

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy

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Chapter 0321

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She beams at me, genuinely pleased. "We always sit ringside for Luca's fights," she says, giving me a little squeeze. "But thank you. That's very kind."

"Offer stands," Rafe says, coming over with Jesse, Gran between them with one arm around each of their waists. "Any concert or sporting game - if you want to use the box just let us know."

She blushes and laughs like we can't be serious, but Jesse assures her that we are. Then we all say our goodbyes and head out the door, dashing as fast as we can for our black car so that the paparazzi can't get a good picture.

But as we run, I wonder if it even matters -

Because I'm going to be at Luca's fight tonight, front and center. And isn't that all the confirmation they're going to need?

I'm still wondering about it, a little worried, when I wander into my bedroom about half an hour later, barely concentrating on my surroundings because I'm so lost in my thoughts.

So, it's no surprise that I don't notice the tiny Queen sitting on my bed.

"Heyyy babyyy," she croons, and I shriek and basically jump out of my skin, making her laugh and fall back against my pillows. "Mom!" I growl, dashing forward to smack at her, even though she dodges my half-hearted blow. "Don't scare me like that!" "It's not my fault you were lost in Lala-Land," she says, grabbing me and hauling me over to her when I slump down onto the bed. "What would you have done if I was some kind of agent from another country sent to kidnap you? Aren't they training you for precisely this sort of thing in that school of yours?"

"I would poison you," I mutter, laughing a little, "because my education hasn't gotten me any further than that yet."

"Oh yes, very powerful," mom murmurs, stroking my hair and grinning at me. She pulls me back against her, my back to her chest, and starts to pet my hair. In the mirror across the room, I watch as her face falls into more serious lines. "How did it go with Luca?"

I sigh, nestling more comfortably against her as mom leans over and produces, of all things, a cup of hot coffee, pressing it into my hands. I grin and take a sip, pleased both to have it and because she knew I'd want it - she saw I didn't have any caffeine this morning at breakfast.

"It went okay," I say, nodding and relishing the taste of the coffee. "Luca and I are fine. He wasn't the one who told the press." Mom exhales a deep breath and nods to me with relief.

"But," I continue with a grimace, "his uncle did." She gasps satisfyingly mom is a great listener of gossip and then sits quietly while I tell the whole story. By the end she's shaking her head in a bit of awe.

"It's such a shame it had to go like that," she says quietly, staring into space a bit and idly playing with my hair, curling a strand of it around her finger. "If Luca needed funds - especially for his family, or for such a good cause - then they could have come to us instead of gambling your secret away. We'd have been happy to help."

"That's what I said!"

She nods to me. "But I agree with you - his uncle is underestimating Luca's abilities to support himself for the rest of his life. Luca - he's more than just a talented boxer. I just hope his uncle didn't get so far into his head that Luca can't see that himself."

"Well, we'll help him." I say, curling up closer to her and resting my head back against her shoulder, pleased to have my mom's support.

"Of course we will," she murmurs, slipping her arm around my shoulders. "Now, let's talk about your mate."

I blink for a second, and then turn my head to frown up at her. "Didn't we just do that?"

"No baby," she says, grinning at me. "Your other mate."

And I sit up straighter because....Jackson?

Did something go wrong?

Chapter 0322

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"What's wrong with Jacks?" I ask, a little frantic, turning to look her in the face.

"See?" mom says, sitting up with a grin and pointing her finger at me, poking me in the chest. "The fact that you keep assuming something is wrong with him tells me that you know something is up too."

"That's not a ridiculous assumption to make when someone says they want to talk about someone, mom," I say, glaring at her a little and slumping back against the pillows, taking the last sip of my coffee and putting the cup on my bedstand.

"I know, but you did it at breakfast when he wasn't there, too. He's a big, powerful Alpha, Ariel - why do you assume he can't take care of himself?"

I sigh, pressing my hands together and screwing my mouth to the side as I consider my mom, who is so pretty, and considerate, and kind. But I know that she's asking for a reason, and I don't know how much Jackson told her, or how much he'd want me to reveal. "Well, Jackson's kind of..." I hesitate, not knowing what to say.

"He's precious, isn't he?" Mom says with a little smile, staring at me with a whole heap of love in her eyes.

"So, you see it too?" I ask, leaning forward a bit. She nods. "He's so...you're right, mom, he's so powerful, but he's so delicate too -like he totally doesn't understand this world, and he doesn't know how to move around in it, and he's so hungry for someone to love him - but I don't even think he knows that. I just feel...very protective of him."

"Oh, baby," mom sighs, beaming at me and reaching out to pat my cheek. "I'm so glad you see it too."

"How could I miss it?" I say, a little awed.

"Well," she says, with a shrug. "I think...pretty much everyone else in his life has missed it. He's so... rugged. I think people just assume that what's inside matches the outside." She pauses a minute, considering. "He told me a little bit about where he comes from. It...it doesn't sound good."

"What did he tell you?" I ask, fascinated and curious, glad she knows so that we can talk about it.

"A little about the Community, about not having parents. Most of it came out when I was getting him new clothes

I laugh, and she does too, and I can just imagine how funny, awkward, and sweet my mate was when mom was putting him through his fashion paces.

"But," she says, "did you know he's like...never chosen his clothing before?"

"No," I say quietly, resting my head back against the pillow, a little awed by it.

"Yeah," she says, nodding, her eyes a bit far-off. "His entire life Jackson's just worn whatever was provided to him - a tradition we continued at the Academy. When I gave him his new wardrobe, he asked which piece he should wear next, and I said whatever you want, and he looked at me like I was crazy."

"Did you pick out his outfit today?" I whisper, kind of dying to know.

"Nah," she says, grinning at me. "I gave him some hints about how to put together colors, and I left him with some fashion magazines. But he successfully put together a button-down and some jeans today. Clever boy."

We both laugh then, but there's no malice in it. Just a great deal of love between two people who care about someone who is trying very hard.

"He's so sweet," I murmur, dropping my head a little to hide my ridiculous smile.

"He is," mom says, and the slight hardness to her voice makes me look up at her again. She looks at me seriously now and my smile falls away. "I won't have you breaking his heart, Ariel."

My mouth pops open a little, because - well, one, because I have no intention of doing that. And two - "Wait," I say, voicing my protestation aloud, "aren't I your daughter!? Shouldn't you be saying that to him!?"

Mom laughs now, unable to help it. "Jackson doesn't need to be told not to break your heart, Ariel." I open my mouth again to protest, but she holds up a hand, asking me to let her finish. I scowl, and snap my jaw shut. "But baby, you've got a team behind you - a whole world of support. Luca does too. If either of you get your heart broken, you've got people to fall back on. Jackson..." she lets her words fade off here, because I know how they end.

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And my heart sinks, thinking of the reality of that. Thinking that my sweet Jacks - he's really got no one in his life to hold him and cuddle him and be his safety net. Well, almost no one.

"He's got us," I whisper, looking into my mom's eyes, which I know are precisely the same shade as mine. "Which...I mean, it isn't nothing, mom. We're formidable."

"It's true," she says, a slow grin coming over her face. "Pint sided, but formidable."

We both laugh again, and she strokes my cheek. "I love you so much baby," she whispers, "I just...I care a great deal about that boy already."

"Why?" I ask, a little curious.

She just grins at me. "An orphan boy, looking for a mom? Who wants a family, but doesn't even know how to ask for it? Come on, baby trouble," she murmurs, and I immediately put the pieces together - and I can't believe I didn't see it before. "Jackson's basically my catnip - I can't resist wanting to give him everything I didn't have."

"Mommm," I groan, scooting closer to her over the bed and wrapping my arms around her, putting my head down on her chest as she tugs me close. "You're so nice. Thank you for taking care of him. And I promise, I'll be careful. He's very important to me."

"I know he is sweetie, and I know that it's not easy for you. I know it's complicated, with Luca too. Just...try to remember that Jackson's kind of an island. And that he's putting a great deal on the line, loving you."

"Do you think I've done a bad job so far?" I ask, kind of terrified to hear her answer.

"Not at all, baby," she says, "this is all...for the future. Because I don't think it gets simpler for the three of you. I think...well, I think there are going to be hard times."

I nod, agreeing, kind of dreading it. And inwardly, I solidify my promise to be on Jackson's side, even when things get hard. Because mom's right - in some cases, I'm the only one there.

Mom presses a kiss to my forehead and then reaches for my bedside table again, where she slides the drawer open and pulls something out. "Speaking of the future," she murmurs, putting a little green bottle into my hand. "This should set you up well to... make whatever plans you want to."

"Huh?" I ask, staring at it. And then my eyes go wide when I realize what it is. "Oh," I say, a little...at a loss for words.

I've seen a bottle like this before - mom keeps it in her bedside table too. The day I figured out that it's a contraceptive tonic - a mild and specific variety of wolfsbane,

combined with ginger and wild carrot - I had blushed for days at the idea that mom still needed it. But when mom had finally confronted me on why I was being so weird around her, we'd had a really good chat about sex, and pregnancy, and reproductive health.

