. "We'll talk?"

"We'll talk," I say, nodding at him, tucking my hands behind my back, resting the urge to touch him more.

Because, honestly, Luca got his way this morning - but I am not a fan of the tempter tantrum he threw to achieve that. And we will be having a conversation about it when he's awake and sober.

Luca sighs, feeling my displeasure a bit, and then walks to Jesse's side. The two of them leave the room and Rafe moves to the door, glancing out of it, looking up and down the hall. "Come on, Ariel," he murmurs, "I think we should get you out of here and into the shower before the halls fill up."

Chapter 0379

Chapter 0379

"I thought you said a shower wasn't going to change the way I smell now?" I say, frowning at Rafe.

"It's going to help," he says, turning back to me and raising his eyebrows. "Seriously, Ariel, you...you smell like you took a bath in eau d'Jackson. It's not a bad thing but it is...a statement cologne."

I laugh a little and he nods to me, stepping out the door, clearly letting me know he'll give me a minute. Rafe pulls the door after him, but doesn't let it completely shut.

Quietly, I cross the room to Jackson, who holds my gaze as I do.

"Hi," I say quietly - the same thing I said last night when I showed up at his door. But this time I say it with...a little less verve.

Jackson just smirks at me, reaching to cup my cheek in his palm.

"I'm really sorry, Jacks," I whisper. "It shouldn't have happened like that."

"Not your fault," he murmurs.

"Still," I say, my voice low. "You're the one who had to deal with it."

"I'd put up with a lot worse for you," he says, his smile growing a little.

I smile back, unable to help it. I step a little closer and look up into his face. "Are we good?"

"We're good," he says, reaching out and tucking my hair back behind my ear in that way he likes. But something in his terseness - I mean, Jackson doesn't usually say a lot anyway, but today...

Well, I can tell he doesn't feel quite right.

I bite my lip, anxious. "Do you...want me to stay?" I ask, kind of hoping that he'll say yes, let me talk him through this, fix it all. I raise myself up on my toes, bringing my face just an inch or two closer to his. "For a little bit?"

But Jackson just sighs and shakes his head. "I think I need a minute, Ariel," he says gently, with absolutely no malice.

Still, my heart sinks, and I lower myself till my feet are flat, suddenly worried. Is he mad at me? Is this...is this way worse than I think it is? Should I -

Jackson just laughs at the emotions he feels through the bond, slipping a hand around my waist and tugging me close against him. "Don't get all mixed up about it," he says,

shaking his head at me. "We're fine, Ariel. I just... Ella said...she said that I am allowed to take a minute. To ask for time alone when I need to... think about stuff. And figure out how I feel."

I stare at him for a second, absolutely gaping, before I burst into laughter. "Seriously!? Ella?" He grins at me. "Ella is behind all of this talk about boundaries and taking a minute!?" Content belong to NôvelDráma. Org.

His grin deepens. "Yup," he says, nodding down at me. "She's on my side now. I stole your mom."

"Yeah well," I mutter, narrowing my eyes playfully. "You can take her for now. She's going to want someone to do all the heavy lifting of yule logs on midwinter anyway."

He grins, pressing a kiss to my forehead, murmuring that it sounds like a fair deal to him.

I groan a little, leaning against him, pretending to be annoyed. But really, I'm thrilled that he's growing so close to mom and that she's helping him figure out how to deal with all of these complicated emotions. I let him feel all of that down the bond. "You take your minute, Jacks." I say softly. "As much time as you need. I'll see you later?"

"You'll see me later," he says, assured. And then he dips his head, and I stand on my toes again, and my mate kisses me, his arm tightening around my waist.

I pull away after a moment, wanting to give him his space, and Jackson just stands quietly - already in thought-

as I move towards the door. But before I leave, I turn back, my hand already on the handle.

"Hey, Jacks?" I ask quietly.

Instantly, his head turns up towards me, his expression I think a little surprised that I'm still here. "Yeah?"

Chapter 0380

Chapter 0380

"Can I ask you...maybe an unfair question?"

He smirks at me, and turns his head to the side, inviting it.

I grin, and nod towards the door, where Luca left. "If it were the other way around. And...you had a big night, and I left early and...you found me in his bed in the morning. Would you...do you think you would have reacted the same?"

Jackson's smirk just deepens. "Trick question, Clark. Because it never would have happened."

"What?" I ask, frowning in my confusion.

"If you think," he says slowly, lowering his head a little in a predatory way that makes my stomach tense, "I would have ever stayed at a bar without you? Let you go home alone to a cold bed? Or, worse yet, to a warm one?" He quirks an eyebrow and then slowly, he shakes his head.

The smile that bursts onto my face - it stretches so wide my cheeks hurt.

Jackson just gives me a grin before he drops his head again, returning to his thoughts. And I slip out the door, pushing it shut behind me just...completely filled with warmth at that answer, from my head to my toes.

I'm not surprised, at all, to find Rafe waiting for me, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, one foot propped against the wall behind him. I am a little surprised, though, when I step close and find him...drowsing. Almost completely asleep just...standing against the wall.

I burst out laughing, giving his shoulder a shove. He starts and looks around, gasping in a deep breath.

"Ari!" he scolds on the exhale, giving me a little shove right back. "Don't scare me like that."

"Don't fall asleep in the hall!"

"I'll do what I want. I'm going to be the King one day, after all. It's my palace, I sleep where I want."

I laugh again as my brother slings an arm around my shoulders and we start down the hall towards our family suite, my arm around his waist. "You sound like Jesse, talking like that."

"Yeah well, with as much gin and as little sleep as we've had tonight, we all sound a little more like Jesse."

I grin, and lean into my brother, grateful to have him here. "Thanks, Rafe. I think you...saved me in there."

"You were doing perfectly fine, little sister." Content belong to NôvelDráma. Org.

"Was I?" I ask, kind of surprised at the compliment, looking up at him.

"Oh, perfectly fine causing as much trouble as possible," he replies, blinking innocently down at me.

I scowl and elbow him in the ribs. He hisses, pretending it hurts more than it does, which just makes me laugh even though it's an old, stupid joke.

"Nah, you're all right," Rafe says, tightening his arm around me a little. "Luca is just... he can be dramatic, can't he? I mean, I do get why he's upset," Rafe gives me a significant look here, and I roll my eyes, done defending myself on that point. "But...yeah. He took it really far."

"What are we gonna do with him?" I murmur, shaking my head.

"Ah, see, the good part about this, little sister, is that it is your problem. Not mine." Rafe heaves a smug, contented sigh.

"Fine," I say, equally smug, aloof. "I'm not helping you at all, then, when your mate shows up and causes a big fuss." I grin, pleased at my joking counterpoint.

But Rafe doesn't respond, and I look up at him, my face falling when I see that he's looking right ahead and not down at me at all. And his face is...sad, worried.

"Rafe, I -"

"Don't, Ari," he murmurs, glancing down at me just for a moment. "Just...I'm tired. Let's get me to bed."

"You got it, bro," I murmur, tugging him a little closer and leaning against him again as we walk, wondering... Well. Wondering what I said that upset him so much.

But when I say goodbye to my brother, and step into my room, and turn to see Daphne curled up in my bed with the duvet tucked prettily under my chin?

Well... think I have my answer.