

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

## **Read Chapter 301 -320**

### **Chapter 0301**

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At Luca's house, the company is really the thing that shines. His cousins and family are just so funny – they're also a little bit mean to each other, in a teasing, familial way, but every insult is lined with love and is so damn funny that I'm laughing until my sides ache.

And of course, my sides aching makes it difficult to get down all of the food that's pressed in my hands. But considering how delicious it is, I definitely prevail in my quest to eat absolutely everything. God, I'm not sure I've ever eaten so much or so well. There's plate after plate of pasta, and meat, and seafood – and then the sweets! Cookies, and little slices of coffee-soaked pastries, and gran's coffee cake, served with coffee – which is a good addition, considering how many tiny glasses of clear liquor I've been passed and drank. I've never had it before, but it's delicious, and tastes like licorice.

"Ugh, how are you not fat," I groan, leaning against Luca on the couch as one of his cousins takes what is probably my ninth plate away. Luca grins and slips an arm around my shoulders.

"I know, it's the greatest disappointment of Gran's life that she can't fatten me up," he murmurs, smiling around the room at the family he so clearly loves, who shout and joke and play with each other. "If it were up to her I'd be like...a little beachball, unable to get up off this couch, just hers to keep and pet and love and feed, as she likes to do."

My eyes drift to the little fat dog that sits on the back of the couch behind Luca in what is clearly his habitual spot, his tongue lolling happily out of his mouth and his legs sticking out comfortably from his belly. "You mean like Valentino, over there?" I point at the adorable old pup and Luca bursts into laughter.

"Yes," he says, nodding and tightening his arm around me, "just like Valentino, her favorite son."

I smile up at Luca, buzzing with happiness, completely charmed by all of this. "I like your family," I whisper. "They're really great."

“Your family now too,” he murmurs, dropping his head a bit to press a kiss to my mouth. “The girls are all really excited. They want me to leave you alone with them so they can have a good gossip with you – but I told them not tonight.”

“I can do that tonight!” I say, sitting up, eager, and looking around. “I miss girlfriends. Where are they all? I’ll go now.”

Luca just laughs and lifts his chin towards the clock on the wall. “Little late for that, Princess,” he says with a sigh. “It’s midnight.”

“It is?” I gasp, my eyes going wide as I follow his gaze. I shake my head, awed, because I can’t believe it’s that late. And then I gasp again, spinning back to Luca. “Oh no, you should go to bed! Luca!” I put my hands on his chest, desperately sorry to have kept him up – he has a huge day tomorrow! He should already be asleep!

“Don’t,” Luca whispers, smiling and shaking his head, bringing his face close enough that our noses nearly brush. “This was way better than sleep. I loved having you here, Ariel, it was so important to me.” He lifts a hand to brush his knuckles down the length of my cheek and I can’t help leaning forward to kiss him. I do my best to keep it chaste – I’m in his family’s house after all – but...well, it’s difficult, isn’t it?

Luca – he’s just so amazing, and confident and handsome and sweet. I can’t get enough.

He kisses me back for a long moment and then sighs as he breaks it, slipping his hand into mine.

“I should go,” I whisper.

“Want me to come back to the palace with you?” he asks quietly, a little hesitant – and as he asks I realize that part of Luca very much wants me to ask him to come back, even if it’s not what would be best for his fight tomorrow.

“No, sweetheart,” I say, shaking my head with a smile as I push back a little of the hair that’s fallen into his face. “You let your Gran tuck you in tonight. Tomorrow we’ll have more fun, after you win.”

Luca bursts into a grin at my confidence, and then he nods, because he knows that I’m right. But as he stands, offering a hand to pull me up with him, I know in my heart that if I did ask him to come to the palace with me tonight...he would have done it. And I’m not really sure what to do with that level of power over the nation’s champion.

## Chapter 0302

### Chapter 0302

We walk slowly to the front porch, murmuring our plans for tomorrow. His family lets me go with a few calls of goodbye, but without much fuss. I'm warmed by this – by the casual goodbye of family members who know they'll see you soon, and so don't need to make a big deal out of it. As we step onto the front porch though, Luca's grandmother calls him back, saying something in swift Itablio.

Luca sighs, hesitating but stepping away from me. "She wants you to take a slice of cake to Rafe - is that all right? I know it's ridiculous, but –"

"Of course I will," I say, laughing and pushing him towards her. "I'll call Captain Conner – you get the cake." Luca nods, smiling his dazzling smile at me, and then he steps back into the house with his Gran. I make a quick call to Conner, who let's me know he's just around the corner and will bring the car up.

I sigh happily, looking down the dark street, but I jump slightly when a shadow detaches itself from the corner of the porch and steps forward towards me. "Did you enjoy yourself tonight, miss Ariel?"

I press a hand to my heart, laughing a little at how skittish I am when I see that it's just Luca's uncle, who was out here enjoying a quiet cigarette. "Yes," I say, nodding when I get some of my equanimity back. "Your family is lovely – thank you so much for making me feel so warm and welcome."

"You are very welcome here," Bruce says, nodding evenly to me, and I can tell that he means it by the serious way he says it. "You're family now, and I'm glad we've let you know that. Even if I didn't think the party was a good idea."

My face falls a little. "You didn't?"

Bruce glances at me for a moment, perhaps takes in my crestfallen expression. "It's nothing about you, miss – you've been nothing but a lady tonight, and I'm grateful for it. Some of the girls that boy

brought home," he shakes his head contemplatively here, "...they were a mess. But you did very well. Still – I told him to hold off introducing you until after the fight – to just concentrate on what needed to be done. But he insisted." Bruce shrugs, like Luca's a problem he can't quite solve and has resigned himself to that fate. "And his mother and his gran indulged him, like they always do."

"I'm sorry," I say, shaking my head and feeling guilty – because as lovely as tonight was, perhaps Bruce is right. Luca should already be in bed, he should be thinking about the fight tomorrow, not me. It is a big deal to be boxing against the Atalaxian champion and...well. This party could have waited, couldn't it?

"I should have thought of that," I murmur, dropping my head to look at the wood of the porch.

"Well, perhaps you should have," Bruce murmurs, and I raise my head to look at him, my eyebrows raised. Because I meant it – I should have thought of Luca's responsibilities, should have encouraged him to delay the party. But...I didn't really expect Bruce to agree with me.

He looks at me evenly now, assessing me, his mouth pressed to a thin line.

"Do you mind, miss?" he says quietly, seriously. "If I say something true to you, that you might not want to hear?"

Anxious, but wanting to know, I nod.

Bruce nods quickly and then looks away into the dark. "Luca is a talented boy – ambitious, hardworking, and he's got a left hook like I've never seen. But his emotions run high – and he lets them. He's got a temper, which I'm sure you've seen –"

He glances at me and I eagerly nod my confirmation, which makes him smirk fondly and shake his head.

"The temper's just the start of it, though. He lets his emotions run him, sometimes, gets his damn heart into something and can't quit it even when it's not good for him. Or he quits something good because he got his feelings hurt. That's why I say he's been a damned fool with women – dates them all, loves some who treat him like crap, breaks up with others over the pettiest nonsense. But he lets it run him, lets it wreck him. He likes the intensity of it, I think – and that love for thrill and passion makes him a good boxer but..." he sighs, shaking his head, lost a bit in his thoughts. "It's not always wonderful for his career."

I turn my head to the side, suddenly confused because...

Is Luca's uncle suggesting, right now, that him being mated to me is bad for Luca's career!?

## Chapter 0303

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I'm quiet for a moment, thinking of the ways that Bruce's assessment of his nephew – who is so much more of a son to him – line up with my own experiences with my mate. It's true that Luca is emotional, though I'm not sure I'd have thought of him that way before now.

Luca's willful, and bossy, and controlling – and he can be a little petty when things go his way, like when he didn't talk to me after he found out, in the dream state, that I'm a girl. But I guess I never attributed all of that to Luca being hot-blooded, as it were. Of being someone who feels things so strongly that he has trouble controlling his intense reactions to them.

I turn my head for a moment, a little lost in my thoughts, because...well, because I think I've been thinking lately that Jackson is the more emotional of my two mates, deep down.

But secretly, is it Luca? Does he have an entire well of emotion that he likes to keep veiled under a thousand confident smiles and jokes?

God, how did I miss that?

"I hope we can rely on you," Bruce says quietly, again drawing my attention back to him. "To...help Luca."

"Of course you can," I say instantly, meaning it utterly as I link my hands earnestly behind my back.

"Yes," Bruce murmurs thoughtfully, studying me. "I can see that you're a good girl, Ariel – and I mean that. You're a nice young lady, you clearly care about my boy – you want to do right by him. And I appreciate and admire that for you. But...Luca has his own career, and his life, that I'm not sure lines up completely with yours."

My eyes go wide, because...what?

