

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 451

“Gimme that,” I murmur, reaching for her cup.

Daphne jumps and then bursts into a smile. “Sit up first, or you’ll spill it all over yourself.”

I grumble but haul myself into a sitting position, leaning back against what is probably sixteen lush pillows. When I’m settled, Daphne hands me the cocoa and I take a long sip, relishing the warm feel of it down my throat, the sugar and spicey taste on my tongue.

“You slept for a long time,” Daphne murmurs, reaching out and stroking a hand over my hair. “We were worried about you. Your mom and aunt made me stay in here to make sure you’re still breathing.”

”

“Oh please,” I croak, my throat still a little dry, looking up into her eyes. “They’re just checking out the wine menu in peace.’ Daphne laughs and the smallest smile finds my mouth before it falls away. I take another sip and then hold out the mug to my friend.

“Oh, you keep it,” she says, holding up a hand. “It’s good to see you drink something.”

I nod and look around for a minute, continuing to sip from the cup. “Where is Mittens?” I whisper, intuiting that he’s a secret.

“He’s been hiding,” Daphne says, unable to keep the little smile from her lips as she pulls back the blankets a little bit to reveal the little cat curled in her lap. “He’s very good at it, unsurprisingly.”

I reach out a finger and stroke it over his tiny head a few times, enjoying the soft shadowy feel of the tiny cat. Daphne and I silent for a long, peaceful few moments.

“Are you okay, Ari?” Daphne whispers, breaking it. But I don’t begrudge her that – I know she’s worried. “I mean, I know you’re not I just these past few days.”

“I know,” I whisper, opening my eyes a little and looking down at my cup. “A few days ago I had...all of them. And now Tony is gone. And Luca is...” my lip trembles and my throat seizes up. Daphne squeaks sadly and moves closer to me, wrapping an arm around my shoulders and tilting me a little so that I lean against her.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have brought it up,” she whispers.

“It’s okay,” I sigh. “I mean, it’s kind of the only thing on my mind anyway.”

“Oh good!” mom says, beaming as she bustles into the room in her own fancy robe.

“You’re up! Now we can get started with step 2!”

“What’s that?” I ask, frowning at her. “What was step 1?”

“Step 1 was making sure you survive,” mom says, plopping down on the bed and leaning close to give me a kiss. “Step 2 is feeding you! And also distracting you from your woe.”

I groan a little, wanting to hold onto my woe a little bit. I don’t know why – maybe it’s just...the only thing that feels real. ” What’s step 3? Can we skip right to that?”

“Step 3,” mom says cheerfully, “is -”

“Bloody revenge.”

We all spin to see Cora leaning in the doorway, grinning at us a little deviously. I laugh – I can’t help it.

“You have many options, baby,” Cora says, coming close and stroking a hand over my hair. “We can skin him alive, or we can cut his toes off and make him eat them, or we can -”

“Oh my god,” I say, looking at my aunt with wide eyes. “You’ve...thought about this.”

“Yeah, well,” she sighs. “You’ve been asleep a long time, kid. What else were we going to do?”

I look around in shock at my three lovely defenders and can’t help smiling again when mom and Daphne just shrug, like Cora’s precisely right.

“Oh, revenge later,” I say with a sigh. “Now...can we have wine? And maybe...more ice cream? Without the sleep meds this time?”

“The perfect medicine,” mom murmurs, pressing a kiss to my cheek. “I knew I raised you right.”

A few hours later, my skin is buffed, my hair has gone through four treatments that have left it shiny and lustrous, and my nails are a pretty blushing pink. I’m also about four glasses of wine deep and have exclusively eaten bowl after bowl of ice cream today, so my mind is sufficiently unable to mope as much as it would if I stayed back at the castle. Deep down, I’m very grateful for my mom knowing precisely what to do.

I mean nothing is fixed, and nothing has changed. But my soul has been wrapped in a comfortable quilt of pampering girly things, and honestly, I'm the best I could be right now. I mean, it's not good but...I am comfortable.

Mom. She really does know.

"This is a shame," I say with a sigh, looking at my fingernails as I sit with my three companions on the wide plush couch in our sunny suite. "I'm going to have to take this off before I go back to school."

"Screw it," Cora says, taking a big bite of a pretzel slathered in mustard. "Boys can wear nail polish too." She returns the half-finished pretzel to the wide coffee table, which is predictably covered in food.

"Not little shrimpy ones who are trying to convince people that they're not a girl."

"I wonder how much of your secret is intact though," Daphne says, frowning at me a little, her voice gentle. "After Rafe carried you...pretty naked through the halls."

"I had a blanket," I growl, snatching a wrapped piece of candy off the table and throwing it at her.

Daphne grins. "And no hat. What mystery, a girl in Rafe Sinclair's arms with a pretty rose-gold braid arching over her head ___"

"Oh, shut up, they saw that in the Examination too and they're all too stupid to figure it out. Or, at least too scared to say anything."

Mom beams at me, I think pleased to see that I'm feeling well enough to be cheeky. "You okay, baby?" she asks, soft. The first time, really, that she's invited me to talk about it. Which must mean she thinks I'm strong enough to talk about it now.

Mom's confidence boosts me, even though it is hard to even think about what happened.

"I'm not sure I'm okay," I say, dropping my head to look down at my glass of wine. "I'm not sure I'll ever be...who I was. Or I'll never not...want things to be different." My hand drifts higher now, my palm cupping the bandage that covers my mark. It's fully healed, I'm just...not ready to look at it yet.

"I think that makes a lot of sense, baby," Cora says, nodding to me. "I think...this is probably one of the great tragedies of life, akin to losing a parent. You're going to be feeling a lot of grief for a long time."

"But you will get through it," Daphne says, smiling softly at me and putting a hand on my knee.

I look over at her with a tremulous smile, knowing she knows what she's talking about. And as I look around at the three women who are being so supportive, my eyes fill with tears because I know that each of their lives has been struck with tragedy.

And yet, here they are. Strong and happy, whole enough to come and help me when I need them.

My eyes fill with tears as I look around at each of them in turn – just so, so grateful.

“Oh god, she's crying again,” Cora says, sitting up straight and reaching for one of the many bottles of wine that ring the table.

“Quick, her glass!” Mom gasps, over-dramatic, pointing to it in my hand with a shaking finger. “Fill it! Go!”

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I burst out laughing, even as tears start their way down my cheeks and Cora refills my glass. “It's fine to cry!” I protest. “That's what we're here for, isn't it!?”

“Of course, baby,” mom says, leaning forward towards me. “But you can laugh too. It's...all part of it. We just love you and want to be here with you through all of these hard first couple of hours and days. Until my little bird gets her strength back and can fly again.”

I look at her, my lips a little tremulous. “You really think that's going to happen? That I'll...get back on my feet?”

“Oh, trouble,” mom says, her face breaking into a little smirk. “I'm sure of it.”

“To men!” Cora says, impulsive and a little tipsy, raising her own glass. “May they all meet the violent ends they deserve for torturing our poor innocent hearts! And, in their death, leave us enough money in their wills that we can go on more spa trips.” (

“Woo!” mom says, laughing and clinking her glass against Cora's.

I laugh but then scowl around at the three of them. “Oh, please,” I say, smiling just a little. “It's not like you three don't have perfect relationships.”