"I think you should start taking it," mom says, thoughtful. "I mean, obviously, the choice is up to you. But there's nothing wrong or bad or shameful about sex, Ariel, even if...well, if your mate situation makes it a little more complicated. But considering your choice of career, I don't think you want a baby right now

"No, I don't," I confirm, my eyebrows raised. God, it sure would be hard to pretend I'm a boy at Alpha Academy with a big pregnant belly to give me away.

"Not that I would protest that!" mom says, putting her hands up.

I gape a little, staring up at her.

"Listen, baby," mom says, grinning at me, "the sooner you want to give me a grandchild - or eight - the better, as far as I'm concerned -"

"Mommm!" I groan, tilting my head back so far that I fall back on the bed. I use the new position to kick at her lightly,

embarrassed and kind of appalled at the idea. A baby! A grandchild for my parents! God, I haven't even thought of something like that.

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"I know, I know," mom says with a sigh, flopping down next to me on her stomach. "I am willing to wait. And if you decide you don't want kids, Ariel, that's fine too - I'll badger Rafe and Junie and Mark, because one of you will have to give in. I just..." she shrugs, and I look over at her seriously as I clutch the contraceptive tonic to my chest, "I want you to be in charge of your choices. I want you to decide when and if you have kids. And that," she says, pointing to the tonic, "helps with that."

I consider my mom seriously for a moment, and then the tonic in my hands, and then I sit up with a new curiosity burning in me. Well, does it like, change anything?" I ask curiously. "Will my period be different? What does it taste like?"

Mom laughs, and begins to tell me everything, and it's the start of a very long, very detailed, and very important chat.

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In fact, our chat is so long that it only ends with a big thump on my door that makes both of us jump, but which we know can only be one thing.

"Ariell," Mark groans, slumped against the outside of my door. I laugh, because he's been doing this since he was a kid. Markie doesn't knock - he just throws his body against the door and starts talking. "Stop hogging mom! Some of us need help with our bow ties!"

"Bow ties?" I call, "what are you talking about?"

My handle twists and Markie comes in then, and I gasp to see him all dressed up in a tuxedo, looking down at the two ends of the bow tie in his hands. "Mark!" I squeak, thrilled. "You look so handsome!"

"Really?" he says, grinning and striking a pose for me. "I'm not cute anymore? I'm handsome?"

"You're both," I say, nodding, decided, and my baby laughs and jumps on the bed with us, pleased to be so complimented. I laugh too, watching him with a bit of fascination, because it's not like I've never seen Mark in a tux before mom dresses us up formally for all sorts of occasions. It's just that he really did grow up in the few months that we were away. He looks...god, he looks like an adult now.

Soon the girls are going to be all over him, and I won't know what to do.

"Come here, Markito," mom murmurs, holding out her hands for him. "Let me tie that tie."

"I'm not going," Juniper sighs at the doorway, and I turn my head to look over at her, a grin immediately taking my face. She's slumped against my doorframe, her arms crossed, her eyes rolled up to the ceiling. "I don't have anything to wear. So, I'm not going. Plus, it's a primeval form of entertainment, watching two men beat each other to bits."

"Oh Juuuune," mom sighs, waving her to come in as Mark scootches closer to her. "Come in, you can raid Ariel's closet, I'm sure she has something that will look amazing on you."

"She so can not raid my closet!" I gasp, even as I subtly tuck the contraceptive potion away beneath my pillow, not really ready for Mark and Juniper to know about this burgeoning aspect of my life.

"Ariel, you don't even know what's in your closet," mom murmurs, rolling her eyes, "how would you even know if Junie wore I bought for you or for her?"

"You have to pay rental fees by the hour!" I say, pointing a finger at June as she wanders over to my wardrobe. "And don't spill anything on it!" I don't mean it, not really - I never care if my sister borrows my clothes. I just like to torture her about it.

Juniper, knowing this, completely ignores me.

A little gasp comes at the door and I turn to see Daphne standing there, staring at me. "Ariel!" she says, a little freaked out. "Why aren't you ready!? we have to like...go!"

"What," I say with a frown, looking at the clock. "We have like, an hour, Daphne -"

"And you have to get ready!" she says, scurrying into the room, looking amazing in a red dress.

"Daph!" I say, gaping and putting out a hand with my palm out. She skitters to a stop, not knowing what I mean, and I just stare at her. "That dress looks insane on you!"

Daphne blushes, but I can tell that she's pleased as she gives a tiny ironic curtsy. "Daphne Designs, of course," she says, waving a hand down to gesture to the expanse of the sleeveless dress that hugs her every curve all the way down to the intricately pleated skirt, which flares out at her hips and spreads around her, all the way to the ground. It's just a few shades darker red than her hair, which I never realized would look so good until I see it now in person.

"You made this?" mom gasps, standing and moving to Daphne's side now that Mark's tie is tied. Daphne laughs and nods, again pleased, and mom admires the dress extensively. I grin, likewise pleased, especially because I can tell that not an ounce of mom's compliments are flattery.

Read Chapter 0325

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"Seriously, Daph, good job," I say, giving her a thumbs up and wandering over to my wardrobe to sort through the dresses with Juniper. "Now come help me pick out something for me to wear - I have to look at least half as good as you tonight."

"You don't even know what you're going to wear!?" Daphne squeaks, horrified, as she scurries over to my side. "Oh my god, Ariel, I don't know how you live such a chaotic life"

"What are you talking about?" I burst out, laughing. "What's chaotic about -"

"Ariel, I have had this outfit picked out for a month," she says, staring at me like I'm completely insane. "And you're picking out what you're going to wear to the media event of the year - at which you will be center stage, miss mated to the boxer -" here she pokes me in the center of the chest with a finger, making me laugh again, "and you haven't even decided what to wear?"

"It's because she's spoiled," mom says, making me spin in protest as she comes to stand with the three of us at the wardrobe. Mark sprawls over the bed, watching, grinning, enjoying the drama. "I always pick out her clothes - all of my children's, honestly. They've never had to worry about it a day in their lives."

"I pick out my outfits all the time!" I protest.

"Because mom basically turns your room into a department store," Juniper mutters, smirking.

"Oh, look who's talking," I snap playfully, giving my sister a playful shove. But Juniper ignores me, her face going serious with awe as she gasps and reaches for something in the back of the wardrobe. When she pulls out a shimmering silver gown, my eyes go wide. "Ohhh....this is pretty," she murmurs, her hand running over it.

I gasp a little too, because it is a gorgeous dress, the fabric shimmering like liquid. But not in a metallic way - almost like...well, like it's actually water, reflecting starlight, or something equally mythical and fantastic.

"Wow," Daphne says, reaching out to touch it.

"Um," my mom says, and we all turn towards her, surprised by the hesitance in her voice. She reaches for the dress, and Juniper hands it over to her. To my surprise, mom holds it up to me. "Actually," she whispers, "I kind of did buy this with Ariel in mind. Since it's such a special night for her."

I look at my mom in surprise, and then gratitude, because it is an incredible dress - and it was so nice of her to realize that tonight was going to be important for me, with Luca boxing for our nation's pride.

But when I see the way June's eyes cast down to the floor, not at all protesting, but...disappointed...

I know that the choice is simple.

"No, let's let Junie wear it!" I say, beaming at my mom and taking the dress from her hands, holding it out to Juniper's body to see how it looks. Juniper snaps her head up, a little agape.

"But it won't fit me," Juniper murmurs, pushing it away, wanting me to take it since mom got it for me. "It's too long - mom will have had it tailored for you -"

"Well, I can help with that," Daphne says, taking my side and nodding eagerly to June. "I can fix a hem in a cinch. Why don't you try it? I think it's going to look great."

The smile on Juniper's face - it makes the sacrifice of such a stunning dress completely worth it. My taciturn little sister even laughs a little as she takes the dress from my hands and hurries away to the bathroom.

"You are so sweet," mom murmurs, stepping close to me and pressing a kiss to my temple after Juniper closes the door. "But.... you're also going to be naked at this fight. Because I didn't get a backup for you to wear."

I grimace a little, turning back to my wardrobe and sorting through the dresses, realizing that mom is right. Because even though there are dozens here, none of them at all match the one that Juniper just took.

I bite my lip, wondering what the hell I should do. I mean, it is an important night - I should look good. There are going to be lots of eyes on me as the returned Princess and the champion's declared mate- I want to show everyone that I'm proud of both.

"Hmm," Daphne says, tapping her lip with her finger and staring into the wardrobe. "I might have an...idea. Do you mind?" She raises her eyebrow at me and mom, and I know that we both give her the same grin.

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"Be our guest," mom says, gesturing towards the selection in front of us.

"Actually, what I'm thinking of is in my room," Daphne says, a huge smile on her face. And then she skitters away.

"I like this new friend," mom says, nodding as she watches Daphne dart out the door. "She's got moxy. She's also...talented, and organized, and precise, and ambitious."

"I know, she's the best," I say, looking at the empty door that Daphne just skittered through.