"Again, I don't think it's anything you've done," he says, drifting his hand through the air between us in an ameliorating way. "I just...well, you're a Princess, aren't you? And you've got mixed up in this Academy, just as he has. I told him not to do that – not to go joining the military, but he liked the idea of being a hero, of serving his nation." Bruce rolls his eyes a little here. "But he didn't really care about Moon Valley - what he liked was the fact that the magazines called him a hero. He didn't really –"

"I'm sorry," I say, interrupting a little and starting to get frustrated because – well, because I'm kind of getting the impression that I'm being a little insulted, frankly. "What does this have to do with me being good for him?"

"I'm sorry, you're right - I'm tired," Bruce says, sighing and dropping his head, collecting his thoughts. "What I mean to say is that...Luca has responsibilities." He lifts his head now, meeting my eyes. "He bought this house for his grandmother and his mother, which was a good thing to do. He bought that gym, too, and he pays for all of those boys to train there – got them all off the street. He gives them a monthly stipend, too, so they can afford to not work – to just train."

I go quite still because...I did not know that Luca did that.

Bruce nods, seeing my understanding now. "Luca's made money, and he's been successful, but his career has an end-date. He's young and he's strong now, but he's not going to be forever. There's always someone younger and stronger coming up the ranks. So Luca needs to win the prize fights while he can, and invest the money wisely so that he can continue to support the women who raised him, and continue to give back to his community. Which is why I don't like him throwing a party for you the night before the biggest fight of his life."

I step back a little, feeling like I've been slapped. Because I didn't ask for this party but...

## **Chapter 0304**

### **Chapter 0304**

Well. I didn't think about it either, did I? I set my jaw, offended and guilty all at once.

"I'm sorry," Bruce says, shaking his head as he sees my expression. "It's just...I think it would be good for Luca, and helpful, if you really understood his situation, and his world. You need to help him make the right choices. He's a good boy — and I can see he loves you. But he's someone who lets his emotions run away with him. He needs a bit of guidance to make the right choices — and you can help with that."

"I will help him," I say, steady, meaning it. "In whatever way I can." "I hope we can count on you for that," Bruce says, holding my gaze, giving me a steady nod.

Luca comes out of the house before I can respond, a plate of coffee cake wrapped in tinfoil in his hands, a big smile on his face. At the same moment, a car pulls around the corner, headlights flashing.

Luca smiles at his uncle, who nods and walks back to his corner of the porch, before coming to slip an arm around me, frowning at the car. "I was hoping for a moment for a quiet goodbye," he says, sighing.

"That's okay," I say, smiling up at my mate and standing on my toes as I take the plate from his hand, begging silently for a kiss. Luca grins and then obliges me, kissing me softly and pulling me close for a moment as Conner's car pulls to the front of the house.

"Thank you for coming," he says. "This was amazing. Everything I wanted it to be." "It really was," I say, honestly meaning it and unable to help my smile. "But you will get some sleep, yes? And tomorrow I'll see you at the fight."

"You'll be there?" he asks, a little desperate, almost as if he's worried that I won't.

'I promise say, laughing and ~. grinning up at him. "I can't wait. It's going to be amazing. I'll be right in the Royal box — right up front: You won't be able to miss me' "Content ~

"Good," he says, tugging me close one more time and planting a kiss on my forehead before starting to walk me to the car.

Luca calls a goodnight after me,

and I give him a little wave, but as Luca gives me a final kiss goodnight and tucks me away in the car, I can't stop my mind from wandering over everything Bruce said about Luca, and his life, and his responsibilities, and my role in it all. to FindNovel.Org

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Because it really does make me wonder...am I the best thing for Luca right now? Can I really support his career? Or...is dating a Princess going to be a huge distraction for him?

I sigh, sinking back into the seat,

) ~ disturbed by {all. I want, more than anything, for Luca to have the best. life he can = to have a wonderful career to support his family, to continue doing this work he never even told me about to help. Boys that ranst be so like he was when he was an angry teenager. to FindNovel.Org

But how do I do that?

"Did you have fun?" Conner asks, glancing over at me.

"I did," I return, tucking my thoughts away and giving him a friendly smile. "It was an amazing night."

"Did you bring me some cake?" he asks, raising an eyebrow and nodding to the plate in my lap.

"Oh no." I say quite seriously, "this cake is for Prince Rafe. Exclusively."

Conner bursts into laughter, and I begin to tell the story of Luca's Gran and her Royal favorite, who is clearly not me.

And as we drive...I can't help but worry that the same might be true of Luca's uncle as well.

## **Chapter 0305**

### **Chapter 0305**

I got home a little too late to see anyone. I mean, Rafe was probably awake somewhere, but I didn't really feel like going to find him, so instead I simply cracked open the door to my parent's room and called softly inside to let them know that I was home — groggy affirmations greeted me from both, which made me smile. I left Rafe's special cake on the coffee table with a little note of explanation, laughing a little, and then I went to bed.

I wake up late, and immediately looked for Daphne, but then I sigh when I remembered that mom moved her to her own bedroom last night. Scowling, I pull myself out of bed and dress casually for breakfast, wishing she was here so I could tell her what happened with Luca's uncle last night and get her perspective. Daphne's really even-headed - she'd definitely give me good advice on how to handle this.

My stomach growls as I yawn and pull a hairbrush through my hair, so when I finally set out for breakfast I'm definitely eager to get there. But when I push open the door to the breakfast room

Instantly, I know that something's wrong. The room goes from hushed, angry whispers to absolute silence as heads turn and see me standing at the door.

"What," I say, freezing with my hand on the door, my eyes going wide. "What's wrong?"

Rafe, Ben, and Jesse sit at one end of the table, Daphne between them, all huddled over a copy of a magazine. Juniper lounges at the other end of the table, sighing like she's so bored by all of it, and Markie freezes stock still at the sideboard, where he is loading up probably his third plate of bacon and eggs for breakfast, staring anxiously my way. Cora and Roger stand with him, but Cora just grimaces when I come in and Roger



looks at me with a great deal of pity that makes me feel even worse — because if even Roger isn't teasing me!?

God, something really is wrong

Frantic, I move my gaze to my parents, who are sitting at the center of the table right in front of me. "Come in, Ariel," my mom says on a heavy sigh, putting down her own copy of the same magazine that Rafe and my friends are looking at. When I glance around the table again, I see another copy at Markie's seat, and one more in front of Juniper.

"What?" I ask, worried. "What is it?"

"It's nothing, baby," mom murmurs, standing up and starting to come around the table towards me as my dad stays stoically in his seat, his arms crossed, looking pissed as hell.

"It's obviously not nothing," I reply, my voice getting higher as I become more frantic. I look around the room suddenly, realizing that Jackson isn't here. (asp, and stumble back a step, starting to freak out. "Where is Jacks? Did he — he didn't — Where —

"Ari" Mom says, finally reaching me and taking me by the shoulders and looking me in the eye. "Jackson is fine, he's just late for breakfast, like you. Probably figuring out how to put on a pair of jeans — it's all a very new world for him. Okay? ~ Just. come in, darling, close the door. We'll talk about it as a family."

A huge sigh of relief rushes from my lungs at my mom's assurance that Jackson is fine, just late and struggling with fashion. Because she wouldn't lie to me — she wouldn't say that he was okay if she knew he wasn't.

Still, something is happening, and with the whole way the room is looking at me right now, it's obviously got something to do with me.

"Mom?" I ask, my voice tight with worry as she guides me around the table to the seat next to her, where Cora brings me a cup of tea with milk and sugar. "What's — what's going on?"

"Sweetheart," my mom says, sitting down next to me, and taking both of my hands in hers. "Now, I don't want you to freak out —"

"Oh, just tell her, Ella," Cora sighs, putting her hands on her hips and rolling her eyes as she stands straight. "You're making it all worse with all this coddling."

"[ am not!" mom protests, her jaw falling open as she gapes up at her sister.

"You totally are! You —

Jesse comes to my rescue, standing and tossing the copy of the magazine halfway down the length of the table so that it smacks right in front of me. It's upside down so I don't catch all the details, but my eyes go wide when I see my own face on one half of the cover, beaming. Content

"Someone spilled the beans, Ari," Jesse says, crossing his arms and glaring at me — not at me, of course, but angry and looking me steadily in the eyes. "About you being mated to Luca."

## Chapter 0306

### Chapter 0306

"What!?" I gasp, grabbing the magazine and lifting it up, reading the headline and realizing that the other half of the cover is, of course, a picture of Luca in his boxer's getup — which, essentially, just means sweaty and shirtless. And, of course, he looks stupidly good with his boxing gloves up by his face, his expression all tough and gritty and determined.

But I tear my eyes away from the picture of my handsome mate to read the headline splashed across both of us. "CONFIRMED: LUCA GRANT MATED TO PRINCESS ARIEL.

"Ohhh my god," I murmur, my fingers tightening against the cover in my shock. Because, I mean, it's not a secret within our inner circles that Luca and I are mated — but this is not public knowledge, and certainly not something my parents would have wanted me to announce so openly and so early on in my relationship.

And, especially, since I have — you know — a second mate that's going to complicate all of this — this is not at all a good thing for me. But who did this?