My mom presses a hand to her heart, pretending to be aghast at such a declaration. “If you think that your father has not put me through the emotional ringer, baby -”

“Twenty years ago!” I accuse, laughing and throwing a piece of popcorn at her in turn.

“And don’t get me started on Roger,” Cora murmurs, smirking. “Bane of my existence.”

“Love of your life,” I snarl, sending popcorn her way too. She laughs and grins at me, tacitly admitting it. He does torture her, but she loves every minute.

“Well Daphne saves us, then,” mom says, gesturing toward my suspiciously quiet friend. “She and Rafe broke up, right? So it can’t be all paradise in her little sewing room, can it?”

“Oh, Rafe and Daphne broke up,” I say, a wicked smile spreading over my face. “But I suppose this means Daphne has not yet told you the provenance of a certain tiny kitten?”

As if he knows we’re talking about him – and, considering his attention-loving source of existence, that’s probably true – Mittens climbs up over the back of the couch, meowing and parading back and forth with his tail high.

Mom and Cora’s mouths drop open as they stare first at the shadow cat, and then at Daphne, who bundles him off of the back of the sofa and into her arms.

“I told you to stay hidden, you little menace,” she whispers, blushing and looking down at the cat who gnaws playfully at her thumb.

“Well well,” Cora says, leaning back against her couch cushion and grinning at the love of her son’s life. “I guess Dominic owes me fifty bucks after all.”

I gasp, leaning forward and staring at my mom and aunt. “You bet on our love lives!?”

“No, baby!” mom protests far too innocently, frowning at me like she’s ashamed I’d even suggest it. “We’d never do that!” “This is so unfair, Cora has an advantage, she’s all of our godparents,” I say, pointing at her.

“That’s why I get terrible odds,” she says with a sigh, nodding. “Roger hates it.”

“You’re both unbelievable,” I sigh, sitting back on the couch and glancing at Daphne, pleased to see that the blush has faded from her cheeks just a bit. But Cora notices it too and pounces, not letting her off that easy.

“So,” she says, leaning forward and peering into Daphne’s face. “Is my boy a good boyfriend? He’d better be polite to you – you have my permission to smack him if he’s not”

“He’s – he’s very polite!” Daphne sputters out, laughing and blushing again.

“But not like...too polite, right?” Cora says, narrowing her eyes a bit. “I didn’t raise my boy to be too scared to grab his girl and -”

“You come here,” mom says, laughing a little and scootching closer to me, pulling me tight against her side while Cora continues to torture Daphne. I laugh a little too, watching Daphne melt into the couch with embarrassment under Cora’s good -natured teasing.

But I lean against my mom and take a deep breath and a sip of my wine. “It’s good to be here,” I sigh. “Thank you so much, mama.”

“Of course,” she murmurs, pressing a kiss to my head.

“Um,” I say quietly, fiddling with the stem of my wine glass. “Do you think I could talk to dad for a little bit? On video chat? I mean, I know why he really couldn’t come I know he’s at the front -”

“He wanted to, baby,” mom whispers, stroking my hair. “Only something that serious would have kept him away.”

“It’s okay,” I say, nodding and looking at her. “But dad’s...done this before, right? With Lydia?”

She nods slowly. “He wants to talk to you too. But I told him to wait until you were ready for it.”

“Well,” I whisper, “I think I’m ready for it.” My heart sinks in my chest as I wonder if that’s true. “I’d just like to know...what to expect, you know? In the days to come?”

“Of course, sugar,” mom says, beaming at me and getting to her feet. “I’ll call him now, see if he can set a few minutes aside.”

“Oh, are we calling boys?” Cora asks, cheerfully getting up and leaving Daphne alone. Daphne groans with relief, finishing her wine in one big slug and making me laugh.

“Yes, come on, you can talk to your boyfriend after I talk to mine,” mom sighs, waving Cora along with her into the kitchen,

where she left her tablet. Cora eagerly follows and I grab the bottle of wine, refilling Daphne’s glass.

“Thank you,” she sighs, and I grin at her. “Is it always going to be like this?”

I laugh. “You picked the wrong Sinclair boy if you didn’t want to be teased,” I say, grinning at her as I settle back into the cushions. “Mom and dad would have been far more polite.”

Daphne sighs dramatically and gives a big shrug like it can't be helped. "I shall simply have to endure, then." She scoops Mittens up into her hands and lifts him to her shoulder, where he starts to bat playfully at her curls.

"Daph?" I ask quietly, studying her face. "Is...is Jesse your mate?"

She turns to me, her face quite solemn. "I honestly don't know, Ari."

My mouth twists a little. "I mean, you'd know," I say, trying to be gentle.

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But she shakes her head, looking off into the kitchen, I think wanting mine and Jesse's mothers to be separate from this conversation. "I know what you mean but...it's more complicated than that," she murmurs. "The connection with him - it wasn't instant, and my wolf just...can't decide. It's not like other mates - the bond, if there is one, has not snapped into place. But the way we feel about each other? And the way he smells?" She groans and rolls her eyes, tilting her head back against the couch.

"Oh, you're exaggerating," I sigh, grinning and tilting my head back too. "Jesse smells like corn chips and despair."

"Oh, no he doesn't," she sighs. "He smells like a chai latte, and old books, and a warm old sweater..."

"So, like wet wool?" I say, my face again twisting with doubt.

Daphne laughs and swats at me. "Shut up. I love it."

I grin, nodding to her. "I'm just teasing. You know my cousin has my whole heart. But, you're getting mixed messages? Like, half bond half not?"

"Yeah," she says, her face falling straight again. "And I wonder if it's because he's half human? Or..." she shrugs. "I really don't know. I think that's why I tried to deny it for so long but...he's really special to me, Ariel. Even if he's not my mate, I want to keep him."

I smile at her, terribly happy for my friend. "Good. I'm glad to have a new sister-cousin, then."

She beams at me, I think realizing for the first time that she's part of the family, even if she doesn't have his mark or a ring. Just his strange little half-substantial shadow cat, which is very Jesse and likely just as good.

"Thanks, Ari," she says, leaning forward and wrapping me up in a warm hug. "I'm glad you're my sister-cousin now too."

I hold my friend close, taking a deep breath of her own pretty cinnamon scent, feeling cozy and warm.

In the other room, I hear the soft sound of my mom and my dad talking, and my heart soars to think that I get to talk to him soon. And quite suddenly I start to realize that...well, perhaps things are looking up.

But still, my heart sinks, because...

There's one big thing on my heart that I haven't touched yet. I hang my head a little, looking down into my wine glass and giving the pretty golden liquid a limp swirl.

"Tell me," Daphne murmurs. I look up to see her turning her head at me, sweet and thoughtful. "Please, Ari, what are you thinking about? It might help to get it out."

And I sigh, frightened to touch this line of thinking that I haven't allowed myself to go to all day, even though it's been slowly revolving in the back of my mind.

"I'm thinking about Jacks."

"Oh, Ari," Daphne murmurs, leaning close to me and plopping Mittens into my lap before putting her arms around my shoulders, pulling me in for a hug. "Why on earth could you possibly be worried about Jackson now? He's fine!"

"He's not fine," I sigh, leaning against her for a pleasant moment before sitting up straight and shaking my head at my friend. "The last thing I remember before I passed out was Jackson throwing up at the sight of me -"

"He what!?"