"You and me, we need people like her," my mom says, looking over at me with a grin as she darts a finger rapidly between us. Because we're just big-hearted chaos on wheels."

I burst into laughter, tilting my head back for the joy of it. Mom laughs along with me. "What?!" she says, grinning. "It's true!"

"Not completely!" I protest, bringing my head back in and grinning at her. "I mean, we're ambitious! And I'm organized, when I want to be!"

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"Oh, sure, sure," mom says, flapping a hand like it doesn't matter. "But selective organization and ambition are easy execution is hard. We need Daphnes in our life to help us along. And Dominics and Rafes. Practical, organized, precise."

"Which team am I on?" Markie calls from his spot on the couch, flicking through his phone as he does, only half paying attention. "Team benevolent chaos, baby!" Mom calls over to him with a big grin. "The fun team!"

Markie gives a whoop, happy to be included, and I laugh again, losing myself to it. But then I pause, my eyes drifting over my mom as she laughs along with me. "Wait mom, what are you going to wear?" I ask, gesturing towards her very high-end but completely leisurely leggings and sweater.

"Oh my god!" mom gasps, and then she, too, runs off for the door. "See? Chaos! I'll be back, twenty minutes! I have a dress! I'll be back, don't do anything fun without me!"

I'm still laughing when she's gone from the room, swinging the door shut behind her. I head over to my bed to sit with Mark and wait for mom and Daphne to come back.

"Can you help me with this?" he asks, staring baffled at the two ends of his bow tie that has, somehow, come undone already. "Should have just gotten you a snap-on," I murmur, leaning close and fiddling with the ends, trying to remember how to do this. "Definitely," Markie agrees, lifting his chin so that I can see what I'm doing.

It takes us awhile and a couple of internet videos to get Markie all fixed up again, but we get there. Not long after we do I hear the click of two doors - my bedroom door as well as the bathroom door - as they open almost simultaneously.

My head first moves to Daphne, who comes in with a length of black fabric draped over her arm, but when I see her wide grin looking towards the other end of the room I snap my head around to Juniper, who shyly peeks around the bathroom door, only half stepping through.

Mark and I gasp in tandem when we see her in the dress and I get up to my knees, excited. "Junie!" I say, my voice soft and referent as I wave her into the room. "Let me see you! Oh my god!"

Juniper laughs a little, anxious, as she steps fully out of the bathroom, but I can tell by the smile she can't keep off her face that she knows she looks good - and that she's really enjoying it. But good - the word doesn't cut it.

I clasp my hands beneath my chin as I beam at my little sister, who looks...ethereal. Something about the shimmering silver of the dress against her newly-black hair makes her emerald eyes sparkle - and the way the dress hugs her petite form to pool on the floor at her feet...

"Junie, you look so pretty," Mark says, and I can hear the happiness in his voice.

"You really do!" I squeak, my throat tight as tears spring to my eyes. Because my little sister - I've never seen her so grown up! The dress is very innocent with its sweetheart neckline and slim straps - it's not sexy or provocative at all. But still, she doesn't look like our family's little girl - she's a beautiful young woman, and I feel so proud.

"Guys," she moans, half laughing, her shoulders slumping forward as she sees the way that we're all staring at her. "Stop! I mean ...is it... is it good?" She looks down, spreading her hands out over the dress.

"It's perfect," Daphne breathes, tossing what I assume is my dress onto the bed and moving swiftly over to Juniper. "What do you think about..." she hesitates but then reaches out to softly gather Junie's hair up behind her head in a delicate twist. I nod eagerly as Daphne and Juniper look to me, because sometimes Junie hides behind her hair, but this really allows her pretty face to come forward and take center stage.

Chapter 0327

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"Do you think we can darken her eyebrows?" I ask Daphne, eager. "To match her hair more?"

"Oh, good idea!" Daphne says, and then gets started. Excited, I jump off the bed as Daphne ushers Juniper over to my vanity. Very quickly Daphne loosely pins Juniper's hair up and then uses a very light bit of cosmetics to highlight Juniper's features - her lovely dark lashes, her high cheekbones - and then, to my surprise, lines Juniper's lips in a very dark red - almost black.

"Really?" I ask, surprised.

"What?" Juniper says, her eyes going wide, trying to glance over to the mirror. "What are you doing to me?"

"Trust me," Daphne murmurs, grabbing some clear lip gloss and dabbing it onto Juniper's lips and then smudging the color at the edges a bit so that it bleeds onto her lips like a watercolor, leaving her mouth dark at the edges and light at the center, making them look full and gorgeous.

"Ohhhh," I say, my eyes crinkling with delight - because it's just precisely the right detail, and the dark color makes her look very mysterious. "You look coooool, Junie!"

"What!?" June protests, but when she spins towards the mirror her eyes go wide, I think because she's probably never seen herself like this before - glamorous, enigmatic, alluring. She stares at herself, shocked, and then a little smile takes her lips as she leans forward. "Wow..."

"That's amazing," Mark says, coming to stand with us and also peering at June in the mirror. He turns to stare at Daphne. "Can you do my makeup? What can you do to make me more handsome?"

Daphne bursts into laughter and gives Mark a playful shove on the shoulder. "You're already handsome enough, with all of those Sinclair genes. You don't need anything else."

"Yes, I do," he says, striking a dramatic pose with the back of his hand against his forehead. "Make me stunning!"

I laugh at my little baby brother, adoring him as always, but then Daphne gasps again. "Ariel!" she says, gesturing over to the fabric sitting on the bed. "What are you doing!? You haven't even tried that on yet!?"

"We got distracted!" I protest.

"Go!" she shouts, giving me a shove before reaching a hand out to Juniper, asking her to stand so that she can check the hem length on her dress. I move to the bed and gather the black fabric in my hands while I head to the bathroom door just as Markie starts to try to pull Daphne away.

"No, her hem is fine!" he groans. "Give me a makeover! What color should my eyebrows be!?"

I'm laughing as I step into the bathroom and pull the door shut behind me. Then, grinning, I quickly peel my clothes off and step into the dress, pulling it up over my body.

I turn to look at myself in the mirror, but eyes immediately go wide with anxiety as I fasten the zipper on the side and stare at myself in the mirror.

Because as innocent and ethereal as Juniper's was?

This one is...sexy.

The zipper done, my hands fall to the sides as I stare at myself in the mirror, at the dress that's cut in so sharp a sharp V over my chest that it comes to a point just above my navel. In many ways it's cleverly done, the V so narrow that it's almost demure there's no cleavage on display, just a great deal of implication that it could be.

I twist a little, observing the way that the dress loops up over my shoulders in diaphanous straps about an inch wide and then falls gracefully down my back in a wide scoop, leaving my entire back bare as the fabric settles just barely an inch above my butt. My eyes go wider - if possible - when I see how much flesh is bared, and I blush at myself...

But then I bite my lip because...I mean, because I kind of like it.

This feels like the kind of dress that was made for a spy disguised as a princess, a femme fatale, someone who people underestimate because she's pretty and delicate but who can poison you in nine different ways.

The kind of dress for a princess with two Alpha mates, each of which is ready to tear the world apart at her command. Slowly, I smile.

Because I absolutely love it.

Chapter 0328

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I beam in particular at the thought of Daphne, who envisioned me in this dress tonight. Daphne, my dear friend who knows the intricacies of my story, and my personality, so completely that she...made this dress.

And instantly, I know that she made it. And that she made it for me. Because it fits like a damn glove, even if it is a little bit long.

Eagerly, I move for the door, pulling it open and smirking when I find Daphne standing about ten feet away, waiting for me, the straps of a pair of insanely high stiletto shoes

draped over her fingers, held out towards me. "I cut the hem for six-inch heels," she says with a smirk. "Think you can handle it?"

I squeal with excitement as I scurry over to her, throwing myself into her arms as she laughs and hugs me back, as Markie says "whoa!" and Juniper gapes from her spot by the vanity, pins all over the bottom of her dress.

"I love it," I whisper to Daphne, incredibly excited as I pull back and take the shoes from her hands, leaning on her shoulder as I start to pull them on.

"You do!?" Daphne nearly sings, excited. "I dreamed it up, but I wasn't sure you'd like it -"

"It's perfect," I say, shaking my head a little.

"Actually," she murmurs, and I watch with surprise as she pushes hastily at the straps over my shoulders so that they fall, dainty, to hang in loops over my arms, leaving my shoulders bare. I hesitate for a second, thinking that the whole dress is going to fall down, but then I realize that Daphne's crafted it so carefully that the boning and structure beneath the long strip of black silky fabric holds it up. The whole dress looks like it's crafted to go to pieces and leave me naked in an instant, but really it's quite sturdy.

"You're so clever," I murmur, twisting a little as I take in the effect in the mirror. "I can't believe you did this. Every girl in the nation is going to want one of these tomorrow." Daphne laughs and heads back to Juniper while I finish pulling on my shoes. I turn towards Mark and Juniper, wanting their opinions, when the door opens and mom comes in in her own gorgeous gown, a confection of peach-colored organza and lace.