I mean, I know that my family knows, and that Luca told his mom and his uncle, but to everyone else he introduced me to last night — he always said girlfriend, never mate. Because that's incredibly personal, and considering who I am, and what my position is within this world...

God, spilling this to the press? It's a huge betrayal. My fingers hesitate, a little, as I begin to flick through the pages of the magazine, because I am suddenly quite terrified that I know who leaked this...

Someone who...who quite likes the attention of the press. And is incredibly proud to be mated to me. Someone who wants everyone to know that we're mated, especially since there's another claim on my affections that he's quite eager to dismiss.

And suddenly I can't. I can't read the article. I sigh, and press the magazine shut in my hands like that could keep my secret inside. I just...can't get the confirmation, if it's there at all, that Luca did this. I don't know what I'll do if that turns out to be the truth. A little unsteady, I look up at my mother. "Mom?" I whisper, not really knowing what I'm asking, staring at her with all of my horror in my eyes.

"Oh, sweetie," she says, her words sounding like her heart is breaking, and she reaches for me in an instant, wrapping me up in a hug and pulling me half off my chair, half onto hers.

"Did he do it?" I whisper, horrified, not wanting an answer. "The article is unclear, sugar," she replies, her voice grave. "He.. he didn't deny it, when he was asked by the reporter. I sit up straight, surprised and confused, wanting to see her face. "But then, who..."

"It reads that 'a source close to Luca Grant' confirmed that you two are mates," dad says, and mom leans back a little so that I can look into my father's stern face. He's not mad at me, obviously, but I can tell that he's keeping his temper on quite a tight leash.

'And then Luca was interviewed at his gym early this morning," Rafe adds from across the table. I look over to see him standing, his hands in his pockets, his face sorry for me. Next to him, Ben and Daphne look exactly the same. Jesse just looks pissed as hell, and starts across the room to pour himself a cup of coffee that he probably doesn't need, just wanting something to do. As he does, Markie slips back into his seat next to Juniper, watching everything with wide-eyed attention.

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June looks at me with more empathy than I'd expect. But, then again, she is my sister. Maybe I don't give her more credit.

"Well," I say with a sigh, reaching for the magazine again. "what does the interview say?"

"The interviewer blankly told him that she was told that he is mated to you, and asked if he would confirm it," Jesse says, his words clipped as he sloshes creamer into his coffee before turning to me, his cup tight in his hands. "Apparently Luca blushed and was very charmingly evasive,

but he smiled and didn't deny it"

"Which we all know is tantamount to confirmation," Rafe says, his voice dry and disappointed.

I groan a little, looking down at the magazine in my hands, devastated by this betrayal. I start to flick N through the pages now, noting the pictures that they captured — > pictures of Luca and me holding hands at the train station. Luca and me leaving his gym yesterday. Luca and me kissing on his front porch last night. FindNovel.Org

I gasp at this last one — because while paparazzi might easily have caught the other two — this one? It's just too intimate — like the photographer knew just where to stand to get this shot.

Like someone tipped them off,

## Chapter 0307

### Chapter 0307

"Ariel, darling," mom says, reaching out to tuck a strand of my hair behind my ear. "Tell me, sweetheart, how are you feeling about this?"

I look up at my mom, trying to sort through my feelings. trying to figure it out. Because on one hand...I mean, he is my mate — it's just the truth, and it was going to come out sometime. And why should Luca have to deny who his mate is, or hide it, when the press asked him? If it were any other mating bond, just between two people, I'm not sure it would be as big of a deal

but...I mean, that's not our situation at all, is it?

Passively, I look down at the article, reading enough to gather that it is a laudatory piece. The press is, apparently, thrilled that I'm mated to Luca Grant — it marks us officially as the cutest new couple in the celebrity world and suggests that everyone's rooting for our future. Especially today, with Luca in the spotlight and so much at stake, everyone is thrilled to have the Princess at his side while he fights for our national pride against the enemy.

But...even if it's good. ...it's not what I wanted. Not right now anyway.

would have liked to be asked," I say quietly, raising my eyes to look up into my mom's eyes and then around the table at my sympathetic family. "It's not a small thing to tell the world that someone's your mate, especially when you're already someone in the

public eye. I should have been asked. I should have had...some control over it, at least been part of the interview.”

Rafe and Jesse stand coldly, still pissed and not even willing to be as fair as I'm trying to be in this moment. But Ben nods warmly towards me, and Daphne presses her mouth into a commiserating line, her expression letting me know that she understands and feels for me.

I look to the other side of the table, where Markie looks worried and Juniper stares at me evenly, like this is nothing I can't handle. Uncle Roger gathers Cora to his side and looks at me with sympathy, like he understands how important a mating bond is, and how intrinsic honesty is between those who share it.

And as I look around at my family and friends, all so eager to support me in my own way, I feel so incredibly bolstered. Like I can certainly handle this as Junie's expression suggests — like it's really not the end of the world, even if it felt that way a minute ago.

I'm even almost smiling as I turn back to my mom

‘I agree completely, baby.” mom murmurs, again wrapping me in a hug as I turn my attention back to her and dad.

‘It's a betrayal,’ dad says, meeting my eyes over my mom's shoulder and giving me a steady nod. “We're — not going to stand for it, Ariel. You deserve better than this. You're absolutely right — you should have had a say in whether or not this article came out today. It's unacceptable that you did not.”

I press my eyes shut, taking a deep breath and letting my mom hug me tighter. Because I hate that Luca's in hot water with my family now — he's my mate, and obviously I want everyone to get along.

But, well...if he did this?

Doesn't he deserve it?

As I tuck my head down against my mom's neck soaking in her comfort — as she strokes my back and I try to figure out how I feel, I hear the breakfast room door creak open. The

But my jaw drops. Because...I mean, I knew who it was going to be — or at least had a really good idea — and I know that a hard conversation is coming.

But I had no idea Jackson was going to look like that.

## Chapter 0308

### Chapter 0308

He's standing there holding the breakfast room door open with one broad hand, frowning around at all of us, looking like a god damn model. Somehow, he got his hands on a really nice pair of jeans, and a blue button-down shirt that looks like it was made for him, rolled up to his elbows. His look is all very simple, which suits him, but it's very clearly expensive and tailored. And it suits his body completely, making him look...honestly, almost a little unreal, unnaturally perfect,

But the real coup is his hair. Jackson has always had a longish, shaggy mess of hair that really worked for his brutal, controlled-ferocity sort of vibe. But some genius has transformed that into a style, cropping Jackson's hair closer on the sides and trimming the ends so that they're more even. Now his hair falls into his face in a soft curtain of silky brown, and he just looks

God, he looks like I want to jump him right now.

But if Jackson notices the effect his new appearance has on me, he doesn't let me see it, instead quickly surveying the room and realizing that something is wrong.

When his eyes fall on me, and he sees the trace of devastation left on my face, and puts together that something happened to me? His response is immediate.

"What is it," he growls, slamming the door shut and striding into the room so that he stands across the table from me, leaning far across the wood to lock his eyes with me, smacking his hand down against the surface. "Who did this to you? Are you all right? What happened?"

Jackson absolutely ignores everyone else in the room and a swell of joy and pride rises in me, pride for my big scary Alpha mate who is ready to tear the world apart because something made me sad

"I'm okay," I say, putting a hand out on the table like he's doing, not reaching for him but wanting to be closer. "I promise, Jacks, I'm okay."

Incrementally Jackson relaxes, standing taller and starting to look around the room. I do the same, a little entertained by the shock on almost everyone's faces. But some people aren't shocked, or don't show it. My eyes move first to Rafe, Jesse, and my dad, who look stern and pleased, like this is precisely the reaction they were expecting from him.

And then to my mom, who I see is bursting with pride for Jackson as well, not at all startled by a huge man storming around and slamming his hand on tables, demanding answers. That's just a normal Tuesday morning for her, after all.

And then to Cora who is...perhaps a little too appreciative of Jackson's glow-up to be shocked by anything else.

"Will someone please tell me what's going on? Jackson asks, his voice tense as he clearly works to balance his desire to intercede and make it all better with his need to be polite.

I sigh and untangle myself from my mom, standing and rolling one of the magazines up so Jackson can't see the cover — not just yet. "Come on, Jacks," I say, moving around the table towards him and gesturing towards the door. "Let's go somewhere quiet - I'll explain." "Wait no, don't go!" Jesse gasps. "I want to see this!"

Juniper bursts into laughter at Jesse, who she always finds much funnier than any of her actual siblings.

"This is not for your entertainment, Jess," Rafe snaps under his breath, turning to glare at our cousin.

Jesse slumps down into his chair, frowning up at Rafe. "Everything is for my entertainment."

I ignore them as I reach Jackson, . NN .

looping my hand around his elbow and looking-Up i nto his gorgeous face for g long moment, willing him to relax;-to see that I'm al right and that this is manageable. Feeling these emotions down ou bend, Jackson sighs and his sheulders oosen. Conten belongs to FindNovel.Org

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take a moment to glance to my parents. My dad looks at me sternly but nods, just a tiny movement, to .. et me know that he trusts me to RN handle this with my mate. And my momjst beams at the two of us, her-hands clasped delightedly beneath her chin. I can't help smiling at her — mom, she's just so pure.