I nod vehemently. "He got sight of me, Daphne - or scent or something - and just threw up all over the hall "Oh my god."

"

"I know," I moan, letting my head tilt back. "I'm just...terrified. What if he can't stand to be in the same room as me anymore? What if I make him physically ill because I bear someone else's mark?" I hang my head, starting to tremble a bit at the idea. "What if he doesn't love me anymore?"

“Oh, Ariel, that can’t possibly be true,” Daphne murmurs, stroking a hand soft over my hair. “That boy is obsessed with you.” “He was. It’s what if it’s different now?”

“It won’t be. A mark or a lack of a mark isn’t going to change everything he adored about you.’

I bite my lip. “But what if he...what if our being mated was the only reason he liked me? What if now that things are different with me he realizes how boring and silly I am -”

“Oh, you stop that right now,” Daphne snaps, her voice harsh. I look up at her in surprise. “You are not boring and silly, Ariel. And I understand your concerns, but you’re letting your fears run away with you. I bet you anything – I’d even bet Mittens here-

”

The little cat spins to look at her, appalled.

“- that Jackson is in his wolf form, all curled up at the bottom of your bed, missing and worried about you -”

“Why do you think he’d be in my bed?” I ask, narrowing my eyes at her.

Daphne smirks a bit. “Jesse’s got a lot of great traits, but his pillow-talk habit of spilling secrets is very good for me and very bad for everyone else. Come on, Ari,” she says, smirking and raising an eyebrow at me. “I know where Jackson sleeps.”

I gasp but then laugh despite myself, my best friend tumbling into laughter with me a moment later.

“God damn it, Jesse,” I growl, shaking my head a bit. “What else do you know?”

“I know,” Daphne says, smiling at me quietly, “that Jackson loves you, Ariel. Bond or not, mark or not. I have every faith in the world that he’s just sitting, miserable, worried as hell, waiting for you to come back. You should text the boys,” she says, nodding to the kitchen where I know the phone is. “I’m sure they’ll confirm it.”

“Yeah,” I say on a sigh, looking that way too. “I suppose I should.”

But then I frown, because mom and Cora’s faces are...very serious.

“All okay in there?” I call out.

Cora and mom look up at me and then at each other.

“We’re going to take this in the bedroom for a second, girls,” mom says, picking up the tablet and carrying it away to the other room. “Nothing to worry on, so don’t freak out. Just...taking a minute.

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Despite my mother’s words, I feel my blood go icy with fear.

“What are you talking about, Dominic?” Ella says, frowning at her mate as she closes the bedroom door and flicks on the light. Cora stands close by, arms crossed, likewise waiting for an answer.

“Let’s go over this again,” Dominic says with a sigh, Roger peering curiously over his shoulder. “You brought Ariel to this spa and she cried the whole way on the helicopter. You healed a couple of cuts and bruises during the trip, but then you gave her some sleeping medicine and she slept for sixteen hours, and then you fed her ice cream for breakfast and she got a facial? And she’s...fine?”

“She is not fine, Dom,” Cora says, shaking her head at her brother-in-law, her lips drawn into a thin line. “The girl is devastated -”

“No, you don’t understand,” Dominic snaps, interrupting, harsher and less patient than he usually is.

Cora and Ella, look at each other worried.

“When I broke the bond with Lydia,” he continues, “I was shattered, Ella. And not just emotionally – physically.” Roger nods solemnly behind Dominic, remembering those days, even if they hadn’t been close. “I didn’t eat anything but broth for two weeks – I lost about fifty pounds – for the first few days my legs didn’t function – ”

Ella’s and Cora’s mouths drop open in shock.

“I was under the assumption, Ella,” Dominic says, leaning forward towards her, “that you would see Ariel and realize that she needed to be taken to a major medical facility for rehabilitation. Not a spa. It’s – god, Ella, but it should be impossible for her to be sitting on a couch drinking a glass of wine and laughing at her friend’s jokes!”

“But she is, Dominic,” Cora says, shaking her head at him. “The girl is a wreck but she’s nowhere near close to that description. Could it be because the bond was newer? You and Lydia were together for years – ”

“No,” Dominic says, shaking his head as he looks at each of them in turn. “I’ve spoken to others who have experienced breaking a mating bond – it’s always the same no matter the length of time. The physical effects are always devastating as well as the emotional.”

“What the hell is going on,” Ella breathes, looking towards the door and running an anxious hand through her rose-gold hair. “Why is my girl different?”

“Have you considered...” Roger hesitates now, glancing down at Dominic.

Dominic looks up at his brother, clearly inviting any insight.

“Look, I did a lot of research on mating bonds back when we were young and Dominic and Lydia’s formed theirs,” Roger says, glancing at each of his listeners in turn. He sighs. “We don’t need to go into the reasons why – I was devastated.”

Each of the listeners nods, remembering that Roger and Lydia had been engaged when Dominic turned sixteen and his bond with Lydia snapped into place.

“But I do remember,” Roger continues, “reading about rare cases in which bonds weren’t fully broken but instead...bruised? Or drawn quite thin? Shredded and damaged but...intact.”

Ella gasps a little, a hand flying to her mouth.

Dominic curses low under his breath, turning back to the camera and glaring hard into it. “If that boy didn’t even have the courage to give her a clean break,” he snarls, “I’m going to kill him, revive him, and kill him again just for the pleasure of it.”

“D-do you think you can tell, Ella?” Cora whispers, looking at her sister. “You’ve checked on her bonds before -”

“Yes, I can try,” Ella says, passing the tablet to Cora and striding for the door. “You stay here and...let me see what I can suss out.”

Cora sighs, anxious, and watches her sister pass through the door.

“All right, chickens,” Ella says with a happy sigh, hiding her worry under a kind motherly smile as she quickly crosses the room to stand behind Ariel on the couch. “Have we thought about what we want for dinner?”

“Oh, cut it, mom,” Ariel says, anxious, looking up at her. Ella’s face bursts into a real smile as she looks down at her daughter, reaching out her hands to stroke over her pretty hair. “We know something is up, the way you skittered off to speak in private.”

“Nothing’s up, trouble,” Ella murmurs, continuing to pet her baby. “Your dad’s just worried and we didn’t want you to hear him getting all snappy. You need a calm and

relaxed atmosphere. Plus, he didn't want you drinking any wine and I had to tell him how I felt about that. You didn't want to see mommy and daddy fight, did you?"

"I know you're lying," Ariel sighs, rolling her eyes.

"No, I'm not, I've never lied a day in my life," Ella coos, gently using her fingers to turn Ariel's face back down. "Now your beloved papa is very concerned and wants me to do another magical sweep to make sure you've got no more cuts and bruises. Is that okay?"

"I mean, I'm fine," Ariel says with a sigh and a shrug. "But all right."

"That's my good little peanut," Ella murmurs, shutting her eyes and letting the lavender light of her gift spill out of her, sweeping down into Ariel's being and looking for anything amiss.

"I'll never get used to this," Daphne murmurs, quite awed.

"Yes, you will, she'll be giving you your own scans every two weeks now that you're part of the family," Ariel murmurs. Ella smirks at this truth but doesn't comment, looking further and deeper beyond Ariel's physical body, searching her soul. And...there. Yes, right at the center, where she knew they'd be, are Ariel's bonds – stretched long and silver in several directions. The faded and sleeping bonds that are standard between a child and her parents are there – so vivid in early life but dormant as the child grows. And then the unique ones with her brother and her cousin. And then, beyond those...