When mom presses the door shut and turns to me, her mouth falls open.

"Oh my god," she whispers, looking me up and down, her eyes wide and her expression blank.

I bite my lip, not sure if I like this reaction. "Is it too much?"

Slowly, my mom raises her eyes back to mine. She's silent for a long, long moment, and my stomach sinks, but then she clasps her hands in front of her chest and gives a brilliant little shriek of joy. "Ariel! You look gorgeous! You look amazing!"

I burst into a grin and my mom hurries across the room to me, taking my hand and making me spin in a circle for her, her eyes going wide again when she sees the back.

"You look so sexy," she whispers, meeting my eyes, which makes me laugh and blush at once. Pleased, Daphne goes back to kneel on the floor in front of Juniper, fixing up her hemline in a hurry.

"But seriously, you don't think it's too much?" I ask, a little worried.

Mom laughs and gives me an anxious little grimace. "I think your dad's going to flip."

I go a little pale at the idea but mom just flaps her hand at me, darting over to the closet where some of my coats are kept, pulling out a chic little faux-fur wrap. "You can just wear this until we get to the fight, and then he won't have a chance to protest, will he?"

I laugh and nod, grinning at my mom, loving her loving that she doesn't have a prudish bone in her body and would never try to make me feel any shame about my body or wearing whatever I want.

Mom tosses the coat onto the bed and then quickly begins to confer with Daphne about what we should do for makeup and hair. Mark pretends to get in on it, giving his playful suggestions, all of which are dismissed because he has terrible teenage-boy tastes. But by the time Juniper's hem is all sewn up, I'm equally fitted out as well, with dark and smoky makeup on my eyes, and barely a bit of gloss on my lips, and two tiny diamond clips holding my hair back from my face so that it flows down my back. Simple, sexy, dangerous. When I stand next to my mom and my sister and look in the mirror, I grin around at all of us - shocked at how three women with such similar features can look so different tonight. But each of us so lovely in our own ways.

"Oh, I love you both so much," mom squeals, putting her arms around our shoulders and giving us each a kiss and a squeeze. "What about me!?" Markie protests, behind us, left out.

"Yes, you too, Mark, of course," mom says, her voice over-indulgent as it always is with him, but he beams anyway when she turns and gives him a hug.

As she does, Juniper turns to me and crosses her arms, looking me up and down. "Who's spooky now?" she asks, smirking.

"Yes, bubblegum sparkle princess is no more," I say with a mock sigh, grinning at her, remembering her words on the day I came home. "It's all dark Ariel now."

Juniper laughs with me and then gives me a nod. "I think it's cool," she says, giving a one-shouldered shrug. "New era, new princess. I think it...suits you. All sides of you."

"Thanks, Junie," I say, a little softer now, genuinely touched.

"You're welcome," she says, giving me a big grin. "In exchange for my kindness, please do not tell mom and dad if you see me drinking champagne tonight."

I narrow my eyes a little at my wicked sister, but then I grin and loop my elbow in hers, giving her a nod. Secrets between sisters, after all, are very important. It's about time Juniper and I were on the same team.

"Are we ready?" mom asks, moving towards the door.

"Aye aye, Captain Mom," Markie says, giving her a foolish salute. She grins at him and then points to the fur still on the bed." Seriously, Ariel, you'd better wear that or your dad will lock you in your room."

I grin and, as I move out of the room with my sister on one side and Daphne on the other, I grab my coat, pulling it over my shoulders and feeling incredibly excited about the night.

Because I have a new dress, and I get to go to an event with my entire family, and watch my mate beat the crap out of someone and defend our national pride. It can't get any better than this.

And what, possibly, could go wrong?

Chapter 0329

Chapter 0329

Downstairs, where we all gather by the door and wait for the cars to come around to the front of the palace, is the best kind of chaos. I'm beaming ear-to-ear, a cheeseburger in one hand and a glass of champagne in the other, as I chat with my family, greeting everyone and exchanging compliments.

None of the compliments are false, actually, because everyone looks amazing. All the men are in tuxes, and while my dad and Rafe wear tuxedos like they were born for them, nobody outdoes Uncle Roger and Jesse for flare. Jesse's suitcoat tonight is made out of an incredibly gorgeous wine-colored velvet with black lapels. It would swallow anyone else, but Jesse's personality can handle it. "Hello, gorgeous cousin," he murmurs, pulling me close to give me a kiss on the cheek as he smirks at my cropped fur jacket. "What are you hiding under there?"

"Oh, weapons," I say, grinning and taking a big bite of my cheeseburger. "Vials of poison, a very small sniper rifle." I put my fingers up close to my face, pinched together, indicating the rifle's approximate size.

"Not a crossbow?" he asks, raising an eyebrow, his hands slipped into his pockets.

"No, I'm kind of over those at the moment," I say with a sigh, tilting my head to the side. "Though I can't imagine why." Jesse laughs and pats me on the shoulder before moving over to the little buffet mom had set up by the door she always does this, wanting us to

each have a bunch of greasy food before we go out to a party or an event so no one's drinking on an empty stomach. And, despite being practical, it's delicious.

I continue to eat my burger and sip my champagne, letting my eyes drift over my family. I grin to see Markie standing with my dad and Rafe, pleased as hell to finally be allowed to come along to a big grown-up event like this. Ben and Daphne are raiding the buffet, I think a little shocked by it but enjoying it nonetheless. Juniper, meanwhile, is being extravagantly admired by Aunt Cora, who is stunning in an elegant navy-blue jumpsuit with wide-flared legs that almost give the impression of a dress until you see her move.

I'm suffused with happiness, thrilled to be here with everyone, except...

Well, except my eyes keep moving to the door. Because there's one person missing, and he's precisely the one I'm waiting for.

A bell rings by the palace's main doors, letting us know that the cars are here, and my dad looks over at me with his mouth drawn into a thin line, a little worried. Because it's time to go, and he's well aware that Jackson's missing.

I wave to my dad, swallowing my last bite of cheeseburger, and head immediately for the door to the hall, intending to check Jackson's guest suite to see if he's ready-

But there's no need, because before I've even taken three steps, Jackson appears.

And, as it so frequently does these days when I see him, my mouth drops open.

But this time, it's not a good thing.

"Jacks!" I gasp, quickly closing the distance between us and looking worriedly over his jeans, his casual flannel button-down, the brown jacket draped over his arms. I mean, he looks good, but... "Why - where's your tux!? Didn't mom get you one!?" I look anxiously over my shoulder at the waiting crowd, some of whom have noticed Jackson's appearance and look worriedly over at us, and some of whom are still oblivious.

"Ariel," Jackson says, putting a hand out on my shoulder and smiling down at me. "No, she did, I just "

"Well, why aren't you wearing it!?"

Jackson sighs, and holds my gaze, but he doesn't say anything. It only takes me half a second to figure out the answer to my own question.

"You're not coming?" I whisper, stepping closer to him so that the fur of my coat brushes against his chest, so that I'm staring up into his sapphire eyes.

"Ariel," he murmurs, raising a hand to tuck my hair back behind my ears, gazing down at me, his expression sorry to see me so dismayed. "I'll just be a distraction -"

"No, you won't!" I insist, meaning it and shaking my head. Anger starts to roll in me, a bit, because Jackson - he always thinks he's an imposition, but I always want him by my side. Why does he keep insisting he'll be a bother? "Jacks, I want you to come! We all want you to come!" I gesture vehemently back towards my family, nearly spilling what's left of the champagne from the glass still in my hand.

Chapter 0330

Chapter 0330

Jacks sighs and deftly takes the glass from me, setting it on a table by his side as he speaks. "Luca doesn't want me to come," he murmurs, raising an eyebrow at me.

"Oh, Luca won't even know you're there," I say, waving a hand to dismiss the idea. "Seriously, Jacks"

"No, seriously, Ariel," he says, his tone a little sharper than I've heard from him before. I go still, looking up into his face, realizing that Jackson is asserting himself. Which I certainly want him to do - I just...am not used to it. He sighs and takes my face between his palms, stepping close, speaking more softly now. "I'm fine with it, okay? This is Luca's big night, he's worked hard for it, he deserves the spotlight. And he deserves your full attention. And beyond that, you deserve to have a night where you just get to concentrate on him - I know that if I'm there you'll check yourself, always looking over your shoulder to make sure that I'm okay."

I sigh too, my expression falling as I gaze up at my sweet, thoughtful mate. "I just...always want you to be okay."

"I know," he murmurs, slipping his hand around to the back of my head and wrapping his other arm around me, pulling me close, bringing my head to his chest so I can hear his words rumbling as he speaks them. "Take the night, Ariel. Feel what it's like to be Luca's mate, to give him your full attention. I think that's...important."

"Why is it important?" I murmur, hating the idea of Jackson not being there, of him missing it.