"Come on," I say softly to Jackson, tugging on his arm. "Let's go somewhere and have a chat."

## Chapter 0309

## Chapter 0309

He nods to me, and we duck out of the room.

I take Jackson down a few doors to dad's study. Not his office, where he does all of his big work — but a peaceful room where he goes to relax and think, or to have little intimate chats with his closest advisors, or mom, or Rafe, or me. Or Markie and June now, I suppose, now that they're all grown up too.

I can't help but smile when Jackson walks into the room like he owns it, like he's been there a thousand times. It's not that he's being conceited - Jackson just doesn't care to look around and admire the furnishings or dad's books. He only cares about me — this room could be filled with rubbish, for all he would notice. Jackson moves instantly to the window seat, sitting and opening his arms, a clear invitation for me to come close.

I press the door shut and go to him, exhaling in relief when he pulls me to his chest and then up into his lap, helping me to curl comfortably against him in the circle of his arms. When I'm nestled in tight, his voice rumbles out, deep and reassuring. "Tell me.

And so I do. I hold up the magazine so that he can see it, telling him all of the details of what it contains — about someone spilling about how Luca and I are mated, and the press running with it, and printing all sorts of images that confirm it. Jackson listens closely, letting me talk, only glaring a little bit at the picture of me kissing Luca. I have to fight my smile when I see him do that, and I quickly turn the page to get away from it.

When it's all finished, Jackson nods quietly, thinking it through. "So, do you think Luca did it? Told the press?" "[ don't know," I murmur, leaning into Jackson's warmth. "It isn't...something I think is beyond him."

"What do you mean?" Jackson asks, confused and a little horrified. And as I look up at him, I realize it's because he'd never do something like this — it wouldn't even enter his head. So he doesn't get the motive — not at all.

"Luca...likes being a celebrity, Jacks," I say quietly, staring up into his face. "And that's not a bad thing — Jesse likes it too, and Rafe and I don't mind it. But Luca actively cultivates it — he's talked to the press about his romantic relationships before. And considering how positive this article is...Luca telling the press this big news the day of his big fight? It... can see how it would be tempting. The ratings for the fight will probably go sky high."

"But he knew it would upset you," Jackson says, frowning. I stare up at him, and put a hand out flat on his chest, wanting to be close when I clarify things for him. "Jacks, Luca knew it would upset you.

"What?" he breathes, screwing up his face in confusion



"Think about it; I say, sitting up a little straighter, wanting to ensure that he understands. If Luca did this, then he knows that I'm going to be mad at it — but he knows that. I'll eventually forgive him. This isn't the sort of thing I'd leave him alone with — not in the long run, not with how important he is to me."

Jackson's face goes a little dark when he hears me say that, but he doesn't say anything, listening closely.

"But Jacks™ continue, lifting a hand to cup his cheek, "in doing this, Luca also basically made it impossible for you to claim me publicly as your mate." ta. FindNovel.Org

Jackson's expression doesn't change — he still just frowns in confusion.

"Whoever did this made it so that the two of us — me and you, Jacks? We can't be seen in public together — romantically — you can't hold my hand, QFKiss me, or pick me up; or give any indication that we're — romantically involved. At all. Not where anyone with a camera could catch us." FindNovel.Org

"What!?" Jackson breathes, his eyes going wide as the gravity of the whole situation sets in.

## Chapter 0310

### Chapter 0310

"I'm a public figure too," I explain to Jackson, incredibly sorry, "and... my reputation, unfortunately, matters. If Luca has confirmed to the entire nation that I'm his mate, and then I'm stepping out with this super hot Alpha, kissing him in the streets? The press is going to tear me to pieces — call me unfaithful, say that I've betrayed Luca. No one will believe me that I have two mates — everyone will say that I'm a liar. And...I mean, as a political figure...I can't be seen as a liar."

"Oh," Jackson says, his eyes unfocusing as he looks away from me and starts to process this. "So...he claimed you first. So that I couldn't."

"If he did it," I say softly, needing that to be stated. Because, well, while it doesn't look precisely good for Luca right now...I'm not willing to damn him without confronting him first and getting the truth from his own lips.

Still, Luca isn't my priority in this moment.

"How are you feeling about this," I murmur, softly running my fingers through Jackson's newly cropped hair, loving the way that it feels against my skin. I feel so much calmer than I did even half an hour ago — and it's not only that I got a chance to process everything, but also because Jackson is here, holding me, being steady and warm as he always is.

He turns his head to me, frowning consideringly. "How do you want me to feel about it?" I scoff and smack him lightly on the shoulder. "I want you to feel how you feel!"

Jackson laughs a little, his pretty blue eyes crinkling. "Okay, I just...I mean, I want to support you, Ariel. And I think that if he did this then it was an absolutely horrible thing to do — that you should be livid. You're right — it's not up to one person in a pair to make unilateral decisions regarding these kinds of announcements. He took that from you."

I nod, grateful for his support, but I smack him again. "You're dodging the question." He laughs at me, smiling, and I can't help but grin back. "How do you feel, Jacks?"

"Don't be mad at me," he murmurs, leaning forward and gently pressing his forehead to mine. "But Ariel... for me? I... I don't really care."

"What!?" I squeak, and Jackson grins, pulling me tighter, liking that sound. And I lift my arms, wrapping them around his neck as I shake my head at him. "Jackson, this was a blow to you! He took a shot, he made a move to actively counter your claim on me! That's bullshit!"

"He took a shot," Jackson murmurs, "but it didn't land, Ariel. I just...I'm not wounded by this. It's not something that's important to me."

"Please explain," I sigh, leaning back a little and letting my fingers lace together behind his neck. "I don't get it. How does this not piss you off?"

Jackson takes a deep breath, thinking for a moment before he speaks, trying to put words to his emotions, which I know is sometimes foreign to him. "If Luca did this, then he did it at least... partially to piss me off, thinking that I'd get jealous. But I'm just not jealous of this sort of thing."

He shifts his eyes back to me, looking a little worried that he won't express himself clearly. I nod to him, encouraging.

"I have a very visceral reaction, Ariel," he murmurs, "when I see Luca touch you. That's difficult for me. And I did..." he growls a little, the sound rumbling in his chest, and I can't help but smile, "I did not like that picture of you and him on the porch, in the magazine."

I bite my lip, a little pleased, but he moves on.

"But this more...abstract jealousy? Where like, he has a claim on you, and it matters because other people know about it? And that's supposed to bother the?" Jackson shakes his head, clearly indicating that he Ny

this is nonsense. 'I don't think that's a natural response, Ariel = think that's a very cultural thing — having to like, announce to the world that this woman is your woman, and getting all pissed off when someone else looks at her the wrong way."

I look at him curiously, needing more.

Jackson sighs a little, wanting to be clear. "I don't care if anyone else knows that I'm your mate, Ariel. Don't take that the wrong way — bit what other people think and feel." about our relationship? It doesn't matter to me — the only thing that matters is you being here in my arms, where you belong." "Content

He says this last bit with an edge of a growl on his words and I grin at this, pleased

'I didn't grow up here," Jackson continues, looking at me steadily. "I didn't. I learn how to be jealous like that — how to get mad and possessive because some other guy announces to the nation that you're his girl, when I know you're mine. I think it's kind of...dumb.

## Chapter 0311

### Chapter 0311

I nod, getting it now, unlacing my fingers from behind his neck and starting to run them again through his hair, liking Jackson more now than I have before, which is...saying something. He's right, though — he doesn't have some of the more annoying and disgusting habits of our culture's masculinity. He just never learned them

"I don't want you to think that I'm dismissing this," Jackson murmurs, lifting a hand to softly stroke my cheek. "I respect that you're a public figure — and I'm proud of you for that. I think you take it seriously, and I...I like that. So, if this hurts you, and you're mad about it, then I'm mad about it. But. if you're worried that I'm wounded by this?"

Jackson just shrugs, like bullshit like this can't even touch him. And I grin, and pull him closer, and press a simple kiss to his mouth. "You're amazing, Jacks," I say, shaking my head in awe a little. "You're so lovely.

"Do you want me to be madder about this?" he asks, genuine and earnest. "Because I can be angrier, if that's what you want." And then he forces his face into more rigid lines,

growling again, and I laugh as I feel the rumble of it in his chest. "This stupid...magazine!" he grumbles, taking it from my hands and tossing it to the floor, clearly trying to figure out how to perform an appropriate level of rage for my sake. "I'll...beat up that reporter! I'll... punch Luca!"

I burst into laughter now, taking his cheeks between my hands and shaking my head, urging him to stop.

Jackson laughs too and then shrugs. "Actually, I won't punch Luca," he murmurs, smiling down at me. "Because...I mean, I really want him to win tonight, and I'm really strong and would seriously mess him up. So. If you want me to punch him, I'll have to save it for tomorrow."

