

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy Chapter 461

I just snuggle back against him and shift my eyes to Rafe, who I find smiling subtly at me.

“Did you two even talk?” Rafe asks, raising an eyebrow at me.

“Cake first talk second,” I murmur, patting the bed, knowing my brother doesn’t understand but also know that right now... he doesn’t really need to. “Wanna watch?”

Jesse and Rafe look at each other but then both shrug.

“I’ll get more cake?” Jesse says, turning towards the dumbwaiter.

“Get something savory too,” Rafe murmurs, crawling across the bed to my other side and resting his giant head on my knee as he cuddles up and gets comfortable.

“You got it!” Jesse calls over his shoulder.

And I smile, and rest against Jacks, and allow myself to feel the peace I don’t fully feel I deserve. Because he’s too good to me – too forgiving, and I’m well aware of it. And tomorrow we can talk it all through.

But right now, when my wolf is curled up basically encircled by his, her head resting against his paws, feeling the warmth of him as he breathes softly around her? How? How could I disturb them both when they’ve been tortured for days and have finally found this peace?

And so I eat, and rest, and slowly let myself again drift off to healing sleep with my mate behind me and my brother and cousin on either side.

“Hey, trouble.”

Rafe’s voice stirs me from my deep sleep in the morning, from the dream in which Jacks and I were running, cliffside as our wolves, like we used to do even before we knew we could share dreams.

I blink, dazed and hazy, and look up at him.

He smirks and I can almost see the deep pleasure running through him to have me back where he can watch over me, back where he can see me getting better.

“We’re going for our run,” he murmurs, gesturing towards Jesse over his shoulder.

I moan, closing my eyes and pressing my cheek back to Jackson's chest. "No, don't make me run," I murmur, shaking my head. "I can't do it. I am weak. I am illness."

Rafe laughs and I hear Jesse's booted footsteps coming to his side. "To begin, you're lying," Jesse says, and I open one eye to peer up at him. "You could totally run if you wanted to. You're just lazy."

I scowl at him because he is right. But I don't want to go. And they can't make me.

"It's fine," Rafe says, laughing a little. "Stay in bed, we just wanted to let you know where we were going. Maybe...see you at breakfast?"

I nod up at him, noncommittal but letting him see that I understand.

My brother and my cousin nod to me again and then wave, headed for the door.

As the lock clicks, Jackson slowly begins to move his hand in its place on my back, slowly stroking up and down over my pajama top.

"Hey," I whisper, smiling a little, relishing the warmth of him beneath me.

"Hello," my mate says, quite soft, passing a great rush of warmth and affection down our bond.

I sigh and lift my head, resting my chin on his chest and peering up at him. "Ready to talk?"

"You hungry?" he asks, raising an eyebrow at me.

I laugh, smiling at him. "Jackson, I've eaten enough for an Alpha ten times my size in the past four days. Honestly, I'm not at any chance of withering away."

He grumbles something about miniature people being swept away by the wind but I just laugh and shake my head. "Seriously, Jacks," I whisper, my face falling a bit. "I want to have this chat."

"All right, tiny," he murmurs, cupping my cheek in his palm. "Let's have it, then."

Jackson and I each take a moment to clean up, brushing our teeth and splashing water on our faces, before we return to the nook – the place where we feel most secure. But I push the curtain back, letting the pre-dawn light stream in. Because that feels right, feels better.

"So," Jackson murmurs, wrapping his long arms loosely around his knees as he leans back against the pillows. "Where do you want to start?"

I bite my lip, wondering at it, but also...distracted. Distracted by the sheer physical presence of my mate, sitting there across from me in our bed, all gorgeous and understanding and willing to hear every bit of what I have to say. Almost despite my resolve to be stoic and serious, my eyes move away from his face and down his form, taking in the beautiful way that his body has been crafted, honed, over years of punching stuff and running and whatever else it is these warrior-types do. My wolf shifts from paw to paw, giving me a nudge, telling me to go to him to touch him –

But –

I hesitate, knowing where that got me last time. With Luca. Giving in to impulse and attraction is...not always the best choice.

When I raise my eyes again to Jackson's face, I see that his jaw is tight, his teeth clenched as he senses the direction of my thoughts. To that day, with Luca. And all the things that lead to being marked, if not the marking and the rejection itself. "Did you want it?" Jackson asks, his voice tight. I can almost feel the tension over every muscle in his body.

I exhale slowly and hold his gaze. "I wanted to sleep with him. But I didn't want the mark. Not yet."

And then I tell him everything. I soften, where I can, the information that he doesn't necessarily need – about how attracted I was to Luca, and precisely how much it hurt when his wolf attacked and he rejected me. These things, I sense, he doesn't need the details of. But beyond that I tell him everything, wanting things to be an open book between us, wanting him to have it all.

And when I finish, Jackson tells me his side of the story. What it was like to have a Cadet burst into his and Rafe's meeting with the Captain and tell Rafe he was desperately needed, and then seeing me there in the hall. His own pain and confusion has me weeping as silently as I can, not wanting to stop him from the story but unable to hold it back. But my mouth falls open when Jackson gives me the details about Luca – about chasing him down, and their fight, and then letting him go even though he left the Castle intending to kill.

"Oh, Jacks," I say, pressing my hands to my chest and shaking my head at him. "I'm so sorry. I – I've been so bad and unfair, through all of this."

He just frowns at me. "You've done what you had to do, Ariel. Your grandmother gave you two mates. Who the hell am I to do anything but try to deal with my jealousy in the face of a divine gift like that?"

I shake my head. "But I agreed – I told you both I'd choose one of you – Luca was right when he pointed out that I said I wouldn't sleep with either of you before I made my choice – and I broke that –"

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“That was a shit place to put you in in the first place,” Jacks murmurs, his head hanging a little. “We both... Ariel, as the weeks passed it was becoming increasingly obvious that a choice was going to be impossible. That Luca and I were just going to have to...deal with it. Find a way to live with each other.”

I gape at him. “Is that...is that seriously where your heart was?”

He raises his eyes to look at me. “Was being the important word here, Ariel. I wouldn’t share you with that jackass now for the world – he – he fucking deliberately put you in danger – he knows there are potentially others in this Castle who were trying to hurt you and he left you naked and alone with an open door -”

His words get angrier and angrier as they fall from his lips and I lean forward, putting a hand on his knee, stopping the tirade. Nearly shaking with rage at the memory, Jacks takes a deep breath and nods to me, letting me know he’s got it back under control.

“But yes, before that?” he shrugs. “I was...finding a way. I don’t know. It felt right. Luca was...frustrating and difficult. I’d have rather shared you with someone like Tony, who was cooler and nicer and I think quite a wide margin smarter than Grant.”

I tilt my head to the side at this, curious about that thought process. Where on earth had that come from? Tony as my mate? Honestly, the idea is... ridiculous to me, even though Luca was jealous of him too, so some kind of romantic connectoin was clearly on his mind as well. But Jackson catches himself mid-harangue and clears his throat, drawing in a deep breath.

“Clearly,” I murmur, “you gave this some thought.”

“I mean, I didn’t like the idea of sharing you,” Jackson murmurs, slowly shaking his head as he holds my gaze. “But if that was your destiny?” Another shrug as he looks away into space, like he hated it but he was willing to bear it.

For me.

And suddenly my heart sinks as I realize just how precisely good he is. That Jackson – he’d take a half happiness, as long as it meant having me in his life.