"Because," he says, and I turn my head up to look into his face again when I hear the smirk in his voice. "When you pick me, Ariel, I want it to be with the full knowledge of what life would be like as Luca's mate - all the highs and lows. I'm not going to be accepting any accusations that I sabotaged his chances by always hanging around you, spoiling your good time."

"I would never accuse you of that!" I gasp.

"Yeah," he says, smirking and laughing a little. "But he would."

And I can't help it - I grin, and stare up at him. "I think you're too good, McClintock," I whisper, shaking my head a little. "That maybe you should play dirty, every once in awhile."

"Oh, I've got plenty of time to play dirty with you, Clark," he murmurs, his voice hitting that low register that makes my eyes flutter half shut. He takes my chin in his hands, then, sharp, and pulls me up onto my toes as he dips his head to kiss me. His movements are rougher than usual, his lips hard on mine in a way that lets me know precisely what he's got in store for me in the future.

My wolf responds with a panting little howl, frantically turning in circles, urging me to try to find a way to stay in his arms. To make him come with us, or stay here, or run away to Aunt Cora's beach cottage with him and just live on whatever canned food they've got stocked up there for as long as it lasts -

Because I never, ever want to not feel precisely like this - pressed wann against Jackson's body, tight in his arms.

I have to admit, I'm a little dazed when he pulls away, but his arm tight around me stops me from stumbling.

"Have fun, enjoy yourself," he murmurs, smiling down at me. And his eyes twinkle a bit, like he's daring me to have more fun than I could with him. Because he kind of...knows that it's impossible.

"Ariel?" my mom calls, worried. I glance over my shoulder and see that my family is starting to head out the door. Jackson raises a hand to her, letting her know she's been heard, asking for another moment.

"Jacks," I say, pouting pathetically, a little whine in my voice.

He just laughs and shakes his head at me, moving to step away. But I move with him, not ready to part.

"What will you do tonight?" I ask, really wanting to know.

Because Jackson, alone in the palace, or the city?

What on earth will he get up to?

Chapter 0331

Chapter 0331

I frown a little, looking Jackson over, wondering what his plans are. I mean, he's dressed - he's got a coat. If he was just going back to his room, he'd be in pajamas, wouldn't he?

"I'm going to go watch the fight in a bar," he says, nodding to me. "Actually, the one I used to work at - I'm going with the guys I used to live with, those three months I lived here."

"The rough boys?"

He grins at me. "Yes, the rough boys," he says, a little laugh in his words. He leans forward, conspiratorial. "Don't worry, Ariel, I can take them."

I frown a little, narrowing my eyes. "And they're taking you to the restaurant you used to work at? With the waitresses?"

Jackson bursts out laughing now, but a vicious little snarl slips from between my teeth.

Because I do not like that. I do not like that at all.

"I can take them too, Princess," he murmurs, running his fingers through my hair passively, not even thinking about it. And as he does I can sense his feelings - that he's putting up one hell of a front right now, and is having quite a bit of trouble not throwing me over his shoulder and just carrying me back upstairs. But also, that he genuinely wants to support me, and let me live and explore my life. Even if he can't really bear to think about what it means to be giving Luca a full night alone with me, he pats that emotion away for my sake.

Or at least, he tries to.

I pass my own warm feelings back to my mate, a promise amongst them that Jackson will get his own night. Very soon.

A little smile curls at the corner of his mouth at that, and he nods.

"No waitresses," I snap, pointing a finger up at his face.

Jackson just laughs and bends a little again, pressing a quick kiss to my mouth. "Have fun, Ariel," he commands, hardly louder than a whisper. "I mean it."

And I sigh and stand on my toes again, pouting heartily at him and bringing my lips close to his, but not kissing. He laughs, seeing my game, and grabs me to him, pressing a long and lingering kiss to my mouth before I laugh and make myself push him away, make myself move towards the door even as I sigh. My head hangs a bit, my wolf howling and turning back towards Jackson, nipping at my heart and urging me to go back.

But my mom is waiting for me at the door, and despite what my wolf thinks, I do really want to go to this fight. So, I straighten my shoulders and do my best not to look back.

"Hey, Princess," Jackson calls from behind me.

I pause, curious and still a little sad, looking back at him. He raises his chin towards me.

"What's the mystery? What do you have going on under that coat?"

Slowly, my mouth curls into a grin. "Oh, baby," I say, and I don't miss the way his shoulders straighten at the way my voice has dropped, at the use of his very secret pet name. "You don't want to know."

"Show me!" he calls, laughing a little, pleased.

But I just keep walking, pretending to ignore him. As I go, though, I let the jacket slip from my shoulders, and then down my back, and then all the way off until it's just dangling from my fingertips, nearly brushing the ground.

Behind me a heavy groan breaks from Jackson, and through our bond I can feel all of his emotions at once. It's a mixed bag of joy, and pride, and the sense that I'm the most beautiful creature he's ever seen, and wonder at how lucky he is to have me, and bitterness that he was a stupid chivalric idiot and sent me off into Luca's arms dressed like this. But what traces along all of it is a great deal of desire, and the urge to chase after me and snatch me back.

I laugh, a little delighted, and I turn to walk backwards for a second so that I can grin at my mate and so that he can see the front of the dress. When I do, Jackson's jaw drops, and he groans again - louder this time- and covers his face with his hands as he turns away from me, muttering curses and turning his head up to the ceiling in regret.

"I told you to come!" I call, teasing and laughing.

Jackson doesn't respond, just sends a rather feral impression to me down the bond, something akin to teeth on skin, and ripping black silk, and panting breath in the dark. A shiver runs through me as I turn away from him, his hands still over his face, and I'm laughing as I catch up with my mom.

"Well done, baby trouble," she whispers, grinning at me and slipping an arm around my shoulders. "Making mommy proud! Now put your coat back on, your dad could still make you go change."

Laughing, I do as I'm told, slipping back into my coat and doing my best to tuck my sadness at Jackson's absence away, to concentrate instead on having fun with my family and supporting Luca. Because Jackson is right - it is Luca's night, and he does deserve my full attention.

Chapter 0332

Chapter 0332

And even if a little piece of my attention will be at some restaurant bar downtown, baring my teeth at waitresses....well, Luca doesn't need to know that, does he?

"He's too good, that boy," mom says, unable to help a little glance over her shoulder back towards the palace, to where Jackson is presumably still inside.

"I know," I say with a sigh, reaching for the car door, which opens before I can reach it, revealing a great deal of light and laughter inside the limousine as our family waits for us. "But...he gets to make his own choices too."

"That's right," she says, leaning forward to press a kiss to my cheek. And then she gives me a little push towards the car, laughing, urging me to get inside and have fun. And so I do.

Inside our limousine the atmosphere is very bright and vivid, and I'm already smiling as the car pulls away.

"Your highness," Ben murmurs from his spot next to me, slipping a glass of white wine into my hands. "I think you were perhaps wanting this."

"Thank you, Benny," I say with a sigh, grinning and putting my head on his shoulder for a second. "You're so thoughtful."

"Yes, well, I remember that one time when my insanely gorgeous mate declined to attend the national sporting event of my insanely gorgeous other mate," he says, his voice soft and whistful. "It was hard."

I burst out laughing and give Ben a hearty smack on the chest, making him grin. He holds my gaze for a second, letting me know that he really does understand and that

he's here for me if I need him. I nod, grateful for my pal, and we turn back to the group when hear a loud pop of champagne.

"To Luca Grant!" Roger says across the huge, packed limo, raising the foaming bottle high before starting to pour it out into delicate flutes. "May he make me a great deal of money tonight!"

"You bet again!?" Cora gasps, smacking him and making him spill the champagne a bit.

Roger just grins at her, pouring quickly and passing the glasses around. On his other side, Jesse laughs, clearly enjoying the drama. "I basically had to, Cora," Roger says, looking at her with wide-eyed innocence and glancing my way. "He is Ariel's mate - I have to support the family -"

Cora rolls her eyes at him and turns away, sipping her champagne, but she perks up a bit when Roger murmurs something in her ear about using the winnings to buy her a new beach house. I grin, sipping at my white wine and looking around the limo at my family and friends, my spirits starting to rise.

I turn my head a little with interest when I note that Daphne is seated on Jesse's other side, and that Rafe is on her left. I wonder, passively, what's going on there - because I know they had their little midnight date down in the kitchens but... has that been all?

Or have there been developments of which I have not heard?

As I consider it, studying Daphne and Rafe, my eyes catch again on the color of Jesse's jacket. And I realize that it's almost the perfect companion to Daphne's dress...

Almost as if he...planned that.

My eyes narrow a little and I lean forward a bit, studying further. Did he plan that?

Daphne catches me looking and raises her eyebrow, questioning. I flick my eyes between Rafe and Jesse, asking silently what's going on there.

Daphne goes still for a second but then is suddenly magically distracted, a smirk on her lips as she looks up at the ceiling studying the patterned lights there. I laugh and turn away, letting her have her secrets. For now.