Ella fights the urge to gasp at what she sees.

"Just five minutes, then you can talk to your dad!" Ella calls cheerfully to Ariel as she slips back into the bedroom, pulling the door carefully shut behind her. But the moment she turns back to Cora, all kindness slips away from her face.

"I'm going to murder that stupid boxer."

"Oh no," Cora sighs, her shoulders slumping.

"Ella, can you please come over here?" Dominic sighs. "It's very hard to hear you -"

Ella sighs and storms over to the bed, sitting down hard next to her sister. "You were right, Roger."

"Usually my four favorite words," Roger sighs, shaking his head. "Though not today."

"Tell me," Dominic orders, stern.

“I looked,” Ella says. “Her bond with Jackson is quite strong – bright and shining. But next to it, the one with Luca – it’s still there. Not broken, not disappeared. Just ragged as all hell and stretching out towards him, wherever he is in the world.”

Dominic groans, devastated by the news, and ducks his face into his hands.

“Oh, Luca’s in the city,” Cora murmurs innocently.

Ella glances at her with a frown but turns back to the tablet when Roger speaks.

“Is it not better, in some ways?” Roger asks, hesitant. “She’s not broken by this – she’s not ill like Dominic was. I’m not trying to downplay what she’s been through, I’m just saying –”

“

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“No, I’m glad she’s not going through what I want through,” Dominic says, raising his head. “I just...I hate that that smug little bastard still has a claim on her. He’s going to keep doing this to her – reeling her in, making his demands, and hurting her when he doesn’t get what he wants. It’s despicable for a man to tell the woman he loves that she’s rejected, to shred the bond almost to the snapping point, and then to leave it intact.”

“And Ariel’s so sweet,” Ella murmurs, worried. “That if she has a chance to try again, to renew the bond – she’ll probably take it. The boy means a lot to her. She loves him, I’m sure of it, and she’s generous of heart enough to see his good attributes when she should worry about the bad.”

“It would have been...hard on her,” Dominic sighs, softly shaking his head. “But in the long run, a clean break would have been better. It would have killed me to see her in that kind of pain, but I’d have taken that choice if it meant a clean break from him. I never regretted breaking from Lydia. But to use rejection as a punishment, and then to keep the bond...”

Dominic shakes his head, disgusted.

“We should have him arrested,” Roger murmurs, nodding.

“What?” Cora breathes. “Roger, it’s not illegal – ”

“Well, it should be,” he growls, glaring hard at the screen, though his anger is, of course, all for one tall dimpled playboy and not his wife. “We could have him court marshalled for dropping out of school in a time of war. Desertion. Lock him up in a dungeon, let the rats gnaw at his toes -”

“We don’t have a dungeon, Rog,” Dominic sighs.

“Should have built one when I told you to twenty years ago,” Roger murmurs, looking rather superiorly down at the desk. “Would come in handy right now, wouldn’t it?”

“I’m not worried about Luca. Or his toes,” Dominic says, frowning and glancing to his brother like it’s weird that they got on that subject in the first place. “We need to think about what’s best for Ariel.”

“Well, Ariel thinks the bond is broken, right?” Cora says, glancing at Ella, who nods. “She’s not aware that it’s intact. She thinks that she’s been rejected, that it’s done.”

“Perhaps we should leave it that way,” Dominic says, his face grim. “Let her recover. Let it be a clean break, at least on her side.”

“Dominic, to just lie to the girl,” Roger murmurs, frowning at his brother, hesitating at the idea. “When she’s already been through so much...”

“No, I agree,” Ella sighs, crossing her arms and looking seriously at the screen. “Not for forever. But...just for now. Whether or not the boy broke the bond, he rejected her – broke up with her. I want her to have the space to mourn him and then start to move on. Plus, if Rafe and Jesse hear that the bond is intact they might react strongly. If everyone is simply under the impression, for the next few days, that it’s ended...perhaps that’s best. Ariel needs to start living a life without Luca Grant – adjusting to that reality. We’ll tell her – just...not today.”

“And she won’t figure it out on her own?” Cora asks.

“I don’t think so,” Ella says on a sigh. “The bond is so tenuous, so ragged...I think it will take a great deal of healing until she feels it again, if ever. Again, we’ll tell her. Soon. Just...not today. Are we agreed on this?” She looks around at her family, genuinely wanting their advice.

“For what it’s worth, I think she should know now,” Roger says with a steady nod. “But you have my support if you think delay is better.”

“Yes, delay is better,” Dominic says, steady. Cora nods too, murmuring about it making sense from a medical perspective. “Let her mourn her loss, heal from this grief. When she feels stronger, we’ll tell her and she can make whatever decision is right for her.”

“I’ll kick her ass too,” Cora murmurs, pissed off. “If she decides to take him back.”

“I’m telling you guys,” Roger murmurs, shaking his head. “A dungeon goes really far in a moment like this. Just lock him away – never see him again – no longer a problem.”

“You go build it, Rog,” Ella says with a sigh, standing up. “Fill it with all the toe-nibbling rats you want. Dom? She wants to talk to you. Be gentle with our girl.”

“You know I will be,” Dominic says, looking at his mate quite steadily. “Go and get her. We’ll have our chat.”

Early the next morning, Ella, Daphne, and Cora let Ariel sleep in.

“What’s taking Cora so long?” Daphne asks, frowning towards the door. “If she doesn’t get back soon I will not be blamed for the lack of coffee.”

“Oh, we’ll just make another pot,” Ella says with a sigh, splashing more coffee into Daphne’s mug and moving the cream and sugar close to the pretty seamstress. “With the Sinclairs, there’s always more coffee.”

Daphne smiles at the Queen and there’s a beat of silence while Ella turns towards Ari’s bedroom door. “I think her talk with her father did her good. He always knows what to say to her.”

“Yeah, he’s a good dad,” Daphne says, smiling softly down into her cup. “I’m glad she has him.”

Ella smiles too as she studies Daphne’s downturned face, knowing there’s more to that statement than on the surface. “How is my girl doing at school?” Ella asks quietly. “Girl to girl. When I ask that question to the boys they give all sorts of boring statistics about her ranking and her run times. As if any of that matters.”

Daphne grins and looks up. “Do you want to know the changing statistics regarding her uniform size? Her waist has gotten quite trim and-”

“Oh no,” Ella groans, faking misery with a dramatic hand over her forehead. “Not you too!”

Daphne laughs and shakes her head. “Nah, I kid. But really, all of this rejection drama aside, I think she’s okay. She works very hard – harder than everyone else, I think – but she really, really loves it. I think losing Tony...” she bites her lip. “Will be very hard on her.”

“They’ve really gotten that close?” Ella asks, looking curiously into Daphne’s eyes.

“She thought he was so funny,” Daphne whispers, giving a little shrug. “And he was very honest and helpful to her. Plus, he was the first to call Luca out for bad behavior. Tony – he’s a big loss to the little group of friends, even if he was rather a late addition.”

“I liked him too,” Ella sighs, sighing and sitting up. “It’s so hard to lose someone so bright so young. The funeral is tomorrow, you know.”