I groan and crawl to him, unable to stand being apart anymore and pressing myself to his side. Jackson wraps his arm around me and pulls me close, taking a deep sniff of my hair.

“I’m very sorry,” I whisper, shaking my head. “I don’t think the Goddess’s gift was very fair to you, was it?”

“Any deal that comes with you attached, Ariel,” Jackson murmurs, “is the lion’s share of the riches. And I’m not just some poor orphan saying that – just some kid who’s never been loved taking whatever the world would give him. I’d say the same even if I were the Prince of Atalaxia, with all the world’s riches at my feet. You are worth it all, Ariel Sinclair.”

I sigh, thinking that it can’t possibly be true, but grateful instead to be so overwhelmingly loved.

And so I tell him, finally, of the extent of the Goddess’s gift. Of her command to me, that day in the magic classroom, to get all of my mates’ marks. That what he was moving towards was correct anyway, even if I hoped that the three of us would have time to get there on our own. Even if, apparently, we didn’t.

And then I apologize, profusely, for keeping it from him. But Jackson, as he so unendingly does, understands and works hard to see my side.

I can feel him thinking through it as he holds me close for a few moments, turning over the details of what the Goddess said, the consequences of what happened.

“So, what do you think?” he asks, his deep voice rumbling and low and contemplative. The back of his fingers barely graze the bandage still over the mark on my neck. “Do you think this is enough, that you’ve got his mark now? Or...do you think the Goddess is going to give you a replacement mate?”

“I don’t know,” I whisper, shaking my head, kind of terrified at the idea. “I think we have to get Cora to call her up again and ask. I’m not sure how long I can stand not knowing.”

He nods, grumbling something.

But I bite my lip and sit up and face him again, my own hand moving hesitantly to the bandage over my neck. “You know this is...all for show, right?”

Jackson raises an eyebrow at me. “I know that your mother wouldn’t have let you leave that spa unless every inch of you was fully healed, if that’s what you mean.”

“Yes,” I say, shaking a bit. “But...I haven’t looked at it yet.”

“Do you think you’re ready?”

“Are you?” I ask, a bit wide-eyed.

Jackson smirks a little. “I can handle it.”

I turn my head a bit, my eyes narrowed at his confidence. “You aren’t going to barf again?”

A little laugh huffs from him, his eyes crinkling as he shakes his head no.

“How are you so confident?”

Jackson shrugs. “I’m good with it. I’ve made my peace. All parts of you are precisely that Ariel – parts of you. Which makes them beautiful to me, so.” He shrugs. “If you’re wearing that bandage for my sake, you don’t need to.”

Slowly, my fingers shaking slightly, I reach up and peel away the gauze from my neck, letting the bandage fall to my lap. When Jacks doesn’t even flinch, I turn my head to the side and let him see the full extent of Luca’s mark, high on my neck.

“Well?” I whisper, my wolf quailing a bit with the fear that he’ll change his mind. “What do you think?”

Jackson’s silence is long. Too long.

I whip my face back to him, my mouth a grim line.

His expression is...carefully blank.

“Oh no,” I whisper, slumping down, my hand whipping up to cover the mark. “You hate it —“

“Ari,” he sighs, scowling and swatting at my forearm, attempting to knock my hand aside. “Don’t do that – I don’t hate it -”

“You do!” I protest, a little more devastated than I thought I’d be, even if I knew this was coming. I mean, he can’t like it, can he?

“I don’t hate it!” Jacks insists, laughing at me a little as I stubbornly keep the mark covered and frown at him, leaning away. Seriously, Ari, it’s fine.”

“It’s fine?”

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He laughs again, giving up the attempt to pull my hand away and leaning back against the pillows. “Do you want me to lie and say I think it’s my new favorite feature?”

I narrow my eyes. “Well then tell me what you really think.”

Slowly I drop my hand and Jackson leans forward a bit to peer again.

“I stand by my words. It’s fine.”

“Jacks!” I groan, lashing out a leg and kicking at him. “You can’t possibly think it’s fine!”

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“Yes I can!” he says, laughing and grabbing my leg, using it to haul me closer to him. “Besides, when I was at your place for Midwinter, Seraphina told me -”

“Seraphina!?” I screech, a little shocked. “How the hell did she come into this!?”

“If you’ll listen,” he growls, gathering me further into his lap, even as I go limp in protest to make it hard for him. “I’ll tell you.”

I grumble noncommittally but allow myself to be fully ensconced on his lap and wrapped up in his arms.

“Sera told me,” he murmurs, pressing a kiss to my hair. “That if I don’t have anything nice to say...I shouldn’t say anything at all. So. It’s precisely fine. That was very wise, by the way, how did a little girl come up with something like that?”

I laugh a little but then groan at the realization of the truth – that he really doesn’t like it. I mean, not that I expect or want him to like it – I just – I mean – if he hates it, he’s the one who has to look at it every day for the rest of his life.

“Oh no,” I moan, covering it again with my hand. “It’s very ugly.”

“It’s not,” he murmurs, cuddling me closer and dropping kisses to my hair. “It’s simply...not to my taste.’

“That phrase has Ella written all over it,” I grumble.

“Yes, a very useful one for when people try to feed me duck liver,” he murmurs, “or mark my mate with an uneven bite very high on her neck because they’re arrogant and need everyone to see it -”

I burst out laughing and smack Jackson on the shoulder, and then I sigh when I take in the full meaning of his words – that it truly is not to his taste.

But Jackson keeps me tight in his arms. “I’m serious, Ari, you shouldn’t be worried about what I think,” he murmurs. “Feel how you want to feel about it. I think that it is precisely fine.”

I sigh, shaking my head, wondering how he can be so good – so even tempered and sweet despite the Alpha impulses that must be hating, every second, the idea of another man’s mark on my body. Honestly, when the Goddess chose Jacks for me, she must have known what she was doing.

“Plus,” Jacks murmurs. “It helps that it’s faded.”

I go a bit still. “Faded?” I ask, looking up at him.

He frowns down at me and nods. “I guess because of the rejection. Yes, it’s...faded.”

“What?” My face twists in confusion.

“Go look,” he says with a shrug, nodding towards the bathroom. I do as he says, climbing swiftly out of his lap and moving into the bathroom to peer in the mirror. Jackson walks in behind me a moment later, ducking a bit to peer at the mark as well. My breath catches as I look at it truly for the first time – the indelible impression that Luca left on my body. It really is high, like some Luna’s marks are, meant to be worn proudly for everyone to see. My stomach sinks as I realize that, for me, that’s not precisely the case.

But I push past the thought, leaning close to the mirror, trying to see what Jackson means about it being...faded.

“I don’t get it,” I murmur, glancing up at him, “what’s faded.”

“You can’t see it?” he asks, curious. “Look at the mini mark.”

My frown deepens as I straighten up and glance down at my finger, where Jackson playfully gave me my mini mark on the day I lost my virginity. A day that feels...so, so long ago. But as I stare down at it my mouth forms into a little “o” of surprise.

And then I lift my finger, and hold it close to Luca’s mark for comparison, and see that Jackson’s...right. That it’s quite subtle, but the mini mark is...different. It...shines, almost? Just barely perceptible, an incredibly faint line of silver tracing through it? And Luca’s mark has none of that.

“Oh, that’s really incredible,” I murmur. Then I burst into a smile, looking at the mini mark. “See? I knew the mini mark was real.”