"To Luca!" Dad calls out, raising his glass of champagne after they've all gone around. Mom and I are the last to get them, and I laugh a little as I glance between my two drinks, wondering if I'm going to be drunk before I even arrive at the fight. "And to Moon Valley!" Dad continues. "This is a big night for our family," he says, raising a glass towards me, "but also for our nation. Let's all cross our fingers that Luca shows that Atalaxians what we're made of!"

Everyone cheers, and raises their glasses, and clinks them together. I join in, perhaps more enthusiastic than most, but as I do a little anxiety begins to twist in me. Because there's a great deal riding on my mate today, and he had a rough morning.

I just hope, very much, that he was able to pull himself together in time for this fight, to get his head in the right space. Because I really, really want him to win.

I grin, tossing the rest of my champagne back as the limo pulls up outside the stadium where the fight will be held, my anxiety mixing with my excitement. Because we're here! And we're all about to find out whether Luca's as good as his swagger would have us believe.

Chapter 0333

Chapter 0333

"I should probably know more about boxing," I murmur to Rafe, at my side, as we get out of the car to the flashes and the shouts of the paparazzi.

My handsome brother laughs warmly down at me, offering his arm. "Yes, you probably should," he murmurs. "Considering who you're mated to. What do you know?"

I give him a tiny frown and a shrug as the rest of our family and friends climb out of the limo. "You know, all the basics."

His grin deepens. "Which are?"

"Punch punch. Jab jab." I give him a blissful Princess smile, making him laugh. "The one who knocks the other over the most wins!"

"A bit more complicated than that," he says, looking around as the last of our party emerges from the car and offering his arm." But sure, those are the basics. Ready?"

"Ready!" I say, grinning at him and wrapping a hand around his proffered elbow. This is all very deliberate, of course. My family talked it through earlier and decided that I should enter the stadium on Rafe's arm while the paparazzi take their pictures, as everyone knows he's my brother and that we're close. No use stoking the media fire by going in on Ben's arm or something.

The photographers lining the red carpet shout our names as we walk in. I hear my name more than I'm used to people usually call for mom and dad and Rafe much more than they do me. But this time there are a thousand questions for me - asking if I'm Luca's

mate, if we're in love, if I'm pregnant with his child. I burst out laughing at this one, and Rafe laughs with me, but neither of us say anything.

Instead, our whole party moves smoothly inside, giving little smiles and waves when necessary. When we get in there's a group of security there who begin to escort us to the Royal Box, but I drop Rafe's arm and turn back to Daphne, who walked in with Ben. "So?" I say, grinning at both of them as we're swept along pretty quickly. "Did you enjoy your first red carpet experience?"

"Of course," Daphne says, grinning and flicking her hair back over her shoulders. "I was born for the spotlight." Her voice is mock smug, and she lifts her chin haughtily, but we both burst out laughing when our eyes meet.

"You were, Daph!" I say, laughing and looping my arm with hers.

She grins, shaking her head at me. "It's all a bit of a dream, isn't it, Ari? But I'm having so much fun. And I'm so glad we're friends."

I smile at Daphne, nodding my agreement as I give her arm a little squeeze, pleased to be here with her too. I glance back over my shoulder next to check on the rest of my loved ones, pleased also to see my parents looking so happy, and Markie and Juniper looking around with excitement.

Yes, I think, nodding to myself. It's going to be a very good night.

When we get up to the box, there are already a few people there - my grandpa Henry, of course, alongside some close family friends and some of dad's government associates whom he invited to join us. All people I've known my whole life. When enter the box Ben heads to the bar with Rafe and Jesse, but I tug Daphne forward so that we can get a look of the stadium. I stop to give my grandpa a kiss on the cheek before I dart to the low wall at the front edge of the box, eager to see out view of the ring.

A big cheer goes out when Daphne and I appear within sight of the public already gathered in the stadium and she gasps a little, taking a step back. "What do we do?" she asks, her eyes wide.

"Just say hi," I say, shrugging and giving a little wave around, which elicits a bigger cheer. Daphne hesitates but then likewise waves, and the crowd cheers again, though I'm not sure they know who she is. But it doesn't seem to matter - the crowds are ready to celebrate tonight, and they embrace Daphne as one of us. Which, of course, she is.

I smile around at the gigantic stadium, at the crowds already beginning to fill it. We're at the top of the first level of the stadium, our box jutting out just a little bit, but there's really not that much distance at all between the low wall before us and the seats below - so close that it wouldn't be hard, really, for someone to jump up here. Of course, we

have security to stop anyone from climbing up - but honestly, it's never been much of a problem.

In front of us, and a little below, is the ring, and a swell of excitement goes through me as I see it. The lights are already on it, reflecting off the white canvas so brightly that it almost glows.

"You ready for this?" Jesse asks, coming to stand next to me. He presses a glass of white wine into my hands and passes what looks like a gin and tonic to Daphne.
"Reports came in this morning - apparently your boy is going to have one hell of a fight."

Chapter 0334

Chapter 0334

"He is?" I ask, my eyes going wide. I pass my drink back to Jesse for a moment and slip my jacket from my shoulders, suddenly feeling warmer, probably from the anxiety his words produced.

"Yup," Jesse says, nodding to me seriously. "The Alalaxians have apparently brought one hell of a fighter."

I don't really know what that means, but it can't be good. I take my drink back from Jesse and squeeze it between my palms. "Don't let that rattle you, Ari," Rafe says, and I turn to see him on Daphne's other side, looking at me seriously. "Luca's one hell of a fighter - he's the champ for a reason, nobody in Moon Valley can touch him in the boxing ring -"

"Although Rafe can beat him at wrestling and other forms of hand-to-hand stuff," Jesse says, gesturing to my brother and then pressing his hand delicately to his chest, "and I, obviously, beat him in all trials of wit."

Daphne and I burst out laughing at this, but Rafe just ignores him. "And despite what Luca's uncle thinks," Rafe continues, drawing my gaze back to him, "being at the Academy all semester only made Luca better. He's strong as hell now, and faster than he's ever been. I think his odds are good."

I bite my lip with anxiety, glancing back towards Jesse, wondering if Rafe is just saying that to me to make me feel better. But Jesse gives me a serious nod, letting me know that it's true and he agrees with Rafe.

I open my mouth to ask more questions, to try to learn how the scoring works, but suddenly I hear my dad call my name, and we all turn to him.

Dad stands against the low wall at the edge of the box about ten feet away, his arms crossed, glaring at me. My mom is pressed innocently to his side, smiling prettily like butter can't melt in her mouth. I grin too, taking up mom's patented defense, as dad's eyes deliberately move over me, up and down, and he cocks a clearly displeased eyebrow at my dress. Then he snaps his fingers once and points to the ground in front of him, his command clear.

"Come on, Rafe!" I say cheerfully, grabbing my brother's arm and tugging him over.

"No way!" he hisses, digging his heels in. "He wants you, Ariel - he's probably wondering where the other half of your dress is -" "Daphne made this dress," I inform my brother sharply, raising my eyebrows at him, trying to make him feel guilty.

It works, and Rafe's mouth drops open, and he glances back towards Daphne, who is laughing, watching us with a bit of glee as Jesse steps closer to her side. "It's a beautiful dress," Rafe says, shaking his head like he didn't mean it like that. "Dad's just not going to "

"Ariel!" Dad barks, pulling both of our attention to him. "Rafe! Over here! Now!"

"Seeee," I say, tugging on my brother's arm again. "He wants you too!"

Rafe sighs, and hangs his head, and accompanies me to have a quick chat with our glowering father and beaming mother.

As we step away, Jesse steps closer to Daphne, taking a sip of his whiskey. "What do you think, will Dominic Sinclair just make Ariel wear his suit coat all night to cover her up? Or will he banish you for dressing the Princess as the brazen hussy she is inside?"

Daphne laughs and turns towards him, smacking him on the arm. "Ariel looks beautiful, and I don't think Mr. Sinclair really cares," she says, grinning up into Jesse's smirking face. "I think he just likes to keep his kids on their toes."

"Look at you," Jesse murmurs, one corner of his lips turning up, "calling the King mister, calling the Crown Prince and the Princess kids. Getting awfully comfortable with the royals, are we?"

Daphne just huffs a laugh and leans closer, narrowing her eyes. "Getting a little jealous, are we? I mean, even Luca's Gran probably knows who I am at this point," she grins and tosses her hair back over her shoulder. "Can't say the same for you."

Jesse bursts out laughing at this, his head tilting back, and Daphne laughs too, delighting a bit to see him do it. It's always very satisfying to break Jesse Sinclair out of his playful, sarcastic persona - to surprise him, and see him genuinely laugh, to get more than a wry quip or a joke on top of a joke.

Yes, stopping Jesse Sinclair in his tracks....it's more satisfying than Daphne knew it would be.

When he brings his head back up, Jesse gives Daphne a sunny smile and shakes his head. "It's a shame you have to go home after the fight," he says, and the happiness with which he says makes Daphne realize that it's not just conversation, or a compliment. That he really means it. "Anything we can do to make you stay? You could bring your mom to the palace for Midwinter."