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“Really?” Daphne says, sitting up and glancing towards Ariel’s door. “Does she know?”

“No, we’re not telling her,” Ella says, shaking her head. “She’ll want to attend and I think it will be too hard on her. I think she still needs to heal and we can have our own ceremony when she’s ready. Plus, I think that rat-boy is in the city,” Ella says with a frown. “And I’m not letting him anywhere near my girl again.”

“Ah, makes sense,” Daphne says.

But before Ella can say anymore, Cora comes flying through the door.

“Is she up?” Cora whispers, rather belying the need for stealth when she accidentally slams the door behind her, leaning back against it and panting with excitement, clutching something to her chest. “Is Ari awake?”

“No,” Ella says, looking at Cora with surprise. “What the hell happened -“

“You have got to see this,” Cora says, grinning like a cat and striding over to the table, slapping down a collection of tabloids.

“I got these from the front desk. They’re a train wreck but...I cannot look away.”

“Oh my god,” Daphne whispers, awed, reaching for the tabloid on the top.

Which features a big and glossy photo of Luca Grant on the cover.

“Oh my goddd,” Ella breathes, picking up magazine with the picture of Luca splashed on the cover. “Oh, he is...he is spinning out, isn’t he?”

“He is,” Cora says, nodding eagerly and grabbing the next in the pile, one with the headline “The Playboy is Back!” emblazoned over the front. “Apparently he’s spent the last two nights partying – there are doubts about whether or not he’s even slept -”

“So, my girl is crying,” Ella murmurs, a snarl in her voice as she explores the paparazzi photos inside the magazine, “and this jackass is out until three in the morning with girls on each arm?”

“Scum,” Daphne growls, shaking her head. She grabs a pen from the center of the table and begins to black out a few of Luca’s teeth in one of the photos before adding horns and stink lines radiating from his body.

Ella laughs and then reaches for another pen, starting to do the same.

“No, but you guys have to see this,” Cora says eagerly, flipping to a dog-eared page. “It’s insane – ”

“What is?”

All three women go still and then slowly, as one, turn towards the pretty blonde girl in white pajamas standing a few feet

away.

“Nothing!” Ella says, far too cheerfully, snatching up all of the magazines on the table and pressing them to her chest. “It’s... Mark! He was being so dumb! And the tabloids...got pictures!”

“The tabloids don’t care about Mark, all he does is play sports and try to feed peanuts to squirrels,” Ariel scowls, striding forward. “Just show me.”

“Ari,” Cora sighs, shaking her head. “It’s – you don’t want to see –”

“If you all know, I want to know,” Ari says with a wavering frown. “It’s obviously about Luca and I can’t be the only one completely in the dark about my ex-mate. I want to see.” She holds out her hand, insistent.

Ella sighs but then puts the magazines back on the table.

Ariel takes a step forward but then hesitates. “Do they say anything bad about me?”

“No, sugar,” Cora says, shaking her head. “There are speculations about why he’s out at the clubs and acting like a free man but...nothing cruel about you.”

“Good,” Ariel says with a sigh, moving forward again and looking down at the images on the covers, not yet reaching for one. “Let me get you a coffee, baby,” Ella says, leaning forward to give Ariel a kiss on the cheek before turning away.

Cora and Daphne stand quietly while Ariel lets her eyes travel over the images. She grows visibly pale, her lip starting to tremble even though she tries so, so hard to keep it together as she sees Luca with a beautiful young brunette clasped to his chest, Luca standing on a bar singing and spraying champagne over other club-attendees, Luca slumped at a table with twelve gorgeous women around him, flashing a peace sign towards the camera.

In each, he's handsome and carefree and – bizarrely enough – wearing sunglasses, even at night. And his clothes and hair are always...damp? But beyond these strange details, Ariel can see right through his determined coolness, can see the desperation with which he tries to pretend that everything's fine. She can see it, in the strain on his face, that he's in a great deal of pain too. He's just...being a real jackass in his refusal to address it, to pretend that everything's fine.

“God, he's a mess,” Ariel sighs, shaking her head at the man who broke her heart. “Just determined to cover his emotional wounds with as many women as possible.”

“Pig,” Daphne bites out. She grabs the closest magazine and draws a curly tail on Luca's butt.

Ariel lifts her eyes and gives her friend a small smile, the best she can do at the moment.

Then Ari returns her eyes to the images and reaches for one magazine that shows Luca on a rooftop somewhere, his shirt unbuttoned to the waist.

“What the hell is that?” she murmurs, leaning close to see better.

“What are you talking about?” Ella asks, bringing Ariel's cup of coffee over and leaning close.

”

“On his chest,” Ariel murmurs, tapping some kind of red mark there. “That's...I mean, that wasn't there two days ago. “That's what I was going to point out before you came in,” Cora says, her voice a bit grim. She flips to a page in one of the tabloids and lays it out for everyone to see, tapping one picture. “This one got a close up and broke the story. It looks like Mr. Grant got a tattoo – and did not follow medical advice regarding how long to keep it wrapped.”

“Oh. My. God.” Ariel murmurs, leaning close, her jaw dropping when she sees the large letter A tattooed on his muscled chest, right over his heart. And then trailing after it, to the right, the letters r, i, and e. The shirt covers what final letters are remaining, but it's not precisely difficult to imagine what comes next.

“What a loser,” Daphne murmurs, shaking her head. “I mean, in other situations, it might be sweet? But here...” “Seriously, crossing a line,” Cora murmurs, shaking her head. “One day you reject a girl, and the next you get her name tattooed over your chest? And that big? He's such a drama queen, making a statement about his broken heart and ensuring that everyone knows all about it.”

“And is his face all bruised?” Ariel asks, looking closer at a rare picture in which he's not wearing sunglasses. “Do we have any idea where that came from?”

“We don’t,” Ella sighs, looking steadily at her daughter, watching her reaction. “But I don’t have to make a ton of guesses, considering your line of supporters who would leap at the chance to give him a good punch.”

“And why is he all...wet all the time?” Ariel asks, frowning, leaning closer. “No one else is...”

“That...might be me,” Cora says, quite innocent.

The other three go silent and then turn to her, shocked.

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“What, I’m your godmother,” she says, shrugging, fighting a smug smile. “If you didn’t want me to have a tiny rain cloud chasing your douchebag ex around the city wherever he goes, you should have said so in the first place.”

Ariel lets out a sputtering little laugh as Ella and Daphne look at her anxiously. But when Ariel’s shock fades and it turns into real, true laughter, everyone joins in to the point where they’re all wiping tears from their cheeks, leaning against each other for support.

“Cora,” Ariel laughs, hugging her aunt and resting her head on her shoulder. “Please take it away – it’s so mean -”

“No way,” Cora sighs, pressing a kiss to her niece’s head. “He gets at least a few more days of that. Luca pissed off the wrong girl’s family – he’s paying for it -”

“All right,” Ariel sighs. “But no lightening.”

“No more lightening, you mean,” Cora coos, grinning.

“What!?”

“Oh, come on,” she sighs. “I had to zap his ass a few times to send a message. Don’t mess with the Sinclairs – we’ll make your life miserable.”

Ariel doesn’t say anything else, just looks around the room at the three women who are her family now, grateful to the depths of herself to have them on her side. “You guys are the best,” she whispers, breaking into tears again and moving to Daphne to hug next.