"Don't punch him," I murmur, sighing happily. absolutely adoring my big tough Alpha. "But thank you for offering, baby, it's very sweet." A little shiver passes through Jackson when I call him baby, and he looks away from me, I think hoping I didn't notice. But I did, and I grin.

"Baby," I murmur, turning his face back to me, and he groans and brings his mouth to mine, kissing me swiftly and burying a hand in my hair, absolutely sweeping me away.

We both sigh in disappointment when the door opens.

"Oh, gross," Jesse says, and I turn to see him standing stoop-shouldered in the doorway, a pastry in each hand. "Rafe, my best friend is kissing my cousin! And it's gross."

"Oh, shut up. Jesse," Rafe says, shoving him into the room and closing the door behind them. "It's not like I haven't had to watch you make out with people like, a million times.

"Yes, but this time it's Ariel, and I am the one having to do the seeing, and it's very terrible, Rafe, honestly — I might need a nap — I have to recover from this shock —

ait," Rafe says, frowning at Jesse and processing what he said before — which sometimes takes a moment. Jesse talks a lot, and he says it all fast. "Aren't I your best friend?

'Oh, no, that's Jackson now," Jesse says, his face falling into mock apologetic lines as he points over at my mate: Rafe's jaw drops open in pretend shock as he presses a hand to his heart, making me laugh. & Yes, we came to new terms on a cliff outside the Academy the night Ariel told everyone she has two mates. It was a very traumatic experience, but very bonding." FindNovel.Org

"All right, all right," Jackson sighs, releasing me from his arms and putting his hands up like he gives in and just wants it all to end. I laugh" and move over slightly, sitting next to him in the window seat instead of in his lap. "What's going on anyway?" FindNovel.Org

"We come bearing breakfast," Jesse says with a broad grin, moving forward and handing Jackson and I each a pastry.

"And also, a ride." Rafe adds, crossing his arms over his chest and tilting his head back towards the door. "Car's waiting outside to take us to Luca's house. Time to go give him a piece of our collective mind."

I beam at my brother and my cousin, thrilled that they knew that this is precisely what I'd want to do next, and that put this in order so that I - didn't have to bother with the details. Takes bite of my pastry and jump to my feet. "Great!" I say, wiping crumbs from my lips. "Let's go! I want to get to the bottom of this."

Rafe nods to me and then turns his eyes to Jackson. "You coming, McClintock?" I look back eagerly at Jackson, but my face falls when I see him hesitate. "Well..." Jackson says, a little awkward, running a hand through his hair.

"You're kidding me, right!?" Jesse sputters out.

## Chapter 0312

### Chapter 0312

"Ch, come on," Jackson says, keeping his spot on the window seat and spreading out his hands, the seriousness of his gesture ruined a bit by the fact that he's holding a raspberry pastry. "Do any of you honestly think that my presence at the Grant family home is going to help anything today?"

"It's going to help Ariel," Jesse says, eyebrows raised, pointing at me. My own eyebrows go up because...I mean, is it?

"Ariel can handle herself," Jackson sighs, rolling his eyes a little bit and dropping his hands to his knees. I mean, I get being over-protective in the Academy where people are trying to beat the shit out of her —\*

"You included," Jesse says, crossing his arms and glaring at my mate.

Jackson just returns his glare and keeps going. "But, Ariel is smart and capable — she doesn't need her big brute mate coming along when she's got her big brute brother and big brute cousin at her side. Besides, you know my being there is just going to set Luca off. It's not worth it.

I beam a little at my mate, because even if he is declining to come and defend my honor, he's doing it because he thinks that I'm perfectly capable of defending myself. And there's something really nice in that — in Jackson's utter faith in me.

I send a grateful, warm little pulse down our bond, letting him know that I love that he sees me that way, and Jackson turns to give me a little wink before returning his gaze to Rafe and Jesse.

"Nah, I think he's right," Rafe says, turning to Jesse. "Jackson's great backup, and he's on Ari's side, but in this case...it might be too much backup showing up to a knife fight with a rocket launcher. We want to keep this quiet, even if we do want to get to the bottom of it. Ariel's two mates getting into a brawl before Luca's fight isn't going to help anyone."

Jesse scowls but puts his hands up, willing to be outvoted. But then he turns his head to Jacks. "So, what are you going to do all morning, then?" "[I] don't know," Jacks says, giving a shrug, looking between the three of us. "Ella said something about...shoes. "Shoes?" I ask, bursting into a grin, dead pleased.

"Yeah." he says with a confused frown, even though he doesn't seem bothered by it. Then he looks down at himself and gestures casually with his hand towards his new clothes. "She did all of...this.. yesterday."

"Ohhhh." Jesse says, grinning now as Jackson looks back up at us. "So that's where the glow-up came from — Auntie Ells." "What's a glow up?" Jackson asks, frowning.

I can't help my laughter as I grin at my mate. "Wait, so...mom took you shopping?

"She brought the shopping here," he says, frowning a little at the

memory. "She came and got me

from my roar, and then there were all these people, and all these ~ clothes, and someone cut my hair? and then I had to try on everything — took hours. And by the end of it your mom filled the whole room attached to my room with clothes. And she told me they're all mine, and I can wear whatever I want. And that today we're doing...shoes." He shrugs, his eyes a little unfocused, like he's remembering a fever dream. FindNovel.Org

—

[jak]

Which, considering mom's shopping methods...is probably a pretty accurate description

"Wait," Rafe says, fighting a grin as he steps forward towards Jacks. "What do you mean, a room attached to your room?" "I don't know how to be clearer than that," Jackson says, frowning at Rafe.

"Like, the room next door to your room?" Rafe asks

"No." Jackson says, shaking his head slowly and looking between us. "You can only get to it from my room."

"I think he means a closet," Jesse whispers, grinning with delight.

"No, it's a room — a whole room, with a door," Jackson says, holding his arms out to his sides to demonstrate how big it is. "And it's just filled with clothes. A closet-> is small. This one's big — like you could put a bed in there." He frowns at us, dropping his arms while we all do our very best not to laugh. FindNovel.Org

"Yeah, that's your closet, Jacks." I say, taking another bite of my pastry and smiling at him. "It's called a walk-in. And it's your fault for letting mom have free reign over it — she'll never stop now."

"So, all those clothes. . are for me?" He stares around at us like that can't possibly be true. "That's just the winter line, Jacks," Rafe says, coming forward and patting him on the shoulder. "Wait till you see what she brings in for the spring."

Jackson stares at my brother like he has absolutely no idea what that means, and he's a little scared of it. "Wait so," he whispers, shifting his eyes to me. "How many.. shoes do I get?"

Instead of answering — because I know the true answer will freak him out - I just laugh and swoop down to give him a quick kiss on the cheek. He responds instantly, almost automatically, raising a hand that brushes quickly down the length of my side, a caress and a farewell.

## Chapter 0313

### Chapter 0313

"Have fun with mom," I say, straightening up. "She's nice to you, right?"

"She's so nice to me." He replies, eyes wide, like he can't believe how nice mom is to him. But we all know her, and so we just smile again, pleased to see him feeling cozy and cared for.

"Okay, we'll be back as soon as we can," Rafe says, turning towards the door. "And then we'll try to come rescue you before mom picks out your 80(th) pair of shoes."



"That's impossible..." Jackson murmurs with a frown, standing to follow us out the door and go find mom. "80 pairs of shoes...no one has that many." "So, you haven't shown him your closet yet?" Jesse asks, grinning at me.

"I am a lady, Jesse," I say, waving goodbye to Jacks as he turns back towards the breakfast room, "Jackson has seen no part of my room, let alone my closet. A princess must keep her secrets.

"Ch, yeah right." Jesse laughs, striding forward with me and Rafe towards the front of the palace, where the car they've arranged is waiting. "You have simply lacked the opportunity."

"Yeah well," I murmur, pitching my voice low so Rafe doesn't hear me as well. "If I did get him in my room, I wouldn't be showing him my shoes."

Jesse bursts into laughter but then turns it into a gag, pretending to be horrified and disgusted at the idea, which just makes me laugh more. Rafe gives us a little glare as we reach the car, wondering what's going on, but we just wave him off and he shrugs, deciding that he's better off not knowing.

When we all climb into the car, though, things turn a little bit more serious as we all mutually turn our minds back to the problem at hand. I'm a little bit grateful, if I'm being honest, for the distraction that a bit of laughter brought me — it's been kind of an intense morning. But now that we're driving the short distance to Luca's house, I set my mind on what's really important: getting to the bottom of who released this information, and what the consequences should be.

Because if it really was Luca — I mean, I'm going to be devastated. But how, honestly, should I react? Should I...break up with him? Refuse to go to the fight? But no, even if I'll be horribly hurt, both of those options seem just... way too extreme

My wolf turns anxiously inside me at the idea of breaking up with Luca, about what that would do to our heart. But what, really, would my option be? Because...even if he's my mate, I couldn't let him walk all over me like that.

But did he even do it? And if he didn't, who did?