"Not to your house?" Daphne asks, tilting her head.

Jesse gives her a slow smile. "You want to come spend Midwinter at my house, Daphne?"

Chapter 0335

Chapter 0335

"I don't know," Daphne says, tilting her head and narrowing her eyes a little in a challenge. "Are your Midwinter cookies any good?"

Jesse sighs sharply. "Nah, our cookies are crap."

Daphne bursts out laughing again, and Jesse goes with her.

"Seriously," Jesse continues, shaking his head. "Mom isn't particularly domestic, so all our cookies are store bought, and they're gone in like eight seconds. You have to fight to the death to get your hands on one. Chase - he'll bite you, and Bella, she has this really pointy stick -"

"Oh, I'm sure it's not all that bad," Daphne murmurs, still grinning, her eyes slipping down over Jesse even though she didn't mean them to.

"No," he sighs, leaning against the wall and giving her a smile. "I assure you, it is. In fact, mom, dad, and I aren't out on the town tonight - the children have staged a coup and barred us from the house. It's chaos over there - complete child anarchy. We fear that we're going to return home to all of the living room furniture torn to pieces, scrapped for firewood and spare parts for their tree fort."

"And yet, something tells me that's precisely how you like it," Daphne says, leaning against the wall with her chin in her hand, studying him.

"Well," he says, leaning a little closer like it's a great secret. "Someone had to teach them what a coup was. And they let me sleep in the yard, which is more than they allow mom and dad. I get a little bowl of scraps and a torn blanket when I come begging."

Daphne laughs again, light.

"Come on," Jesse murmurs, his face falling into more serious lines. "Stay. It's...good, having you here."

"Is it?" she asks, wrinkling her nose a little bit. "I've barely seen you, Jess."

"Well," he sighs, leaning a little closer, folding his arms on the wall so that his face is level with hers. He hardly blinks as he stares at her, his eyes moving slowly over her face. "That's not my fault, is it? Someone is letting her time be rather monopolized by one of my cousins. And not the cousin I would prefer."

Daphne's mouth twists a bit as she fights a smile. "And which cousin would you prefer?"

"Oh, Mark, for sure." Jesse says, his eyebrows going up, completely honest. Daphne bursts into laughter. "Mark is a lot of fun - he knows a lot of strange animal facts." She laughs harder. "Honestly, Daphne, its for your own edification, really! You should definitely hang out exclusively with Mark."

Daphne laughs harder now, her eyes almost shutting as she does, and Jesse can't help it. He leans closer, just incrementally, breathing deeply from the air between them, hoping desperately that she doesn't notice the way that her scent - nutmeg, and fresh linen, and spicy white roses - makes his shoulders unwind, his breath echo more deeply in his chest.

But if she does notice, she doesn't let him know. She just smiles and shakes her head a little, like she doesn't know what to do with him.

"Come on, Daph," he murmurs, staring into her eyes. "Stay. We so rarely get pretty girls around here, especially ones who make me laugh like that."

"Jesse," Daphne murmurs, hanging her head a little, her stomach tightening in a way that surprises her. And then she lifts her head, slowly meeting his eyes again. "I thought you weren't going to hit on me anymore? Just...be my friend?"

He stares at her for a long moment before he sighs, and smiles slightly, and lets his lashes fall down over his eyes. "Apologies, Daph," he murmurs. "You'll have to let a man have his weaknesses, especially at Midwinter." He raises his head again, holding her gaze steadily with his own. "And especially when the weakness itself looks very pretty in her red dress."

Daphne can't help it. She bites her lip, and grins, and stares into Jesse Sinclair's brown eyes. Inside, her wolf trips over her own feet as she turns towards Jesse, shocked.

"Won't happen again," Jesse says softly, giving Daphne a little wink and standing up straight before he downs the rest of his drink in one go. "Because you are right. We are... friends." He straightens his shoulders and looks down at his glass before looking back up at Daphne with a grin. "Well, I need a refill. You?" He nods towards her half-full gin and tonic.

"I think I'm okay for right now," she says, watching him carefully.

Jesse just nods once and strides away.

And Daphne watches him go. Every step.

"That's one hell of a dress, young lady," dad says to me, a little bit of a growl in his voice.

"Juniper stole mine!" I say, my face the picture of innocence as I point at my little sister, completely ratting her out. My mom works very hard to hide her smirk. "This was the only thing that was left in my closet."

Chapter 0336

Chapter 0336

Dad's frown deepens, so I double down.

"Mom said I look pretty," I say, quickly shifting my hand so I point at her now. Mom gasps a little in protest at my betrayal, but dad ignores it all.

"You do look pretty, Ariel," he says, his words even and slow. I drop my hand with a grin, realizing that I'm not actually in trouble and he's not going to send me home to get changed. "I just hope you've thought quite deeply about this wardrobe choice. It is... bold. And it makes a big statement about how you are not a little girl anymore. Are you ready for that?"

I straighten my shoulders, raising my chin a bit. "I can handle it."

Dad holds my gaze for a second and then nods, the matter ended. I grin, pleased in his faith in me. Dad drops his head for a second, loosing a breath and taking a sip of his whiskey, and my heart goes out to him in this moment. Because he's had to handle a great deal of me growing up in a very short amount of time, hasn't he?

And he's been so good about it.

Impulsive, I take a few steps forward and wiggle myself in between my parents, slipping an arm around my dad's waist and leaning into him. My mom smiles, and moves a step aside, letting me wedge myself between them as dad wraps an arm around me, accepting my gesture of warm thanks for being such a good dad.

He gives me a little smile, and then kisses me quickly on the forehead before looking around at the four of us. He glances over at Markie and Juniper, who are chatting with grandpa, I think wondering for a second if he should include them. But then he decides against it.

"The Atalaxians will be coming in soon," dad says, dropping his voice low so as not to be overheard. I perk up a little, interested in this change of conversation. "It's a peace delegation but... Roger and I are very curious about why they're choosing to send one at this point in the war."

"Why this point?" mom asks, her voice likewise low. "What's special about it?"

"What's special is that they're winning," dad says, his voice full of dread as he confesses something which is certainly not public knowledge. My eyes move to Rafe, and by the way he stands up a little straighter, his mouth tightening, I can see that this is news to him as well.

Dad nods, looking steadily around at all of us before he continues. "It doesn't make sense that they'd send a peace delegation when they've got the upper hand. So," he glances now to the set of stadium seating which is still clearly empty, which has been set aside for them. "I'd appreciate it if you kept your eyes on them tonight. I know we'll be distracted - and especially you, Ariel," he nods to me in particular here, "but...we're not just here for fun tonight. We have a duty to our nation. Please keep your eyes peeled and be ready to report anything of note. Yes?"

As one, the three of us nod, agreeing to be vigilant.

And then dad stands a little straighter, lifting his glass towards us in a clear end to the conversation. "Go have fun," he says softly, his voice rumbling a little. Mom, of course, stays close to his side, turning worried eyes up to him, but Rafe and I take the dismissal seriously, turning away.

Rafe glances down at me for a moment, but when I look steadily up at him - letting him know I'm all right with it - he just nods and we move back to where Daphne now stands alone.

"Hey," she says, grinning at us as we come over. Rafe moves to her side and my mouth falls open a little bit when he slides an arm around her waist. She looks between us, either not noticing my shock or pretending not to. "Am I going to be banished? Has the decree landed?"

"For the dress?" Rafe asks, raising his eyebrows and smirking at her. "No, actually, mom wants three just like it in a variety of colors. Can you do pastels, for spring?"

Daphne laughs, grinning up into his face, and I still just stare between them realizing that that they're on a date. That it's not just that Daphne came as part of our party - that she's here tonight with Rafe.

Oh my god, my brother is actually dating my friend!

Chapter 0337

Chapter 0337

An eager smile bursts onto my lips as I finally realize the truth of it, because I'm suddenly so happy for Daphne. Didn't she say that she had a celebrity crush on Rafe, that she had for awhile?

Good for her! Daphne! Lonely Academy seamstress, crushing on the Crown Prince from afar, and now here she is! Living the dream!

Daphne glances over at me and does a double take when she sees my expression. And then she laughs, and blushes a little, realizing what I've figured out. Rafe follows the direction of her gaze and frowns at me a little, not getting it.

"You guys need drinks!?" I say eagerly, looking between them and stepping away. "I'll get you drinks! I'll go away - and get drinks - and leave you here - alone." I turn quickly, heading for the bar.

"Ariel!" Rafe calls after me, confused. "We...don't need drinks! We have drinks!"

"Rafe," Daphne says, laughing a little, "she knows we have drinks."

I scurry away regardless, happy for my friend, happy for my brother - who could do far worse than Daphne - towards where Jesse and Ben are standing at the bar, both of them looking moody.

"What?" I ask, my face falling a little as I look between them. "What's wrong? What's bad?"