“Oh geeze,” Daphne says, wrapping her friend up in a hug. “Who knew, all we had to do was zap Luca with a little magical lightening and you’d feel better. It would have saved us a great deal of expense in spa treatments if we’d known that little secret from the start.”

“No, I want more spa treatments too,” Ariel murmurs into Daphne’s shoulder. “Also, ice cream.”

“Well, that we can do, trouble,” Ella says with a happy smile, moving for the freezer. “That we can do.”

A few hours later, massaged so that my muscles feel like butter and filled to the brim with every single desert that room service could think to create, I rest curled up at my mom’s side while Cora and Daphne sing karaoke in front of the TV, matching glasses of wine in their hands.

I smile, so pleased to be here but...knowing that the time is nearly up. That this has given me enough strength to face my life.

Mom and I spent a long time this afternoon going over it all. I tell her everything – what the Goddess said about needing all of my mates’ marks, and me deciding not to tell Luca and Jacks so the marks could be freely given. And about sleeping with Jackson first and how right it felt, and how sorry I was when he didn’t mark me, but how much sense it made when he explained it. And then what it felt like to lose Tony, and how good Luca was to save me.

And then how everything happened in his room, with the wine and the whiskey and the sex the mark the rejection, all so fast.

How it all feels like it was my fault, and how if I’d just managed it all a little differently, it would all be...fine.

“You have to forgive yourself, angel,” mom murmurs, curled up at my side, as I sniff again, going over it all in my head for the thousandth time. She presses a kiss to my hair. “You’re very young and you’ve never done any of this before. I’m not sure anyone has. You tried, you may have made mistakes, but you can learn from them. That’s how it works. But forgiveness first – the regrets...they help us grow. But you can’t live with them on your shoulders. Too heavy.”

I nod, hearing her, truly listening. And honestly, I do feel lighter seeing it from that perspective.

She’s right. I do like to be perfect, I hate to do things wrong. And I did a lot of things wrong. But there’s no changing it now – only moving forward.

“I think I want to go back to school tomorrow, ma,” I whisper, resting my head on her shoulder, my own wine glass balanced in my hand.

“Are you sure, baby?” she asks, turning to me slightly, going a bit rigid. “We can stay longer – we can

“No, I’m sure,” I say on a sigh. “I...I miss Jackson. And I need to talk to him.”

Mom hears the worry in my voice and snuggles down next to me. “The boys say Jackson’s fine, Ari. Worried but fine. I wish you wouldn’t worry so much. But, I do understand.”

“They didn’t say he’s fine,” I say on a sigh. “They said he’s been prowling around as his wolf, all full of woe, snapping at anyone who gets too close. And that he doesn’t sleep and just goes and wolfishly gazes at the moon.”

“Because it reminds him of youuu,” mom coos, laughing a little and snuggling closer to me. “And me. Because we’re elegant moon goddesses.”

“Yes, I understood,” I say, rolling my eyes but unable to keep the little smile on my face.

But still, my poor wounded wolf lifts her tired head and gives me another nudge in my soul, even as Cora and Daphne continue to sing, messing up the words and tripping over their own feet, laughing hysterically as they do.

“Will you keep a special eye on Junie at home, mom?” I whisper.

Mom turns to me, curious and concerned. “Of course, if you think I need to. But why?”

I shake my head, not knowing how or why I’m feeling this way. “Just...something about her knowing Redman Blythe and him being dead. She lost someone too, though I don’t know what he meant to her. Still – it’s too mysterious for my liking. Will you check in, for me?”

“I will,” mom promises. “It’s good of you to think of our little June-pipes.”

“And tell her I’m sorry I missed her birthday,” I whisper, closing my eyes against the guilt. “I’ll make it up to her soon.” “She knows you will, baby,” mom whispers back. “Don’t worry about Junie. You’ll see her soon.”

Jesse sighs as, for the third night in a row, he lopes after Jackson in wolf form in the fields and forests that surround the Castle. And Jesse gets it – he really does. His boy Jackson is going through a very difficult time, it’s just...

God, why does he have such athletic best friends?

Why can’t Ariel have the kind of mate who wants to drown his sorrows in a bottle of whiskey while sitting before the fire? Jesse would be great at that.

But, this is what Jackson wants to do.

And because Jackson is his best friend, this is what Jesse is doing. About ten feet behind at all times, just in case Jacks needs him. And even though Jackson hasn't once turned around, or stopped to speak with him, or done more than acknowledge his presence...Jesse knows that Jackson feels him here. Feels Jesse's love, and his support, and his unshakeable willingness to just be there for Jacks in whatever way he needs.

It comes as a great shock to Jesse when at around one in the morning on the third night, Jackson shifts on the cliffside outside the Castle. Jesse comes to rather a hard stop to avoid slamming into the huge guy before him who stands with his hands in his pockets, just staring at the moon.

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"Whoa," Jesse says as he shifts into his human body, running a hand through his ruffled hair and panting a little. "Sorry man. I almost...knocked you off the cliff."

"No you didn't," Jacks murmurs, only glancing at him.

Jesse smirks, standing at Jackson's side and turning his own face up to the moon.

"You don't have to be here, man," Jackson says quietly. "I know you're not getting any sleep and that you're paying for it. I'm not going to like...get in any trouble or anything, if you leave my side."

"No, I know that," Jesse murmurs. "I'm not playing guard dog. I'm just...hanging out."

"Hanging out?" Jackson asks, dry, turning his head to Jesse, dubious.

"Yeah, this is my favorite!" Jesse says, grinning and throwing his hands out to the side. "I love long night runs! In the cold!

And staring at the moon with agony in my eyes, this is the best!"

Jackson huffs a single laugh and looks away, shaking his head. "Is that what it looks like to you?"

"Nah, man, I'm just trying to make you laugh," Jesse says softly, stepping closer and clasping a hand to Jackson's shoulder. "It looks like you're...figuring things out. I just want to be here for you. I know you're going through it."

"Thank you," Jackson whispers, his voice breaking a little.

Jesse just nods and stands silent with his friend.

“How do you think you’re going to handle it?” Jesse asks quietly a few minutes later.

“When she comes back tomorrow?”

Their mother had texted a few hours back to let them know Ariel’s plans. It had been the thing that sent Jackson into a panic, made him shift and go for his run. Rafe had offered to come too, but Jesse told him to stay back with the phone just in case they got any further updates.

“I don’t know,” Jacks replies, his voice grave. “I mean, I love her. I just...had a very bodily reaction last time I saw her. I just honestly don’t know how I’m going to respond – I think it’s out of my control.”

“Well, you’d better be nice to her,” Jesse snaps, a little defensive, turning to glare at his friend.

“Obviously, Jesse,” Jackson growls, meeting his friend’s eyes. “I’m going to do everything in my power to be nice to her. I’m just being honest. I have no idea what it’s going to be like until I see her.”

“Are you jealous?”

“Of course I’m jealous!” Jackson bites out, tossing his hands to the side. “Do you have any idea what it’s like to see your mate with another man’s mark on her neck?”

Jesse’s heart sinks to the pit of his stomach at the thought of Daphne...Daphne marked.

“I think I’d die,” he says, quite honest, meeting Jackson’s eyes. “I don’t know how you’re alive right now. I’m not exaggerating.”