I'm still puzzling over it — and by their quiet, Jesse and Rafe are too — when we alt up to Luca's house. — Rafe curses under his breath when he sees that there are a couple of press vans spread out along the street, clearly covering Lucas activities before his big match tonight. Content belongs to FindNovel.Org

And, perhaps, locking out for a royal sighting.

Which were absolutely about to give them



"All right," Jesse says on a sigh, looking between Rafe and me. "Nothing we haven't done before. Just — into the house as fast as possible, right?" "What, are we just going to barge in without knocking?" Rafe asks, his face clearly letting us know that this isn't a great idea.

But I see Luca's mom at the door peering out at it, looking closely at the black town car with tinted windows that's stopped outside her front door, and then I see her turn to call to someone inside.

"It's not going to be a problem," I say, reaching over Rafe to open his door and giving him a hearty push, urging him to get out. "Go — now. Let's get inside."

Rafe follows my lead, getting out of the car and putting out a hand to help me, which I take. Then, together — Jesse a few steps behind — we stride towards the house.

By the time we get to the front steps, shouts from the press vans let us know that we've been spotted. They shout our names, trying to get us to turn so they can get a shot. We quicken our pace.

But before we can get to the door and slip inside, Luca's already pushing through it, his face desperate.

"Ariel" he shouts, already shaking his head and reaching for me. Before I can stop him, he crosses the porch to me, taking my face in his hands, staring down into my eyes. "Ariel — I am so sorry — I did not do this —" Content

"Not the time or the place, Grant," Rafe growls, using the bulk of his body to block us from the sight of — the press behind us, which are currently running towards the house to see if they can get a shot of our encounter. Jesse strides forward, clasping a hand on Luca's shoulder to get his attention. to FindNovel.Org

Unwilling, Luca drags his eyes from my shocked face to look at Jesse. "Inside." Jesse growls, fierce, giving him a hard shove. "Unless you're trying to get more publicity out of my cousin?"

Luca blushes a deep, ashamed red and steps away from me.

## Chapter 0314

Chapter 0314

I watch Luca's face change as he realizes that he's causing a scene, and that this does indeed look like a press setup. Luca coming running out of the house to clasp my face in his hands, when he could have easily just let us come inside?

Yeah, it really does look to everyone here - the press included, probably - like he deliberately came outside so that the press could get a shot of us on the front porch.

But no one else can feel Luca's emotions like I do right now - he's devastated, completely out of control of how he's feeling. Which, I mean, really could affect his choices, right?

"I'm sorry," Luca mutters, his eyes back on me now as he drops my face and stumbles back towards his screen door, yanking it open. "Please - yes, come inside \_"

We do, and I duck my head, staying close to Rafe's side, hoping that the paparazzi didn't get anything that they could use. I mean, it's not like anything bad happened - but if pictures of me on Luca's porch this morning come out with Rafe and Jesse by my side? Who knows where social media is going to take it.

The speculations, I'm sure, are already wild.

Jesse closes the door behind him and shakes his head at Luca, clearly pissed off. "What the hell was that all about?" he asks, gesturing towards the press.

"They've been here all day!" Luca explains, shooting out a hand, I think desperate to be believed. I watch him closely, and honestly I don't think that he's acting - not at all. He seems to me to be really upset. I take a step towards him, wanting to comfort my mate, but Rafe reaches out to touch my arm just slightly - asking me, silently, to hold back for a minute.

I hesitate, but do as Rafe asks, letting my brother take charge. "You're not an idiot, Luca," Rafe says, his voice low, his eyes narrowed. "You're a celebrity - you know how press works. You know not to go running out on the front porch unless you want them to see it. So, what the hell was that? What the hell is all of this?"

Rafe crosses his arms, getting angrier at Luca as the moments pass.

I look between my brother and my mate, thinking again that this whole thing doesn't look great for Luca.

And my heart sinks because...I mean, honestly, I think this whole time I didn't really believe that he broke the story. But...did he? "Come on," a voice rings out from behind Luca, and I peer around him a bit to see his mom standing there, her face very serious, her arms crossed over her chest. "They can still see you," she says, lifting her chin to where press are gathered around the porch, aiming their cameras through the large

window in the front door. I mean, I doubt they're getting anything they can use, but Linda is right - they can see us.

"Why don't you all come into the living room, where there's a bit more privacy?" Linda gestures towards the room before walking into it, clearly suggesting we follow.

Luca sighs, shaking his head and gritting his teeth, realizing that he's doing this all wrong. But then he turns, gesturing to where his mother is waiting. "Yes, of course, please come inside," he says, falling back on the manners which I'm sure his mom drilled into him as a child.

Rafe and Jesse glance at each other but then move, following Linda into the living room. I go last, glancing at the window and all the hungry press outside, wondering how the hell we're going to get out of here.

Inside the living room I see Luca murmuring his introductions between the Crown Prince, the Duke, and his mom, but the whole time his eyes are searching for me. I just cross my arms and wait for him to finish, my face not giving anything away.

Linda smiles politely at Rafe and Jesse, shaking their hands, before sighing and recrossing her arms. "Well, I'm not going to insult you by pretending that I don't know why you're here, and why you're upset." She gives Luca a little glare that makes my stomach drop - because, I mean, if his own mom is mad at him...

"We didn't mean to disturb you, ma'am," Rafe says, nodding apologetically. "But -"

"No, you're very welcome here," she says, holding up a hand to stop him as she turns away. "I'll let you talk and will bring you some iced tea." With that she leaves the room, leaving the three of us to turn back to Luca.

"I didn't do it," Luca says immediately, holding out his hands towards us.

My heart instantly lightens and I grit my teeth, wanting so terribly badly to believe him.

"I promise," he says, locking eyes with me now and shaking his head slowly back and forth. "Ariel, I didn't know that the story got leaked - I swear it, I didn't tell anyone, and I was completely shocked this morning when the reporter asked me if you were my mate -"

## Chapter 0315

## Chapter 0315

"You were shocked?" Jesse asks, stepping forward, wanting more details.

"Yes!" Luca says, almost shouting in his need to be believed. "She was asking me about the match, and life at the Academy, and then she just dropped the question about my mate in there casual as hell! I think she knew I was going to be shocked - wanted to surprise me! And if you read the way it's written in the article - that I blushed, and stumbled over my words - that was all me having no idea that this was coming!"

Rafe and Jesse just glare, not buying it not yet.

"Do you think I don't know how much this fucks things up for her!?" Luca says, gesturing towards me now and then looking into my face, ignoring my brother and my cousin now, knowing that this is - deep down - about us. "Ariel," he says, stepping forward, though Rafe puts out a hand to stop him from getting to me knowing that my judgment is compromised by physical touch with my mates.

Luca glares at Rafe for a second but then gives in, dropping his hand and looking at me again. "Ariel, I would never do that to you," he says, pressing his hands to his heart and willing me to believe him. "I know that this is not my story alone - that you have a right to hold your secrets, and that you live a very private life on purpose! You have to believe me."

And as Luca stares at me with his big brown eyes, passing all his love and earnestness and truth down the bond to me - I believe him. I do, instantly. There's just...no room for deception here - he's too raw, too open.

"Okay," I say, my voice breaking a little as I step forward, reaching for him. Rafe drops his hand and Luca groans aloud as I dart to him, wrapping my arms around his waist as he gathers me close. "Okay, Luca," I whisper. "I believe you."

Jesse sighs, believing my belief in Luca, but still not finished here. "Why didn't you deny it, Luca?" he snaps, still mad. "That would have fixed a lot -"

"You can't lie to the press, Jesse," Luca says, frowning at him. I loosen my arms around him a little so that I can look to see Jesse's expression, but I don't let Luca go. "The best you can say is no comment, but you can't lie - if it ever comes out one day that Ariel is my mate then they have me on record as a liar, and you can't get away from that "

"Well then why didn't you say no comment?" Rafe asks, folding his arms and still frowning at my mate, I think pleased to know that our friend didn't betray us but still unhappy with the whole situation.

"I basically did!" Luca says, his voice raising again in self-defense. "I just said a lot of noncommittal things about how Ariel's a lovely girl and how my love life is private - I

thought that was all better than a cheeky, blushy 'no comment,' which just sounds staged!"

"It makes sense, Rafe," I say softly, wanting to come to my mate's defense. Because if he didn't do this, then he's on our side and doesn't deserve to be interrogated anymore. But if he didn't do it...

I see the same question forming on Rafe's tongue, but before he can ask it, there's a soft cry from the kitchen and then the door bursts open, a blur of grey and blue dashing through it.

"Principe!"

The tiny figure dashes immediately for Rafe, shouting his name in desperate tones, sounding almost as if she's crying. And then suddenly Luca's Gran has her arms around Rafe's waist, squeezing him tight as she shouts his name and his title over and over, her eyes pressed shut with little tears at the corners.

Rafe stumbles back, a little shocked, and Luca groans, reaching for her, but I hold him back, letting her have her hug. Jesse grins, a little delighted, and Rafe glances around at us for a second before lowering his arms and patting Gran warmly on the back.