Jackson just laughs and shakes his head, putting his hands on my hips and stepping close, dropping a kiss to my hair. “Not my mark yet, tiny. But...” he hesitates and then drops the

point. I lift my eyes and meet his in the mirror, knowing what he's thinking, because I'm thinking the same.

That he needs to give me his mark. That the Goddess ordered it, and we both know it now. But also that...I am not ready. Not right now – not so close to my last marking which was, at best, traumatic.

And even though I know Jackson would give it to me now if I asked for it...

"I just need a little time?" I whisper.

He nods to me, just once, quite simple. Letting me know that he understands and that the moment I'm ready, he's here. And not because the Goddess demanded it – because it's time.

For us, it's time.

I sigh, leaning back against him, and Jackson wraps his arms fully around me.

"Did my scent change?" I murmur.

He sniffs my hair experimentally, almost performative, because it's not like he hasn't been smelling me all night.

"A little," he murmurs, "though not badly. Honestly, you did smell different when I saw you in the hall – I think your scent... did change. And then when he rejected you it started to revert back – I read that that's what happens with scents of rejected mates. But it's almost back to normal now."

I frown at him in the mirror. "Where on earth did you read that?"

He frowns back at me. "The internet, Ariel. Obviously."

I burst out laughing and turn towards him, wrapping my hands around his back and grinning up into his face. Jackson smiles down at me like he can't help it, like looking at my face is the great joy of his life.

I sigh and gaze up at him. "You really think we're going to be okay?"

"I mean," Jacks murmurs, stroking his heavy palm over my hair. "I'm not giving you free reign over my heart to go out wantonly taking lovers and getting marks, Ariel." I smirk at the idea, jokingly turning my head to the side and considering it, making him laugh. "But do I think we're going to be okay? Yes. Of course I do."

"How did I get so lucky?" I rest my chin on his chest, gazing up at him with all of my love shining in my eyes.

“Nah, that’s my line,” Jacks murmurs. And then he dips his head, and presses his first gentle kiss to my lips, quite simple and full of love. I stand on my toes and kiss him back, grateful for him, for his kind heart, his enduring nature, not entirely sure if I deserve him.

But even if I don’t, I’m going to take this gift the universe has given and run with it. Because I know what I’ve got – and I’m never, ever giving it up.

Jackson breaks the kiss for both of us, tucking away any physical desires that that’s stirring in him for my sake, knowing that I’m not ready for that just yet. But that at some point I will be.

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“So.” He clears his throat, looking away for a second as he works to control himself. I grin up at him, watching his face.” Wanna get some breakfast in the hall with everyone else?”

“Yeah,” I say, still smiling softly as he turns his eyes back to me. “Yeah, that sounds great.”

Then I shriek with laughter as Jacks grabs me and tosses me over his shoulder, carrying me back into the room. “All right! Then let’s get going, tiny! I’m starving!”

“What?” I gasp, and then my eyes flare wide when I realize that the only thing I’ve seen Jackson eat was a couple of bites of cake last night from my fork when I offered them to him. “Jackson – when’s the last time you ate!?”

“Four days ago!”

“Jacks!” I gasp, my eyes wide. But then, before I can truly begin to smack at him, Jackson tosses me onto the bed and strides for the dresser where we keep our clothes.

“Let’s go!” He barks out, cheerful, tossing one of my uniforms at me. “I want some eggs! And toast! Jam – sausage – biscuits! I’m going to put bacon inside the pancakes and –”

The list goes on as the two of us get changed.

And as long as Jackson rambles on about all the breakfast food he’s going to devour, I don’t stop smiling once.

Jesse puts his head down, panting, and pushes harder to keep up with Rafe.

Because Jesses's fit, of course – he can beat almost anyone else in Warrior track now that Grant has left the school. But Rafe? He's always been faster. Still, if Jesse pushes a little more, he knows he can keep up-

But he gasps, almost falling on his ass to avoid slamming into Rafe, who has stopped suddenly in the middle of the forest path that they run every morning.

“Rafe, what the hell!” Jesse stumbles out, tripping over his feet as he works hard to stay upright. “Why did you

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Rafe turns towards him, the stern set of his mouth, the hurt and anger in his eyes suddenly putting a stop to Jesse's entire train of thought.

“Rafe...” Jesse pants, going still. “What's...wrong?”

“I tried,” Rafe says, his voice low and devastated. “I kept it in this entire time that Ari's been sick, and away, because she needed us – ”

“Kept what in?”

“It, Jess,” Rafe snaps, turning fully towards his cousin now and taking a step towards him. “The fucking truth. But I can't do it anymore – now that Ari's doing better – now that she doesn't need my constant vigilance – I can't – ”

“Rafe,” Jesse says, stepping towards his cousin, not understanding. “What is it? What -”

“What the fuck are you doing sleeping with Daphne!?”

Jesse's jaw drops open as he stares at Rafe, whose grim face looks ready to kill.

How? How...how the fuck does Rafe know about...him and Daphne?

“Did you think you got one over on me, Jess?” Rafe growls, storming forward and forcing Jesse to take several shaky steps back. “Showing up like that, after Ariel had been rejected, when you were supposed to be watching her? Fucking smelling all over of the girl I'm in love with, your clothes all fucked up!? Did you think I was just too fucking stupid to notice that?”

Jesse just stares at Rafe, his heart sinking, because he – he doesn't think Rafe would be too stupid to notice that. No, it was him, Jesse, who was the stupid one –

He didn't even fucking think of it – didn't even realize he'd just wanted to get upstairs as fast as possible, to get to Ariel's side –

Because Rafe's right, he was supposed to be watching her. The whole thing had been his fault.

Guilt sweeps through him absolutely, from head to foot.

"Rafe," Jesse says, his head tilting to the side, his voice pleading.

"What the fuck, Jess!?" Rafe shouts, his voice breaking on his cousin's name as he grabs Jesse's collar, hauling him closer. "How could you do this to me!?"

"Rafe," Jesse says again, grief in his voice, his shoulders slumping as he puts his hands up, giving in to the larger Alpha, the man with the moral high ground here. "It's not like that -"

"So, what, you're not fucking her?" Rafe's words are a snarl as his rare anger finally starts to take pride of place in his heart, his mind.

Jesse's eyes narrow. "Stop saying it like that."

Rafe goes still, staring at him. "What the fuck did you just say to me?"

Jesse's arm sweeps up, knocking Rafe's aside, making him drop his collar. "It's not like that, Rafe. It's a gross way of describing it - I'm not fucking her. I'm in love with her. Daphne and I are together -"

"No," Rafe growls, his own face shutting down as rage begins to brew in his chest. "That's fucking bullshit, Jesse."

"It's not!" Jesse shouts, stepping forward to Rafe, hating his cousin for a moment for doubting this single thing that means the most to him in the world. "I'm going to fucking marry her - she's my -"

"Your mate!?" Rafe bites out, livid. "You're a fucking liar, Jess!"

"She is!"

"She so fucking is not!" Rafe sputters out a mocking laugh, just staring at Jesse. "If she was your mate you'd have told fucking everyone the moment you met her! You'd have been crowing it from the rooftops! Not watching me bring her home to meet my family at Midwinter -"

"Our family," Jesse growls, stepping back and crossing his arms. "And Ariel fucking brought her, not you -"

"Oh whatever, Jess, you're not her fucking mate." Livid, Rafe turns on his heel, unable to believe that Jesse would ask him to believe such a blatant lie.