“I’m not sure it’s out of the realm of possibility,” Jackson murmurs, turning away to again look up at the moon. “I’ve been... trying to pray for strength. It’s not easy. Also, I’m not sure I’m good at prayers.”

“Eh, the Goddess is a family friend,” Jesse says with a shrug. “I think she’s less concerned about form as opposed to content.” They’re quite for another long few moments.

“Ariel’s going to be really sad,” Jesse whispers. “Are you going to be able to handle that? Watching her cry over Luca, because he’s gone?”

Jackson remains tense and silent.

“I don’t think I could do it,” Jesse says quietly, shaking his head. “Holding my mate while she cried over another man? I don’t know if I’m strong enough to be that guy.”

“I don’t know if I am either,” Jackson murmurs, crossing his arms over his chest. “And I don’t know if that’s what she wants. Have you considered that? As a possibility?”

Jesse turns to him, confused.

“That she wanted it?” Jackson continues, such devastation in his blue eyes as he turns his head to Jesse. “That she...she picked him, after he saved her? And was going to reject me? And then they had some kind of fight, and it turned?” He shakes his head, hating it – all of it.

“That can’t be what happened, man,” Jesse says, tightening his hand on Jackson’s shoulder. “She loves you. She loves you so much.”

Jackson grits his teeth, his head bowing, turning towards Jesse.

And Jesse responds to the silent request in that action, wrapping his arms around his friend and holding him close. “You guys are going to figure it out, man,” Jesse whispers, rubbing a hand up and down Jackson’s back. “Just – if you don’t know where to start, let her take the lead. You’ll find the way. We’ll help.”

Jackson sniffs hard but nods and doesn’t pull away from the hug for a long time.

“Come on, man,” Jesse says. “Let’s get to you to bed. Morning comes faster if you’re asleep.”

For the first time, Jackson consents to be lead inside before dawn.

The room is quiet when I get back in the morning, dressed again in Cadet black with Rafe’s cap on my head. I look around and frown as Jesse and Rafe escort me in, doggedly close to my heels and my side.

Very sweet in thought. Very annoying in practicality.

“Where’s Jacks?” I ask, turning towards them when I realize that he’s not here, as I assumed he would be.

“He went to class, Ari,” Rafe says, quietly shutting the door and watching me carefully.

“Well, why aren’t you in class?” I ask, putting my hands on my waist and glaring at my brother and my cousin.

“Because we’re not letting you out of our sight ever again, you idiot,” Jesse says, cheerful, wrapping an arm around my shoulders and leading me over to the couch where very gently forces me to sit down and then spreads a blanket over my lap. I scowl at him and his over-protective Alpha bullshit.

But then my fears catch up with me as Rafe crosses to his chair and sighs, plopping down into it.

“But...” I bite my lip, looking between them as Jesse sits too. “Jackson...is letting me out of his sight?”

“It’s not like that, Ariel,” Rafe says, sighing and resting his head against his fingertips. “We didn’t know what you wanted – if you wanted to see him immediately. We still don’t know how you’re feeling or where your heart is. What you’re ready for.”

“Oh, but you rashly assumed I was ready for you?” I say, glaring a little.

“She’s healed!” Jesse says, grinning and casting a hand out in my direction. “Look at that! Saucy and cruel, just how we like her!”

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“We did what we thought was right, Ariel,” Rafe says, ignoring Jesse and concentrating on frowning at me. “He’ll come later. If you want him to. He’s...been having a really hard time. Let’s all just take it easy, okay? One step at a time.”

“Okay,” I sigh, looking down at my hands pressed tight against my blanket.

“Are you hungry?” Rafe asks.

“No.”

“Are you going to fight us when we try to force food down your throat?” Jesse asks this time.

I sigh and look up at them. “Is it going to be healthy?”

“No,” Rafe murmurs, a small smile coming to his lips

“Then no.”

Jesse grins as he gets up to walk to the dumbwaiter and order something up. I take the moment to look Rafe seriously in the eye, knowing he won’t lie.

“Does Jackson hate me?” The question is barely a whisper.

“Ariel,” Rafe says, leaning forward and holding my gaze. “I promise you – he loves you very, very much. Just...let him take his time with it too, okay? It’s hard.”

I nod and look back down with my hands. Then I sigh and stand, moving for the nook. “I think I’m going to take a nap.” Rafe watches me go, worried.

I turn towards him. “Will you wake me? If Jackson comes?”

He nods.

I smile softly at my brother and then climb into my bed, shutting the curtain after me.

Even as I cuddle into my pillows I hear Rafe’s worried sigh.

And I smile a little, glad to have a brother who worries about me. Even if he does go a little overboard with those worries...it’s good to feel loved.

I close my eyes on a sigh of my own, praying desperately that Jackson will be here when I wake up.

I bolt straight up in bed a few hours later, instantly aware that he’s near.

My wolf is on her feet, her nails scratching at my soul, howling for Jackson’s wolf.

And even though he’s trying so hard to be cool and calm, I can feel Jackson’s wolf anxiously shifting from foot to foot, turning towards Jacks, begging for permission to run to her. But he’s – he’s being held back –

I drag in a shaky breath and scuttle off my bed, ripping open the curtain and staring around my room, frantic.

“Whoa,” Jesse says, freezing and staring at me from his chair. “Bad dream?”

“What’s wrong?” Rafe asks, jumping to his feet.

“Where is he?” I ask, desperate, looking all around.

But god fuck – he’s not there.

“Who?” Rafe barks out.

“Jacks!” I bark back, storming around the room like I’m going to find him somewhere – even though – god, where could he hide? – he’s gigantic –

“Ari!” Jesse says, starting to get freaked out. “What are you

”

But then I turn, hearing something shift at the door. I sniff deeply and suddenly know precisely where he is.

Ignoring my brother and my cousin, I stride towards the door and yank it open.

Jackson sprawls backwards into the room and gasps as his head smacks the floor. I just gape down at him while he looks sheepishly up at me, moving a hand to cradle the back of his head where I can feel pain – can feel it radiating down our bond.

And even though it’s pain I feel coming through a little sob breaks from my throat – because it’s there, our bond, shining and true and strong. And I can feel him all along it – every bit of my Jacks, still the same.

I fall to my knees at his side, my shoulders shaking. “What the hell were you doing outside?” My question is tremulous, a whisper.

“Um,” he says, glancing backwards at Jesse and Rafe. “I was just...being close. Because it was hard to be far. And Jesse said I should let you take charge? And wait until you asked for me, in case you...didn’t want to see me?”

Jesse groans. “That’s not what I said!”

“Why are you listening to Jesse?” I ask, shaking my head as tears well in my eyes. “He’s the worst at emotions.”

“Hey!”

“I don’t know, Ariel,” Jackson murmurs, sitting up and reaching for me the moment he sees me starting to cry. “You’re right – that was dumb – I’m so sorry -”

I groan in relief the moment Jackson wraps me up in his arms, pulling me into his lap and cradling me against his chest, pressing as much of my body to him as he can manage. He murmurs again and again his apologies, and I whisper back for him to stop that he doesn’t need to – that I need to –

And then I just cry, and Jackson just holds me, and his wolf moves fast across the bond to mine. She shies at first, wary after Luca’s wolf’s attack, but Jackson’s wolf skids to a stop and lets out an encouraging yip, waiting for her to come to him. And when she does, finally pressing herself warm to his side, a fierce and possessive grumble echoes in his chest.