"Principe Rafe!" Gran cries, clearly having the best moment of her life. "Mio preferito!"

I have a very, very hard time keeping the smile from my face as I watch her meet her idol.

But my smile falls immediately as Luca's mom comes back into the room with a tray of iced tea, followed closely by his uncle. And Luca's uncle looks stern as hell, and ready for battle.

Which can only mean...one thing.

## Chapter 0316

### Chapter 0316

Rafe immediately goes into Prince-mode, continuing to pat Gran on the back while looking up at Luca and quietly mouthing "who is this?"

Luca sighs and gestures towards her. "Rafe, this is my Gran," he says. "She's...a big fan."

"Oh," Rafe says, his eyebrows going up, because of course we've heard a lot about Luca's Gran at the Academy. "Oh, with the cake!" he says, laughing a little. And then, I think to everyone's shock, he puts his hands on Gran's shoulders and presses her away just a tiny bit. Surprised, Gran opens her eyes and looks up into his face.

And then, in what sounds like perfect Itablio, Rafe says, "Grazie per la torta. Lo amaro."

Gran gives a loud shout of joy and then starts to cry harder, pulling Rafe close again and tucking her face away against his stomach, crying hard into his shirt.

"Oh my god," Linda says, hastily putting down the iced tea and reaching for her. "Mom, please -"

"No, it's okay," Rafe says, holding out a hand towards Linda and giving her his best Princely smile. His other hand softly strokes Gran's back in a comforting way. "It's fine. This...happens sometimes."

And Linda laughs and rolls her eyes but gives a shrug, like he asked for it. Gran continues to cry softly, starting to pull herself together, as Luca looks awkwardly between all of us, and then over to his uncle.

"Rafe, Jesse," he says with a sigh, holding a hand out towards his coach. "This is my uncle and my coach, Bruce Grant. Bruce, this is\_"

But Bruce just waves a hand at him, clearly indicating that he knows who they are, and Luca hangs his head. He doesn't look at me anymore even though I stare up into his face.

And it's all the confirmation I need.

I slowly loosen my arms from around Luca's waist and take a step away from him, staring at the guilt in the lines of his posture, the sorrow. And then I turn my eyes to Bruce.

"So," I say, slowly, softly. "You did it."

Bruce holds my gaze, his mouth a thin, determined line. "Yes, miss Ariel," he says, crossing his arms as he leans back against a sideboard, at once casual and defensive. "Yes, I did it. I told the press about your relationship with my nephew. And I'd do it again."

Rafe glares, hard, at Bruce Grant, but he continues to stroke Gran's back, clearly unwilling to push her away when she's still overwhelmed. But this just makes space for Jesse to shine.

"Are you kidding me?" Jesse growls, stepping forward loom over Bruce, who is an inch or two shorter than him. Bruce doesn't flinch away, instead simply looking at Jesse with a steady frown. "You had absolutely no right to spread that information to the press. God damn it, you selfish asshole, did you sell it!?"

"Of course I sold it," Bruce snaps back, glaring at Jesse, not backing down. "I sold it in Luca's name - all the profits when to him."

Rafe gasps, and so does Jesse, and I look up at Luca with sadness in my eyes. Because I'm starting to put it together now - that Bruce did this without Luca's permission.

But still. Luca is the one reaping all the benefits, isn't he?

How much did he sell it for? I whisper, directly into Luca's mind.

Luca shifts his eyes to me, his face grim.

Tell me, I command.

Luca drops his eyes. There was a bidding war, he says, his voice echoing in my mind as Jesse and Bruce start to go at it, shouting at each other.

And? I ask, prodding him to continue.

And the final sum was...north of 1.5 million, Luca says, a sigh slipping through his lips.

My eyes flare wide because...because that is one hell of a sum. And while I very much want Luca to have it - especially considering that I have never once in my life wanted for money-

But...his uncle made that money selling a story about me, didn't he? And now it's all in Luca's pocket.

God, this is complicated. More complicated than I ever thought it would be.

Honestly, I didn't know that a story about who I'm mated to could be worth so much - but I should have had a say in it. That money - it could have gone to aid something, done something that Luca and I agreed on together.

But now it's just...his. His uncle took that opportunity from us and seized it all for him.

And the realization that Luca pays his uncle's salary does not pass me by either.

"You can expect a lawsuit from this," Rafe says, drawing my attention back to the room as he speaks for the first time. Gran has loosened herself from his waist now and is

wiping at her face, bustling around the room and straightening pillows before dashing back to the kitchen, probably getting more refreshments.

## Chapter 0317

### Chapter 0317

Passively, some part of me is very grateful that Gran speaks a different language from us - I want her to remember this as a nice day, not as the horrible afternoon it already is.

"You can bring along any lawsuit you want," Bruce says, giving a casual shrug as he meets Rafe's eye. "I didn't do anything illegal. Can't sue me for libel, I didn't say anything that wasn't true."

"You sold a story that wasn't yours," Rafe points out, taking an aggressive step towards him.

"Luca's story too, not just your girl's, just because she's high class -"

"Watch yourself," Jesse snaps, stepping forward to glare at Bruce.

"All right," Grant says, slowly raising his hands and silently admitting that he's crossed a line. "You got me there, that was a step too far towards disrespect. But Luca passed me power of attorney for all decisions regarding his public image years ago," he says, gesturing over at his nephew.

Luca's face goes a bit pale as he realizes that this is true, his mouth falling open.

"And," Grant says, "all I said was that Luca was mated to Princess Ariel. It was a story about him, about his life. I have every right to do that."

Rafe takes a deep breath and I see the thoughts passing over his face. He frowns because he's a bit out of his league here when it comes to these sorts of laws. "I'm not sure we're too worried about the specifics," Rafe says evenly, dismissing Bruce's point. "What it comes down to, sir, is that you made an enemy of a very powerful man today, not to mention his entire family. I'm not sure you'll find moving in this world very easy while Dominic Sinclair looks at you with disapproval."

"Well," Bruce says with a sigh, lifting his chin a bit while he meets Rafe's gaze, clearly holding his stance. "I've operated long enough in this world without Dominic Sinclair looking my way at all. So, we'll have to see how the future goes, whether or not the King approves of me." Bruce shifts his eyes to Luca now, who is still looking at him, devastated. "I did what I did for my boy here. And if I go down having put a significant



sum in his pocket, and setting him on the right path for his future?" He nods once, steady. "I'll take it."

My heart hurts now, as I finally figure it out, as I look between Bruce and Luca and remember everything Bruce said last night about Luca having a short career, and needing to make what money he can now before someone younger and stronger comes to replace him.

And even though I wouldn't have done it myself...I get it.

Bruce Grant is a man who is fighting for his nephew, his family, to have everything in a new world in which their immigrant family has clearly struggled to build a life.

And even if I can dislike that I am the one at whose expense this was earned... I can't hate Bruce for it. Because I would fight just as hard for my family in his position.

"Why did you do it?" The words fall from my mouth before I can even think about whether it's wise for me to ask them.

Everyone in the room turns towards me, and everyone looks grim.

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"I did it," Grant says, holding my gaze, his voice gentler now, I think grateful to have the chance to spell out his reasonings. Because image-wise, Luca needs a boost. The boxing he's got - I'm not worried about that. But he's built too much of his public image up around being a git and a playboy party animal, womanizer, whatever you want to call it."

Bruce waves a dismissive hand and Luca hangs his head. I have to work very hard not to move to my mate's side right now, to comfort him when he hears the man he cares about so much say such nasty things about his image.

"So?" I ask, keeping my focus on him. "What does being mated to me have to do with that?"

"You, miss," Bruce says, leaning forward and staring directly into my eyes. "Are like buttermilk. Sweet, clean, and pure. And when the world sees the way he looks at you? How dedicated he is, how in love?" he shakes his head. "One single move, and this boy's image problems are fixed. You saved him."

## Chapter 0318

## Chapter 0318

"I didn't do anything," I correct, putting out a hand between us. "And it may be true that I'm good for Luca's image, but it should have been our choice to make this announcement. I'm part of this now, and even if you are in charge of Luca's public image, you're not in charge of mine."

Bruce holds my gaze, accepting what I say but still not backing down. And I see in him that he still believes he made the right choice for Luca and his family - and that I'm not nearly as included in that family as he'd have me think.

But also, in the same moment, I realize that it doesn't matter whether Bruce is sorry or regrets it or gives me an apology. Because it's done. And it's time to move on.

And besides, Rafe is right - my father will have his own response to this matter in time.

And when that comes, Bruce will have his own debts to pay.

"You know," I say softly, considering my words very carefully as I step to Luca's side. "Luca's bigger than just his boxing career. His worth is not measured alone by what he can earn in the ring, and through the media. He's doing beautifully at the Academy, which is a career path in itself. And he has people who believe in him, who will help him build the roads to whatever he wants to do once he's no longer boxing anymore."

I slip my hand into my mate's as I feel a rush of shock, and humility, and gratitude come flooding through our bond. And as I look up at Luca, I realize that no one's ever said that to him before - that they think he's bigger than just his boxing career. That he's worth something beyond it.