“I think I’d fucking know!” Jesse shouts, storming after him. “It’s my life —”

“There is no bond!” Rafe shouts, turning back towards him. When Jesse’s steps slow, his mouth drawing to a thin line, Rafe laughs and crosses his arms. “Go ahead, Jess. Tell me there’s a bond. Honestly, say it, truthfully, and I’ll believe you. I’ll get on my knees and beg forgiveness.”

Jesse glares, raising his chin. But he doesn’t say a word.

“That’s what I fucking thought,” Rafe growls, pointing a finger in Jesse’s face. “If she was a mate a bond would have snapped into place, that’s how it works Jesse -”

“That’s not how it worked in my family!” Jesse snarls, smacking Rafe’s hand away. “Dad and mom’s bond took ages – they didn’t know – he went on faith for months, but he knew it was true, he – ”

Rafe gapes at Jesse before he breaks in, enraged. “That’s completely different, Jess! Your mom is human – her wolf hadn’t awoken! The moment her wolf woke up the bond snapped into place! You and Daphne have wolves! You’d know!”

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Jesse gathers himself up, all of his pride, all of his conviction steeled in his core. “She’s my fucking mate Rafe. And I’m sorry if you don’t like it, if you have feelings for her? But she’s mine. I’m in love with her, and I’m going to marry her, and I’m sorry we didn’t tell you -”

“What fucking ever, Jesse, you’re so fucking pathetic,” Rafe snaps, turning again and stalking back towards the Castle. “Pathetic!” Jesse storms after him.

“You never should have touched her, Jess,” Rafe growls, glancing over his shoulder. “I have feelings for that girl. You should have respected that.”

“I tried,” Jesse pleads, chasing after Rafe’s long stride, grabbing for his cousin, desperate to get him to turn, to talk to him again. “Rafe, if she wasn’t my mate – ”

“Oh, would you fucking lay off of that stupid mate bullshit!?” Rafe shouts, shoving Jesse to the side when he walks next to him. “She’s not your mate, you’re just fucking into her because I was into her first, like you always are with these girls -”

Jesse stops in his tracks, staring after Rafe, appalled again.

Realizing that Jesse's not following, Rafe turns about ten feet further down the path, glaring hard at his cousin, not willing to let it end there. "You're just fucking with her, Jess, because you're desperate to be even with me. You did it with Lindsey and Kristy too – you can't stand not to pick a girl up after I've finished with her –"

"I" Jesse sputters, pressing a hand to his chest. "I'm fucking with her!? I'm fucking with Daphne!?"

"Yes," Rafe growls, taking three cruel steps closer. "You're messing with her head if you know you have a mate out there, lying to her, pretending it's going to work –"

"That's what you were doing!" Jesse shouts, appalled, sweeping a hand out to encompass Rafe's whole hypocritical self. "That's like – exactly what you were doing!"

"I never told the girl I was going to marry her," Rafe growls, pressing a hand to his chest. "Plus, I never slept with her! And we broke it off!"

"You didn't break it off, Daphne dumped you!" Jesse shouts, his voice ringing out through the forest as he stares at his cousin, stunned at his level of hypocrisy. "And I am not lying to her – she's my fucking mate, whether or not you decide to believe me!"

"You know the only real reason you want Daphne to be your mate, Jess?" Rafe says, stalking towards him, shaking his head with pity he forces himself to feel, even if his wolf is howling with jealousy and hurt pride. "Is because it's the first time, ever, that a girl has dumped me and told you that she liked you more. And you're kissing her ass for it because you've been hungry for that your whole life. And you know it will never happen ever again."

Jesse's face goes pale and falls slack.

Rafe seethes, staring into his cousin's eyes, his chest pounding with his rage.

But when Jesse fails to move, fails to make a noise, Rafe checks himself, standing straight, his own face falling when he realizes that he has gone too far.

"Fuck you, Rafe," Jesse says, his voice shaking with hurt and rage.

Jesse works hard to clench his jaw but finds that he can't do it. His mouth is trembling too hard.

"Jess –" Rafe holds out a hand towards his cousin, deeply aware that he's crossed a bridge he never, ever wanted to cross. That he's said the words his cousin has maybe been waiting for, and fearing, his entire life.

"No," Jesse says, shaking his head, his eyes filling with tears. "You said it. Now own it. Because you're fucking right."

All of Rafe's anger leaves him in a rush and he stares at his cousin, agonized at what he just did. At what he let his stupid rage lead him to saying words he didn't even fucking mean to his best friend in the world, just because he lost his temper and wanted – so badly – to hurt him in turn.

“Do you think it's been easy for me?” Jesse asks Rafe, wiping hard at his eyes with his sleeve, desperate not to cry in front of his cousin but failing immediately at the task. “Growing up in your shadow? Standing next to you – the perfect Prince – my entire life? Being compared to you at every turn – in athletics, in academics, in looks, in charm, in ability, and yeah – in success with women? And always, always coming up short?”

Rafe stands straight, watching his cousin back away, hating himself.

“And I have never resented you for that Rafe – because I fucking love you. I celebrate you every day – all of your successes, and victories, and accomplishments, because I think you're fucking great and you're my cousin and my best friend. You're my fucking brother. But did you ever think about what it was like for me? Did you ever consider that this is why I feel like I have to be funny all the time – because to get anyone to even look at me next to you I had to become your jester, your fucking clown?”

Jesse shakes his head, sniffing hard, trying desperately to stand straight.

“She is the first person who has seen beyond that,” Jesse says, pointing out towards the Castle where Daphne is. “Or at least, the first person outside of our family to see something in me that doesn't pale in comparison to you. So excuse me if, yes, I run towards that, if I rejoice in finding someone who sees something good in me and want to hold on to it forever. Someone who wants to be with me for who I am, for what I have to offer.”

“Jesse, I – ”

“No, fuck you Rafe,” Jesse snaps, cutting Rafe off with a sharp shake of his head. “Because it doesn't kill me that she liked you first, I'm fucking used to that in my life. This whole thing,” he gestures around at the forest, “this entire fight is happening because it's killing you that she had you kneeling at her feet and she still decided that she likes me better. You can't stand that – you can't stand one person on this earth not choosing you.”

Rafe hangs his head, devastated, wondering if Jesse is right. If he's that arrogant, that conceited.

“You could have just let me have this one, Rafe,” Jesse says, his voice flat and fading as he turns. “You have literally...everyone else.”

Jesse walks away.

Leaving Rafe completely alone.

When Jackson and I walk into the breakfast hall, Ben basically jumps to his feet, nearly dropping his coffee cup in his attempt to get up from the table and across to me as fast as he can. But he doesn't have to go far, because I'm already dashing to him by the time he opens up his arms and wraps me up.

"Oh god, Ari," he murmurs, holding me tight and rocking me back and forth, his cheek pressed to my cap. "I'm so, so relieved to see you awake – and walking – and clothed –"

I laugh as he releases me, but I don't miss that his eyes drop to my neck. But there's nothing to see there – just before we left a package came up from Daphne with a little cylinder of black fabric that I can wear around my neck like a tube scarf. When tucked into the collar of my cadet uniform, it really does just look like a turtle neck. It's not precisely uniform regulation, but ubiquitous enough to pass most notice.

Unless, you know, you're the one who found me naked and bleeding from my neck in someone's dorm room a couple of days ago. Then, you notice.