Both Jackson and the wolf.

“Cool, well, we’ll let you...have a minute...” Jesse murmurs, stepping over us and heading out of the room.

“We’ll be back in half an hour,” Rafe says, his voice anxious. I glance up at him to see him looking worriedly down at me, like I can ask him to stay if I want him to.

I sit up straighter, holding my brother’s pretty green gaze. “It’s fine, Rafe,” I say, my voice croaking. “Thank you. It’s fine – we’ll be fine.”

Jackson grumbles his agreement and the door shuts behind us. I turn in Jackson’s lap, taking his face in my hands, tears slipping down my cheeks.

“I’m so sorry, Jacks,” I whisper, shaking my head at him.

“Ariel, you didn’t do anything -”

“No, I mean didn’t I?” I shake my head, confused, not remembering correctly – just so...so so filled with grief, and yet so deeply happy to be here with him, to feel him, to smell him.

But then I go rigid, wondering if my scent has changed. I mean, my mom said that it hadn’t – not that she could tell. But she’s not an Alpha. And she’s not my mate.

“Jacks,” I whisper, gulping and looking at him seriously. “I’m not blameless in any of this. I had a lot of time to think about it – and Luca – he was very bad to me, but he...he wasn’t totally wrong – I was bad too -”

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Jackson snarls at the very idea of this and I can feel down our bond his line of thinking and the flashes of memory that come along with it – that any attempt to excuse Luca’s rejection of me, the fact that he stormed away from the Castle and left me naked and sobbing in his room –

“Please,” I whisper, shaking my head, shaking all over. “I – I can’t talk about that right now – I can’t think about it.”

Jackson groans, guilty, and wraps me up closer in his arms.

“I’m just really sorry, Jacks,” I whisper, wrapping my arms around his neck. “I know the last three days were really really hard for you. And it’s not going to be...you know, cake. Going forward.”

“Cake?” he asks, pulling back confused. “There’s...cake?”

I laugh a little, the sound sputtering as I shake my head. “It’s an expression,” I whisper. “Like, it’s not all going to be easy.” He frowns at me. “I didn’t know cake was easy,” he whispers. “I thought it was...hard to make.”

I laugh a little harder now, shaking my head, taking his face in my hands, loving him so terribly, incredibly much. “It’s not important.”

Jackson growls his agreement and leans closer to me, brushing his nose against mine, leaning his forehead close as he takes a deep breath. “Ariel. How are you? Are you okay?”

“I’m a lot better,” I whisper, meaning it. “Mom and Cora and Daphne took good care of me. It was what I needed.”

“Good,” he murmurs, breathing a long sigh of relief. “I mean, I know you’re not...fixed, or whatever. That things have changed. But...good. I’m so glad you’re better.”

I go a little still at his words and take a deep breath, moving slightly away from him so that I’m sitting across from him on the floor. He looks seriously down at me as I sit before him, my shoulders hunched, my eyes wide.

“Have things changed, Jacks?” I whisper, gazing up at him, not sure if I want the answer. “Between us?”

Jackson just stares at me. “Ariel, what are you talking about? What would have changed?”

I shrug, my hand awkwardly coming up, my fingers brushing the bandage over Luca’s mark. “I would...I mean, I understand. If things are different for you now that I’m...marked. I know I’m not the same as I was before. I would...understand if you felt differently about me.”

“Ariel.” My name is almost scolding as it falls from Jackson’s mouth, as his fingers snap up and capture my chin, raising my eyes to meet his. “Don’t ever doubt it. Nothing – nothing about how I feel about you has changed, okay? If you feel differently, I’ll understand that, but – ”

“I don’t,” I croak out, shaking my head vehemently, tears again streaming from my eyes. “Jacks, I don’t -”

“Well I don’t either – I’m – I’m fucking in love with you, Ariel – I’ll take you in whatever form – I don’t care a stupid mark –

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“But you did care,” I whisper, shaking my head, taking his cheeks between my hands – not wanting him to lie just to make me feel better. “You saw it – saw me and you threw up -”

He groans, shaking his head. “Please, Ariel,” he murmurs. “Forgive me – you have to forgive me for that. I was shocked, and confused, and your scent was weird, and the sight of it turned my whole world upside down – but it’s different now, I promise

–”

But he doesn’t get any more words out because I throw my entire weight against him, sobbing my heart out with relief. And Jackson catches me – as he always does.

He wraps me up close, and falls back to the floor, and takes me with him so that I’m sprawled out over his chest. Where I belong.

“I’m not saying that the events of the past week are wiped away, Ariel,” he whispers, boosting me up so that our faces are even, inches apart. “The past happened – and it changes us. But if you’re asking if it makes me love you any less?” He solemnly shakes his head. “I love you. All versions of you. Forever.”

I sniff hard and tuck my head down to rest on Jackson’s shoulder, letting my eyes slip shut. He holds me for a long time laying on the floor like that, letting me cry myself out, his wolf carefully inspecting every inch of mine, licking her little face, nudging her paw so he can better see where she twisted her ankle, giving a mournful little howl in commiseration with her pain.

At some point, Jacks stands with me in his arms, and carries me over to the Nook where we collapse into the bed together. “At some point,” he murmurs, his lips against my hair. “I’m going to need you to eat. And then, when you’re ready, we’ll talk.”

I sigh against him, content if not yet perfectly happy after all I’ve been through – all I’ve lost.

“Okay,” I whisper, nodding my agreement. “Food first. And then we talk.”

Jackson leaves me for a few moments to ensure that the door is properly locked and then to bring over some of the food that Jesse ordered up hours ago from the kitchen. I perk up when I see the selection of cakes and pies that Jacks carries over on a tray. He laughs to see my eager expression, hear my stomach growl.

“Here,” he murmurs, handing me a fork. And then to my surprise he moves around the bed to take the little DVD player out from its spot in the bottom drawer, picking out a movie at random and turning it on. As I begin to see his line of thought a little smile takes my face as I eagerly stab at a piece of sponge cake, because as weird as it might seem, Jacks is entirely correct.

We need...a minute.

There are huge conversations to be had – very big ones. But no matter what those conversations are, Jackson and I both now know that we’re on the same page: no matter where those conversations go, we’re getting through them.

We’re going to be together. For good. No matter what – we’re going to put in the work, and the effort, and the grit to ensure that we get to a good spot. Even if we’re not there yet, we both know that we’re going to be.

And with that knowledge intact, we know that we can take a minute to simply rest. To remember what it’s like to be bodily together, side-by-side, even if my bodily chemistry has changed slightly now, perhaps on a fundamental level. Perhaps forever.

Wordless, but with understanding passing down the bond between us, Jackson places the DVD player in front of me on the bed and then squeezes in behind me, his back against the headboard. He presses a kiss to my hair as I lean back against him and continue eating my way through the desert tray, giving him a bite every few minutes as well.

When Rafe and Jesse come back half an hour later, their faces are very, very surprised to see the easy scene before them. “Wow,” Jesse murmurs, wandering over to us. “I kind of thought you’d fight. Or at least not go immediately for cake.” Jackson growls, glaring at my cousin, I think feeling crazy levels of protective and unable to help it.