"I very much hope you're right, miss," Bruce says, his voice soft.

I snap my gaze back to Bruce.

"I am," I say, my voice firm.

And nobody says another damn thing, because we're all very aware that mine is the final word on the subject.

I let the silence ring for a moment before I look up at my mate, and tug on his hand. "Is there somewhere we can go?" I ask quietly. "I want a private word with you."

Luca stares at me for a second before he clears his throat and nods. "My room," he murmurs, lifting his chin back towards foyer in front of the main door, beyond which is a staircase. "We can talk there."

I turn towards Rafe and then Jesse. "You'll be all right here?"

"Sure," Rafe says, nodding easily to me as Bruce sighs and walks out of the room, heading into the kitchen at the same moment that Gran comes out, carrying a heaping tray full of plates. Rafe smiles softly. "I think we'll be... kept busy down here. Take your time, Ariel."

As Luca and I set off for the stairs, I see Rafe and Jesse sit down on the couch with Linda as Gran happily sets the tray down on the coffee table.

"Who..." Gran says, straightening up and putting her hands on her hips, looking curiously at Jesse. "Who....are you?"

Jesse's jaw drops. "You don't know who I am!?"

She just leans closer, like studying him will help her figure it out.

But Jesse just sighs, a tiny bit devastated, as he reaches for a slice of cake. "I'm the Duke."

"The best Duke," Rafe says, grinning at our cousin and patting him on the back as Gran presses a plate of cake into her favorite's hand.

I smile a little, but then we're too far up the steps to see any more of the action below, and the smile falls from my face as I follow Luca into his room.

He doesn't say anything as he holds open his door, letting me slip inside. A grin creeps over my face as I move to Luca's little twin bed and sit down on it, curling my legs up beneath me, because the room is just so boyish. There are boxing posters all over the wall, and old sets of gloves heaped in a corner, and a desk where I can imagine him immediately abandoning his homework as a kid. There's even still a cup with all of his pencils in the corner, a few of them broken and haphazardly shoved away.

Honestly, it's charming as hell. But Luca clearly isn't thinking about how cute his room is as he shuts his door and leans back against it, staring at the floor. "I am so sorry, Ariel," he sighs, his voice low with shame.

## **Chapter 0319**

### Chapter 0319

"Luca," I say, putting out my hands towards him.

He lifts his eyes a little to meet mine, but he doesn't move.

I just raise my eyebrows, a demand in them, and he sighs and presses up off the door, coming to take my hands and sit by my side. "Your room is so cute," I whisper.

He laughs, though his heart isn't in it. "Mom keeps it like a shrine to my childhood," he murmurs. "I had an apartment, obviously, in the city. But I sold it when I decided to run off to the Academy. Put the profits into the gym."

"Yeah, why didn't you tell me about the gym?" I ask, turning towards him and scooting closer, reaching out a hand to softly stroke his cheek. "It sounds amazing, what you're doing for those boys."

"Because...." he says, hesitating and leaning into my hand, "I don't know, Ariel, I mean who knows how long it will last. I don't want to tell you about a project that might fail in a few months when we can no longer afford to fund it."

"Well, you've got millions now," I say, my voice a little dry.

He looks up at me now. "No, I don't," he murmurs, his hands tightening on mine. "I'm giving you that money, obviously." "Okay," I say, a little too cheerful. His eyes widen in surprise - I don't think he thought I'd actually take it. "Except, I want my half donated anonymously to your gym. As long as the profits go to scholarships for the boys. I don't want to pay your uncle's salary,"

Luca huffs a laugh, but when he sees that I'm serious his face falls. "Ariel," he says, shaking his head like it's ridiculous.

"Luca," I say, mimicking the sound of his voice, because he's the one being ridiculous now. "I believe in you. If this is something you care about, then it's something I care about too. I think it's amazing. You should have told me about it sooner - you know that the rest of us would want to help. My mom is going to love it - she loves anything that helps kids who need a little boost in life." "I can't just...take your parents' money."

"Okay," I say, understanding. Money is easy for me, but I understand that it's not that way for everyone. "Then we'll help in other ways."

I smile, but Luca drops his head again, shaking it. "I'm so sorry, Ariel," he repeats, still stuck on it. "You're making this too easy. It never should have happened. My uncle - he crossed a line - and I'm so pissed at him - he's got way too much control of my life, and I think that he hates that I have a royal connection now, that someone else - especially a little blonde girl - might influence me more than he does -"

"Luca," I murmur, moving closer so that my side is pressed to his, sensing that he's on the edge of a rant that's going to take him deeper and deeper into a spiral of worry and sorrow and grief. I press his cheeks between my palms and force him to look at me. "I forgive you, all right? If there's anything to forgive - which I'm not sure there is - I forgive you."

He stares at me, a little baffled. And we stay like that for a long moment before he raises one hand, covering one of my own, still pressed to his cheek. "You're too good," he murmurs. "I don't deserve you."

"The Goddess doesn't make mistakes," I say with a happy little sigh, lifting my chin and pressing a kiss to his mouth. Luca takes a moment to respond, but then his eyes drift shut, and he wraps his arms around me and kisses me back, kisses me like I'm precious, and wonderful, and like he's terrified to lose me.

When we break apart a moment later, I know that we're all right. And that even if the situation isn't right yet - that he and I? We're good. We'll see it through.

"I'm going to go now," I whisper, staring straight into his brown eyes, my voice steady and warm. His eyes widen, worried, but I shush him softly, lifting my face a little to press a kiss to his cheek. "Not because I want to, or because I'm mad - but because you need to get your head back on your fight."

Luca just blinks at me like he forgot all about that.

And I laugh - because he probably did.

## Chapter 0320

### Chapter 0320

After a moment Luca starts to laugh with me before he takes a deep breath and nods. "Fucking fight," he murmurs, running an anxious hand through his hair. "I have so much to do."

"I know," I say, resting my head on his shoulder. "But I don't want your mind on me at all, okay? Put all of this out of your head and concentrate on what you have to do. I'll be there, tonight, in the box. Just like I promised."

"Are you sure?" he asks, tentative - because he knows that there will be eyes on me now that this article is out - way more than there were before.

"Royal box," I whisper. "Dead center. I'll be right there, nowhere else."

"You're not just saying that you're not mad so that I won't worry about it?" He whispers, and I grin at him, shaking my head a little because he's overthinking it.

"You didn't do anything bad to me, Luc," I say, pressing another kiss to his mouth. "So, I've got nothing to be mad about. We're good. You just concentrate on the fight - bring me home a pretty new belt to add to my accessories."

Luca laughs and then kisses me, swift and passionate, sending a great flood of love and gratitude and something very close to reverence down the bond. And I kiss him back for a good long time, not letting my own emotions travel to him, because I'm still mad as hell at his uncle and frankly a little sorry for Luca. And he doesn't need to know that right now.

Luca - he's so brash, and brave, and funny and charming and charismatic. But he's had someone behind him controlling a great deal of his life, hasn't he? And every part of me can see how a teenage Luca - so angry, so driven by his emotions - needed that control. Bruce and Luca - there's a great deal of love in their relationship, but also some condescension I'm not sure I can forgive.

No, I'm not sure I can countenance at all a man who has told his nephew that his only worth is in his ability to get into a ring and beat the tar out of other boys. I'm not sure I'm going to stand for that at all.

But... that's something Luca and I can talk about later. There's plenty of time for that.

"Okay," I say, laughing a little and breaking our kiss, running my fingers through his hair slightly. "I'm going to go. You have to concentrate."

"No," he mutters, bringing his face back to mine, "five more minutes"

"Luca!" I laugh, pulling away.

"Two!"

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But when I laugh harder he does too, and holds me tight for a second before letting me go. Luca stands with me, walking me to the door, and we kiss one last time before I leave him there and hop cheerfully down the stairs. He sends a warm pulse of affection after me, and I send it right back, along with a great deal of assurance.

When I get to the ground floor and peek into the living room, I grin to see that basically all the cake has been eaten, and that Jesse and Gran are looking together at a photograph of the entire royal family that she's taken down from the wall.

"That's me!" Jesse says, pointing at his image insistently. "Duke Jesse! Me!"

A little dubious, Gran looks between him and the picture. "Duchessa Cora?" she asks, hesitant, pointing to Aunt Cora in the picture.

"That's my mom!" Jesse exclaims, throwing out an eager hand. Gran grimaces, staring at him like that can't possibly be true and making Rafe laugh.

Linda stands and comes over to me, slipping an arm around my shoulders. "She knows who he is, she figured it out ages ago," she whispers in my ear. "She's just messing with him now." I look at Linda in shock and then burst out laughing. Jesse and Rafe turn my way, Rafe getting to his feet.

"All good?" he asks, hesitant. I look to Linda, seeing the same question in her eyes.

"All good," I say, nodding around to everyone. "Luca and I are fine." I look up at Linda again. "We'll see you at the fight tonight? Would you like to come and sit in our box? You'd be more than welcome."