Jackson lets out a possessive little snarl as he catches up to me, but he murmurs an apology to Ben when Benny looks up at him with a little bit of fear. "I'm on overdrive," Jackson murmurs, holding up a hand to him. "Ignore me."

"Plus he's hungry," I say, beaming up at Ben.

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"I know, meals have been lonely," Ben murmurs, gesturing around at the empty table. My heart sinks as I look around at it, because even if Rafe and Jesse aren't back from their run yet – there are still two seats that aren't going to be filled anymore. Tears fill my eyes and Ben sighs, leading me the last few steps to a chair next to Jackson, settling on my other side. "Oh, I'm sorry, Ari," he murmurs, shaking his head as I wipe at my cheeks. "Don't think on it much. It's too hard."

I nod, knowing that he's right, exhaling hard and closing my eyes for a moment as I force myself to think of other things. Um, is there coffee?"

"Sure is, whole pot since we beat Jesse here," Ben murmurs, beginning to pour. Jackson puts a warm hand on my knee as I open my eyes and force a smile to my lips, watching the pretty brown liquid splash into my cup.

I send a warm pulse of affection to Jacks and chat with Ben as I sip slowly at my coffee, giving my heart a minute to settle as Jackson digs into basically...everything on the table,

even as he signals the waiter and orders mountains more. The waiter balks a bit, flicking his eyes to me to check and see if Jackson is actually serious about the amount of food that he's ordering. I just shrug, kind of implying that my sweetheart mate, bottomless pit that he is, is of sound mind and probably wants precisely what he orders.

The waiter nods, a little stunned, but walks back towards the kitchens. As he does, my eyes move to the hall's door to see Jesse walking in, his face stern and drawn. Rafe follows about twenty feet behind, looking pale and...

And god, devastated.

"What happened?" I breathe, looking up into Jesse's face the moment he comes to the table.

"Nothing," he snaps, sitting down next to Jacks and reaching for the coffee.

When I open my mouth to push he just glances at me, pleading and serious, for a long moment. And I shut my mouth, turning towards my brother as he comes to the table.

"Are you okay, Rafe?" I ask, watching carefully as he settles in next to Ben – as far from Jesse as he can get.

Rafe just nods, curt, and keeps his eye on his plate, not reaching for any food at all, his hands folded in his lap.

Ben gulps and looks at me, anxious.

Jackson just ignores everything, or doesn't notice in the first place, tucking into the pile of food that's delivered to his seat a few moments later.

"Shit," Jesse murmurs, glancing at Jackson's plate, I think forcing humor into his voice for the rest of us. "Can I have a bite?" Jackson growls and wraps a protective arm around the plate, hunching over it. "Get your own."

And I can't help it – I laugh, even if I'm the only one at the table to do it.

The entire breakfast goes...precisely like that. Rafe quiet and still, Jesse drinking coffee and adding a quip or two, each of them half-hearted. Jackson just eats a rather astonishing amount of food while Ben and I chat quietly, picking at the scraps of the muffin basket that Jackson left behind. My poor Benny does his best, but not even he can drag my eyes away from the two empty seats across from me.

Because I know, if they were here, it would be different.

No part of me wants to see Luca right now, not really – but he was an important part of this group right from the start. What are we going to do without his brash comments, his swagger and cheer?

And Tony – he'd cut through all of this weird awkward silence between Rafe and Jesse, call everyone on their bullshit. He had such...courage.

Jackson stops eating when he senses my sadness, wiping his mouth and looking over at me. "Do you need to get out of here?" he asks quietly, meaning it – like he'll drop everything, his entire day and lessons and responsibilities to go back to the room and sit with me if that's what I want.

"No," I sigh. "We have to get back to normal sometime."

"Ari," Ben asks, his odd tone drawing my attention back to him. "What even...is normal anymore for you?"

"Hmm?" I ask. I mean, I have no idea how to answer that question anyway, but what is he talking about?

"I mean, you're not an Espionage Cadet anymore," he says, screwing his face up. "And even if you were...you're the only one here," he casts out a hand towards the rest of the breakfast hall where, indeed, I see no familiar Espionage faces.

God, they must all be in Atalaxia.

Or...worse.

My heart sinks.

"So," Ben continues. "What are your...classes?"

My eyes go wide. "I honestly don't know."

"We'll take you to the Captain," Rafe says, clearing his throat and speaking for the first time. "Get your new schedule. I imagine you'll be with us."

I nod, recognizing this, especially if I'm...on Command track now? I mean, is that even true? Am I...a Warrior cadet? My tongue sticks out a little involuntarily, because I don't like that. I liked being espionage – I liked my studies, plus it was...cool. "Well, looks like we don't have to bring you anywhere," Jesse says, slumping back in his chair and looking over my shoulder. I turn, curious, my heart sinking when I see the Captain striding decidedly our way.

"Oh hell," Jackson sighs, setting down his fork and turning grimly his way too. "What is this about?"

“You five,” the Captain barks out, looking around at our table. “With me. Now.”

“What’s going on?” Rafe asks, wary as he gets to his feet.

“You’ll find out in a moment,” the Captain snaps, turning away and expecting us all to fall in line behind him, which we do, with me at the center of the little group. “You have a call waiting for you.”

Rafe and I glance at each other, because we know that a call can only mean one thing.

Our parents have something to tell us.

“Hi! Hi cuties!” Mom’s voice rings out the moment the five of us troop into the room. The Captain enters too, going to stand out of sight in the corner. “It’s so good to see you, I – oh!”

I frown when I see her go a bit still on the video screen, seated there next to Cora with dad and Roger standing behind them, bending down so that their faces are in the frame.

“What’s wrong, mom?” I ask.

“It’s not what’s wrong with me, it’s what’s wrong with those two.” She narrows her eyes and looks interestedly between Rafe and Jesse, who come to stand behind me. “What’s wrong, boys?”

Neither Rafe nor Jesse say a word, each looking away. Cora grimaces, worried.

“There’s no time for this,” dad sighs, shaking his head and likewise peering at us from the screen as Jackson goes to one knee at my side and Ben leans down on my other. “We have to –”

“Why are you all dressed up?” I ask, tilting my head, frowning at them. Every single one of them are in state dress, dad and Roger with black sashes across their chest. But why would they –

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My mouth falls open as I realize what it must be.

“Funeral got moved to today, sweetie,” mom says, leaning forward to peer at me. “We’re sorry – we knew you’d want to attend, but your father wanted you at school.”

“And we’re leaving for the front immediately after,” dad snaps, nodding seriously to all of us. “And we want the five of you there.”

My eyes go wide as I glance up at Rafe and Jesse, who look at each other for the first time. Whatever’s going on between them, they’re clearly putting it aside for the sake of the war.

“What’s going on, dad?” Rafe says.

“Atalaxia is moving against us, hard,” Roger answers, his arms tense across his chest.

“With what looks like everything they’ve got. We didn’t expect an assault like this so soon but...if we don’t meet them on the field they’re going to bowl us right over. We even risk...” he sighs, pressing the bridge of his nose between his fingers. “This is classified, so please don’t share, but we risk having our borders breached for the first time. And if that happens it will be...disastrous.”

I go very pale and very still. “We’ll get on the helicopter,” I say, nodding seriously. “Right now.” Because I can turn it – I can do that – I’m very powerful, they can put me at the center of the force and

The way my father looks at me through the screen makes me pause, and then I reach for Jackson’s hand, wanting him close, needing it. He’s there, instantly, grasping my hand right back. My parents eyes see it – I know they do – and a little smile comes to my mom’s lips.

But dad speaks what we’re all thinking. “Can you do it, Ariel?” he asks quietly. “Without Luca there – what are your powers like?”

“I – I don’t know,” I whisper, shaking my head, my gaze shifting to Cora, who looks stern and contemplative.

“I think we have to go too, Roger,” Cora murmurs, keeping her eyes on me. “Ella and I will need to experiment with Ariel to see what she’s capable of. But even without the wind, the flames and the shadow combined should be formidable.”

Dad sighs, scraping his hand down the length of his face, but then he nods. “All right. Kids, are you agreed?”

“Yes sir,” Rafe says, answering for the rest of us, who just nod. “We understand. We’ll be on the battlefield as soon as you need us.”

“Good,” dad says on a sigh. “We’re going to go. We’ll see you soon. We...” he hesitates now, and I see a muscle flicker in his cheek. “We love you very much.”

“We love you too, dad,” I say, leaning forward, eager for him to know and understand it. “All of you. You can count on us.”

“You probably have an hour to pack,” he says, nodding once. “Helicopter on the roof.” Then he leans forward, flicking off the screen.

The five of us exhale, looking around at each other as the Captain comes forward from the corner of the room. “Are you ready for this?” he asks, tense. “This isn’t a trial or a place-filler, like the last battle was supposed to be. If you five don’t have your heads on right, I’m not sending you to get killed. So if they’re not, you tell me now.”

My four Alphas turn to me as I steadily hold the Captain’s gaze. “We’re ready,” I say, soft and sure, and my wolf howls proud in my heart. Because even if there’s still pain, and even if I am still finding my feet amongst all this grief, my nation needs me now.

And god damn it, but I’m going to show up.

The Captain nods once and sends us on our way.

Jackson keeps his eyes on Ariel the entire walk back to the room. Ben splits off at his floor, going to quickly pack a bag, but Ariel and Jesse walk close together, murmuring about possibilities for the magic now that Luca’s gone, discussing honestly if they need to switch things around – if he should be sending out his shadows with the flames tracing through them, rather than the reverse, which they’ve been doing so far.

But Jackson barely hears it, because he knows whatever they decision they come to is fine with him. Whatever power Ariel needs on the battlefield he’ll give it, and more – no matter what the configuration.

No, what matters to him now is keeping her safe.

We have to destroy them all, his wolf says, wary, his lips peeling back to bare his fangs. All of Atalaxia – anyone who would hurt her – they must be ended, immediately –

Jackson sighs and puts a hand over his wolf’s ruff to calm him. It’s not that he thinks the wolf is precisely wrong...his wolf has been...trouble over the past few days. Going into over-drive, ready to attack anything at the slightest sign of trouble. It’s been difficult, keeping him in check.

Rafe wordlessly strides ahead down the hallway to their room, pushing open the door and moving in. Jesse and Ariel follow, Jackson bringing up the rear, thinking over what these past days have been like – how incredibly, incredibly had it had been to play it cool when Ariel took that bandage off her neck this morning and showed him Luca’s mark.

Because even if he had managed, somehow, miraculously, to hide his wolf's howling devastation and convince Ariel that it really had been fine –

The truth was that it really did feel like a knife to his heart, an absolute devastation.

We did the right thing, his wolf snarls, looking up at Jacks, pausing in his plans for world destruction. She needed to hear it was okay. That it will be okay.

Jackson nods, agreeing – because none of that was a lie. Jackson – he loves Ariel to the absolute ends of himself, and things will be fine. It's just...he exaggerated, just slightly, for her sake, just how fine he feels about Luca's mark on her body.

The real truth? When he saw the mark, he instantly regretted not killing that boy. Fought hard against the urge to leap up, and run to the capital, and tear him to pieces. He should have done it when he had the chance. Only stupid pity had held back his hand for that pathetic wretch of a man, that horrible excuse for a mate.

And yet here Jackson is, planning to kill all of Atalaxia and every threat to Ariel, when he can't even take out the one person who actually posed a threat to her safety? Who marked her and left her bare for the vultures to take?

God, can he even protect her at all? What good has he been in any of this? Ariel, she's suffered so much in the past week and at every turn Jacks has failed her – just completely failed to be there when she needed him. When Tony died, he hadn't been there. When Luca snatched her away from Daphne's room and took her to his own? Again, gone.

Jackson hangs his head, wondering how the hell he's going to manage this, how he –

“Whatever,” Jesse snaps, slamming his dresser drawer shut. Jackson's head snaps up, distracted from his terrible thoughts. He glances down at Ariel pressed close to his side and frowns, watching Jesse stride for the door.

“What's happening?” Jackson murmurs. “Why's he...mad?” Ariel grimaces as she looks up at him.

“Jesse!” Rafe snaps, striding after him. “You're being a fucking fool! We have work to do -”

“I'm going to see Daphne,” Jesse bites out, shoving Rafe hard away from him. “You try to stop me and I'll break your damn arm.”

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Jackson's eyes go wide. What – what the hell? These two never fight – and what the hell does Daphne have to do with it?

“Jess!” Rafe barks out as Jesse leaves, flipping Rafe the middle finger as he goes.

Then Rafe, growling, storms back to his own sleeping area and begins furiously pulling his dresser drawers open, not seeming to get much done but needing the distraction of having something rather violent to do.

“What...what is happening?” Jackson murmurs, tearing his eyes away from the Prince and looking down at Ariel, worried.

“Oh, puppy,” she sighs, beaming up at him and squeezing his hand. “Come help me pack, I’ll explain everything.” “Pack?” he says, grinning down at her, unable to help it. Then he snarls and snatches her up into his arms. “Pack!? I have nothing to pack – you’re my only luggage, tiny – I’ll zip you up in a bag right now -”

She shouts with laughter that goes right to Jackson's heart, makes everything actually feel okay, makes war and devastation and death and the thought of losing her feel very, very far away. Jackson laughs too, falling with her onto the bed as she quickly begins to explain a very baffling story about Jesse and Daphne somehow being in love.

But even as his mouth falls open in surprise, Jackson only half listens. Because his heart and his soul are elsewhere, on other thoughts.

We have to mark her, his wolf growls, pacing back and forth in his soul as Jackson's eyes fall to her neck, to that spot he's been thinking of for months, even if it's covered now with black fabric. We should do it now.

Patience, Jacks murmurs, running a comforting hand over his wolf's raised hackles. She has to be ready. It has to be right. She can't have two bad experiences being marked – I'm not going to ruin this just because we're impatient.

No time for patient, his wolf growls, shaking out his fur, anxious. Now. We have to do it now, before it's again too late.

Jackson just grits his teeth, forcing himself back to the moment, ignoring his wolf and concentrating on his girl.

Who is, after all, the center of the entire world.

Ariel grins up at him. "You've been lost in your thoughts, haven't you, pup?" She runs a soft hand through his hair and Jackson smiles, leaning into it.

"All thoughts of you," he murmurs, utterly truthful.

She beams. "Good thoughts?"

"Every single one." He dips his head and presses a soft kiss to those perfect lips.

Jesse leans back against Daphne's pillows in her tiny bed and shuts his eyes, the weight of her against his chest a balm to his entire soul. Mittens purrs softly, a little ball of fur happily curled up on the upper ridge of the headboard.

"So," Daphne sighs, her voice weary. "Rafe...knows."

"Rafe knows," Jesse confirms, dour. "I fucked up. Badly."

"We should have told him," she murmurs, closing her own eyes and nuzzling closer, tugging his neat Cadet shirt out of his pants and slipping her hand beneath so that her palm rests flat against his stomach. She exhales softly, relishing the touch.

"It wouldn't have been any better," he murmurs, shaking his head. "Any way that Rafe found out, no matter how, he was going to be pissed as hell about it. Bro code and everything – in his head, you're off-limits to me because he had you first." "Jesse that's ridiculous Alpha bullshit," Daphne sighs, lifting her head and resting her chin against his chest to peer up at him. "I'm not an object that's given permission for or forbidden – I'm a whole person with my own emotions –"

"I know, Daph," he says, opening his eyes and looking down at her, running his hand over her lovely, soft hair. "Don't let it bother you, love. It will all blow past." He steels himself, because even if his wolf is still raging a bit at all the things Rafe said, he doesn't want Daphne to be mad about it. No, his cousin is his business to handle, not hers to stress about.

"Do you think he'll get used to it?" she whispers, anxious.

Jesse sighs and moves, pulling Daphne close to him and turning onto his side so that they're face to face. He loops one arm around her back with which to hold her tight and the other, a bit unable to help it, slips low, his hand gently cupping her ass.

She grins and shakes her head at him, thinking that he can't even help it when they're having a serious chat, but not minding – not really. Not at all. He just shrugs like why wouldn't he, while he still has the chance.

"He'll have to get used to it, won't he?" Jesse murmurs, pressing a kiss to her cheek and then her nose and then her mouth. "Once we're married – even before that – he's going to

see us together and have to deal with it. I'm sorry I haven't gotten the ring yet – it's been so crazy, but the minute we get back to the city – ”

“Jess,” she whispers, hesitant, making him go still.

“What is it?” he asks, peering at her.

“Are you are you serious about that?”

He blinks at her, then frowns. “Did you think I wasn't?”

“No, I think you are, I just...” she shrugs, looking down, smoothing and hand down over the fabric covering his chest. “I just love you a lot and you keep talking about marriage and rings – but that's all very...human, you know? And I'm a wolf.”

He smiles a little, honestly relieved.

“Do you want my mark?”

She looks back up at him through her lashes, blushing, because – well, it's ridiculous, right? They've been dating for like a couple of weeks at best – how can she want it like this, this fast, when there's no bond –

But she's sure – absolutely sure even if her wolf is not, and her wolf is coming around to the idea, honestly, that maybe it's just his half human heritage, that the bond will come and they can go and ask the Goddess what's up when this has all settled down.

Because everything is else is so real, and so vivid. In her heart she knows it's him, knows it has to be. How...how could it be anyone else?

“Yes, Jess,” she whispers, smiling a little, laughing. “Yes, I want it – but -”

He snarls, laughing too, rolling her over in the bed, reaching for her shirt buttons. “Cool, let's do it now -”

“Jesse!” She bursts out laughing.

“I'm serious, I've got like fifteen minutes, and it's just a little bite – I can do that in four seconds -”

She laughs harder now, knowing that he's not completely serious, even if...well, if she agreed to it right now that it might happen. Both of them – she knows he feels precisely the same – they're both just...a little swept away by each other. But Daphne just shakes her head, taking his handsome face between her palms, the aftershock of laughter running through her.

“No, Jess,” she says with a happy sigh. “You know I want it to be right. And you do too. Not on a sewing break in the few minutes before I send you away to war, of all things.”

“But it’s settled,” he says, looking at her quite seriously, all the love in his heart clear on his face. “We’ll make some time in the upcoming weeks to go away, be alone. And we’ll do it both ways. A mark and a ring.”

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“A mark and a ring,” she says, smiling a little, absolutely perfectly happy. And then she leans in, pressing her mouth to his, closing her eyes and kissing him with everything she’s got. They lose themselves to each other for a long few moments, burying their grief, their worries about family, their anxieties about war in their mutual happiness which right now feels strong enough to sweep through the entire world and make everything right.

Which is why neither of them notice as the room slowly fills with smoke.

Smoke, or shadow, that seeps in like a rage, pulsing and growing and flickering with a horrible blue light. And at the center of it all a very small form made of darkness itself, her breath heaving in her chest.

Mittens gives a horrible little mew of fear just a moment before the darkness moves.

“Mine,” the darkness snarls, storming forward, reaching out a claw-tipped hand to grab at Daphne’s shoulder and haul her back, pulling her away from Jesse.

Daphne gasps and then screams at the form before her, a tiny female form with dark pits for eyes, a hole from her mouth from which horror and shadows fall with every breath, every word.

“He. Is. Mine.”

The darkness slashes its claws once across Daphne’s face, leaving three long streaks of blood. She screams as Jesse roars leaping for the girl at the center of the darkness, grabbing her neck in his hand.

But the girl made of darkness just smiles at him, stepping into his rage and fear and anger like an embrace, even as he tightens the hand around her neck.

“Mine,” she says again, smiling up at him like he’s perfect as Daphne screams in horror and fear and pain. “You’re mine. Not hers. Mine!”

And then she wraps her arms around him, and vanishes away, taking smoke and boy with her.

Silence.

It echoes in the room alongside Daphne’s panting breath.

Quite suddenly the room is precisely how it was not thirty seconds before, calm and quiet.

Except Daphne’s face stings with pain. And she trembles, looking around frantically for Jesse, raising a shaking hand to her cheek. Her fingertips come away red with blood but she can’t even think about it because Jesse –

He’s not here –

He’s gone completely gone – without a trace –

Shaking now, Daphne runs her eyes again around the room because he – he can’t just be gone – he has to be here.

But somehow, impossible as it is, she’s wrong.

Daphne is alone in the room now. Alone with a little cat made of shadow, who stares at her with wide, shocked round eyes. Mittens and Daphne stare at each other for a horrified moment before Daphne snatches the tiny cat from the headboard and dashes for the door, hauling it open and shouting frantically for Rafe and Ari and Jackson and Ben as she sprints through the halls of the Castle.

Jackson and Rafe stand up straight, their Alpha hearing picking up Daphne’s sobbing shouts before I do. But the moment I hear her I go very still, my eyes going wide as they snap for the door. Rafe’s already moving towards it, yanking it open just as Daphne reaches it, stumbling into the room with one hand raised, Mittens clutched to her chest with the other.

“Daphne!” Rafe gasps, staring at her, shocked. Jackson and I are already moving too, and somehow I get to her first, gasping in fear, reaching for her bleeding cheek.

“Daphne, what happened?” I whisper, wrapping one arm around Daphne’s waist and pulling her against me as Jacks moves to look up and down the hall, already growling protectively, and looking out for whatever threat was chasing here. “Rafe, get the first-aid kit ”

–

“Where’s Jesse?” Rafe growls. And I gasp, realizing his point – that something must truly be wrong – because Jesse would never, ever leave her like this – would never let her go running through the halls unless –

“She – she took him -” Daphne gasps out as Jackson steps back into the room and slams the door shut. Daphne’s head spins to look at us all at once. I loosen my arms and she takes a step back, her whole body trembling as she cries. “The girl – the darkness she took him -”

“Took Jesse?” I whisper, horrified and confused.

“Where?” Rafe snarls.

But Daphne just frantically shakes her head, clutching Mittens with both hands now. “I don’t know! She appeared out of nowhere in all this shadow and smoke and then she kept saying ‘mine!’ and then she took him – and then they disappeared – and -”

Daphne’s words fail her and she just stands, staring between us all, trembling.

Jackson and Rafe burst into action as I again step forward and wrap my friend in my arms, cradling her against me, doing everything I can to assure her that it’s okay – that everything’s all right – even though it absolutely, definitively is not.

Jacks strides across the room for the first-aid kit as Rafe turns on his heel and moves for his dresser, where the cell phone he used all week to keep tabs on me is still sitting. Instantly he makes the hall to our parents, explaining everything he can in as few words as he can.

That Jesse was taken – we don’t know by whom – we don’t know where –

Then his eyes go wide and he locks them with mine as Jackson comes close, reaching for Daphne with some gauze in his hand, wanting to clean the three long cuts across her cheek.

“What do you mean?” Rafe says, low and slow. “That Jesse was taken...too?”

My breath stops in my chest as I stare at my brother and watch horror sweep through his expression, watch his fingers sink deep in his hair as he listens to whatever our father is saying.

“Juniper,” he whispers.

Jackson’s hand falls and the three of us freeze, staring over at Rafe at the mention of my sister’s name.

“Juniper...is also gone? Vanished?”

My stomach goes cold as I stare at my brother, who stares back at me, as one question echoes between us.

What the fuck is happening to our family?

Things move incredibly fast after that, so much so that I can barely keep my head. Jackson and Rafe demonstrate their coolness in a time of extreme confusion and panic much more than Daphne and I. Even Ben responds with cool action when we tell him and he joins us in the room.

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Jackson keeps me close to his side the entire time, a hand on me at least at every turn as we get my father's order to come to the camp as planned, to bring Daphne. And while I would usually find it annoying to have someone shepherding me along like that, I'm so incredibly grateful that Jacks is constantly there, tensed and ready, his eyes wary. Because I keep getting worried that I, too, am going to be snatched out of thin air like both Jesse and Juniper did –

On the same day –

The same day that Atalaxia is moving against us with extreme force –

But why?

Even as the helicopter lifts off and moves through the air, and Daphne sniffs next to me with Mittens clutched in her arms, and Rafe and Ben talk quietly on the other side, and Jackson sits stoic with his hand on my knee...

I just can't figure it out.

Jesse, I get – I understand why Atalaxia would take one of our magical warriors on the day of battle.

But...Junie!? Why the hell would the enemy want her!?

Was it even Atalaxia? Do they have that kind of power, to just come into our world and...snatch us up? And if it wasn't Atalaxian forces that took her, was it, instead, the God of Darkness who said her name so many weeks ago, like a purr and a promise and a prayer?

But if Darkness wanted June...why the hell did he take Jesse too!?

I groan, dipping my head into my hands, unable to figure it out. Jackson's hand tightens on my leg and I do my best to send him my gratitude, but my whole soul is agony and worry.

Two more.

Two more. I – I can't lose two more people I love – not like this- not so close on the tail of Tony and Luca –

Not like this, but also not at all.

I grit my teeth and endure, hoping endlessly that my parents have answers when we get to the camp.

Unfortunately, when the helicopter lands just outside of the command tent and we all climb out, it's immediately clear that we still don't have any answers.

"Babies," my mom gasps, flying out of the tent the moment we set our feet on the ground and dashing for us. She grabs me first to her, sobbing into my hair with relief and fear, and I hold her only for a moment before she moves for Rafe. And then it's a mess of sad greetings as the five of us are ushered into the tent.

Poor Daphne is at the center of it all, with dad and Roger immediately converging on her, demanding details. She sputters them out with Mittens clutched tight in her arms, trying to help, but insisting that it was so dark and so strange and so fast that she doesn't know – she just doesn't know –

Even as I try to keep my focus on Daphne, I do a double-take, my mouth falling open at an argument that's occurring in the corner because...

"Oh, holy shit," Jackson whispers, wrapping an arm around me and pulling me close to his chest as we both stare, slack-jawed, at the Goddess's translucent form in the corner of the tent, arguing vehemently with her daughter.

"Well, if you would let me go," the Goddess says, a bit between her teeth, glaring at Cora. "I could go check on some things and see whether or not I can get more information!"

"No way," Cora growls, leaning forward, glaring hard at her mom. "We never, ever ask you for anything – you aren't going anywhere until you tell me where my son and my niece are –

"I already told you that he is somewhere in the Land of Darkness and she is in the Underworld – Juniper's voyage I understand, but Jesse's –"

“Land of Darkness?” I hear myself ask, stepping forward. The tent goes quieter as I cross to Cora’s side, staring up at the Goddess. “With like – with the three moons?”

“Hello, little daughter,” the Goddess says, her voice soft even if her face is drawn. She tilts her head and looks at me sadly. “I see that you have accessed your Dark gift, then, if you know of the moons.”

I nod eagerly. “I – I went there! I – I think I can go again! I can go now!”

I shut my eyes, wondering if I can just do it at will – I mean, if that’s where Jesse and Juniper are then –

But Jackson, growling, grabs my arm and snaps me back to the moment. I look up to see him slowly shaking his head no, forbidding it.

“Your mate is right to caution you,” the Goddess says with a sigh. “It’s his land, Ariel – with his minions. Even if you can travel back and forth, there’s nothing to say he hasn’t set a trap for you there.”

“What did she say?” mom demands, skittering to my side. Cora quickly translates as Daphne moves to stand next to me, her eyes wide and fascinated as she stares at the Goddess.

“You...you can see her?” I whisper, looking Daphne up and down.

Daphne turns to me for a split second, blinking. “You can’t?”

“No, I can see her,” I whisper to Daphne, frowning at her, wondering what magic pumps through her veins that allows her to see the Goddess. “Just...not everyone can.”

I look around to see that everyone has gathered around us, everyone’s faces drawn as Cora summarizes the Goddess’s words for those who cannot hear. Roger’s face breaks my heart – the worry and the agony on it. I tear my eyes away, unable to think about what he could possibly be experiencing with Jesse gone.

I don’t miss the way that dad slides his arm around Rafe’s shoulders, wanting him close, even as he tucks his own worry for Juniper away somewhere deep.

“Yes, Ariel can go to the Land of Darkness,” the Goddess sighs, gesturing towards me once Cora has finished filling everyone in. “Which, I must emphasize, is different from the Underworld, where Juniper has been taken. Same planet but...” she shrugs as if it’s complicated. “Different realms.”

I cry out a little at the confirmation that Junie is really gone. “We have to help her,” I say, frantic, turning towards my mom, who pushes to my side and takes my hand, shaking her head.

“There’s nothing we can do,” she whispers to me. “June – oh, Ariel, Juniper acted like a real idiot -”

My eyes go wide because mom never, ever insults her children.

“She made a deal,” the Goddess intones, drawing my eyes back to her. “With my horrible stepson, the God of Death. She is wound up in a complicated Game now but,” she shrugs, “I have sent her aid. You need to trust the girl to find her own way out.”

“Aid?” I ask, desperate for any good news. “What kind of aid?”

But the Goddess waves away the question, moving on. “My grandson,” she says, “I am much more concerned about. I have had no contact for or about him – this seems...entirely unplanned.” She sighs, worried, dropping her head. “All we know is that he is there, in the Land of Darkness, with his mate.”