"Nothing's bad, Ariel," Jesse says, tucking his mood away and turning to the bartender to order me another white wine. I look down at my empty hands, wondering where the last one went - I don't remember putting it down - but then I shrug and just accept the new one. "We're just "

Jesse doesn't finish his words, though, because suddenly the stadium falls silent. The three of us turn, looking for the cause, but we can't see it. Suddenly the sound of steady, marching footsteps fills the whole arena. My face screws up in confusion because... what the hell could that be?

"Come on," Jesse murmurs, striding now for the edge of the Box, where Rafe and Daphne still stand. Ben and I glance at each other, but then eagerly follow.

When we get to the edge, my eyes go wide when I see the cause of both the silence and the strange marching noise.

A group of people begin to fill the empty set of stands in front of them, those set aside for the visiting delegation. They walk in military precision down the steps towards the seats, filling them one-by-one in orderly lines without hesitation. As they do, I realize that they must have planned this - planned every inch of it. Discovered how many seats were in the stadium, decided who would sit where, then given specific orders about how to enter the stadium so as to have this very precise effect.

And I have to admit, their efforts pay off. While the citizens of Moon Valley entered the stadium in a cheerful mess, everyone taking their seats haphazardly with an excited buzz going around, the Atalaxian delegation here has clearly shown that they are... much more orderly, precise, and serious than we are.

I gulp a little, watching them, talking in their dark uniforms, their slick-backed hair. And as I do, I realize that every single person in that delegation is a man, is an Alpha, and is incredibly dangerous.

But while this display is clearly meant to intimidate, I find that it...kindles something in me. I raise my chin as I step forward to stand with my brother, lifting a hand to rest lightly on the low wall of our box. Because while these men might have a great deal of power and control, I'm aware that it was bought at the expense of the women in their world, and the poor, and the disenfranchised. Each of which these Alphas bend to their own will, reaping the benefits alongside the control.

Everything they stand for goes against everything I hold to be true, and real, and important in this world. Our nation is fighting for the right of everyone to pursue their happiness, however they define that. These people? They believe that the rights and happiness of many can and should be sacrificed to benefit the men of the ruling class.

Chapter 0338

Chapter 0338

And as my brother stands next to me and my cousin comes to my other side, I refuse to let myself be intimidated by these horrible

men.

Not by their cruelty. Not by their brute control.

No, I won't be cowed by it.

And by the low growls that I can almost feel rumbling in Rafe and Jesse's chests, I know that they feel precisely the same.

As the last of the Atalaxians file in, the stadium is quiet for a long moment. And then, slowly, our people begin to talk again, to make noise, to shake off the control that these men just demanded with their display. After a moment my shoulders loosen, and Jesse and Rafe begin to move too, and Daphne and Ben step closer so that we form a little circle.

"I've never seen an Atalaxian before," Daphne says, her voice low. "I didn't realize they'd be so...disciplined."

Ben just looks down at his feet, perfectly silent, and I frown at him for a second, wondering if he's all right. I'm distracted, though, when Rafe begins to speak.

"They're disciplined in everything they do," Rafe says, with a little bit of a sigh. "It's kind of their whole vibe - it's the only thing that they do."

"My mom told me that your mom has a connection over there," Jesse says, his voice serious for once as he looks at Rafe and nods towards the Atalaxians. "An old friend. Do you know if he's here? It could be beneficial."

Rafe sighs and glances over at the Atalaxian delegation. "Unfortunately, no. He's become someone of a persona-non-grata over there. After he and mom developed their

friendship, he started advocating hard for peace. It made him very unpopular with his family, the royals, but...he made some inroads, I think."

I frown a little, because I didn't know mom had a friend in Atalaxia. I make a mental note to ask her about it, but before I can do anything a huge cheer begins to echo in the stadium. And then suddenly the lights drop, and a huge boom of bass music echoes throughout the stadium - so deep and low that I can feel it throughout my whole body.

"Holy crap!" Jesse whispers, his face bursting into an eager grin despite the serious talk from a moment before. "It's starting!" The music changes now, raising into something rhythmic, pulsing, and intense. Lights start to flash with the music - red and purple, then blue and gold with white lights flashing all around. I gasp, because Jesse is right, and we all immediately break our little circle and press against the edge of the box, staring down at the ring. Jesse and Rafe stand steady on either side of me, Ariel to Rafe's right. Ben, I think, is standing on her far side - but I've lost track of him a bit.

Because it's time for the fight now.

And for better or worse, Luca's going to come out soon, and face this Atalaxian champion - whoever the hell that is.

I glance up at the Atalaxian delegation which stands stoically, not clapping or cheering at all like the residents of Moon Valley. And as I run my eyes over them...

I realize, truly now, that much more rests on Luca's shoulders than I think I knew before.

Because the Atalaxians...they've got something up their sleeve here, don't they?

They're here for more than peace, more than a match.

And somehow, it all starts with this.

With my mate, Luca Grant against...whatever it is they're bringing out to face him.

Chapter 0339

Chapter 0339

My stomach twists uncomfortably and I put my glass of wine down on the wall in front of us, not sure if I can have any more, not sure that I'll be able to keep it down. I'm suddenly so worried about Luca.

Not that I think he can't handle himself - I just have...no idea what the Atalaxians are going to throw at him right now.

"Calm, calm," Rafe murmurs to me, putting a steady hand at the center of my back. "Nothing good or bad is going to happen just because you're freaking out."

And I laugh a little, snapped out of it by my steady brother, and heave a big sigh.

-

"Do you want some tequila?" he asks, his voice still low as he quirks an eyebrow at me. "You might want some, Ari – you are wound up -"

I grin, glancing over my shoulder again, thinking that that's not half a bad idea, but suddenly my eyes light on something that surprises me.

Ben, sitting in one of the plush black chairs set out for spectators who don't want to stand at the edge of the box, his head in his hands. Instantly I move to him, leaving my glass of wine behind. Rafe turns back to the boxing ring as the announcer comes out, beginning to speak and greet the enthusiastic crowd.

But I ignore it all, moving to Ben's side and bending down to place one hand on his shoulder, another on his curved back. "Benny," I whisper, worried. "Are you - are you okay?"

He shudders a little, and then looks up at me, his face sweaty and his eyes a little unfocused. He doesn't say anything.

"Ben!" I gasp, bending down closer, studying him. He looks - god, honestly, he looks like he saw a ghost. "What's wrong?"

Ben shakes himself suddenly - physically shakes himself, like a dog covered in rain. And then he blinks hard and focuses his eyes on my face. "What?"

"Ben, you're white as a sheet, and all sweaty! What's wrong!?"

"Nothing," he murmurs, shaking his head and looking around, I think embarrassed. "I...must have eaten something."

"You ate what we did!" I protest, and then I straighten a little, assessing the way I feel. Do we all have food poisoning? But...no, I feel completely fine - all of the twists in my stomach are Luca-related. And Ben, now - what could be wrong with him?

Ben focuses his eyes on me again, frowning a little. Not mad at me but...I think not wanting to have this conversation? I don't know. "Too much to drink then," he says, shrugging, dismissive, again shaking his head like he's trying to clear it.

I clench my teeth a little, not wanting to call him a liar, but... I mean, he was perfectly sober a few moments ago. Maybe a little tipsy? But certainly not enough to be drunk. I

stare closely at his eyes, checking his pupils. Was he poisoned? There are very specific signs you can look for -

"Ari," Ben says, forcing himself to laugh a little and putting his hands on my shoulders now, pushing me away, just slightly. "I'm fine - I promise, I'm fine. Okay? I just...a little dizzy spell. I'm fine now."

"Benny," I murmur, still worried.

He stares hard at my face, all façade falling, and says two simple words. "Please, Ari."

And I stand up straight, realizing that... that Ben knows what's wrong. He just doesn't want anyone else to, not now. Not yet. And I am totally blowing his cover.

"Okay," I say, nodding, taking a step back, watching him a little anxiously. I tuck my hands behind my back, glancing around, but everyone else is by the edge of the box, clearly paying attention to the announcer.

"You're missing it, Ari," Ben says, gesturing me back towards the wall, his voice guilty.

"Are you sure you're okay?" I whisper.

"I am," he says, pushing himself to his feet. And as he does I see that...well, that his color is coming back. And he does seem... better. "Just...um. Where's the bathroom? I'll freshen up."

"You'd better just be freshening up, Ben," I growl, stepping close to glare at him. "Do not pull a Jackson right now and run away or something."

He laughs, smiling at me. "I promise, Ari," he says, putting his hands on my shoulders. "A little water on my face, and some ice from the bartender. I'll be fine. You know I wouldn't miss this." He lifts his chin towards the edge of the box, to where the announcer is revving up the crowd.

"Okay," I murmur, and then I point to where the bathroom is at the back of the suite.

"LUCAAAAA GRANT!!!!!" The announcer's words echo through the entire stadium, which bursts into a desperate cheer and I gasp, staring towards the edge of the Royal Box, where I promised I'd be.

"Go, Ari!" Ben says, pushing me forward.

I spare him one last glance and then streak towards the wall, pushing my way through my family, settling again between Jesse and Rafe, right in the center of the box.

Chapter 0340

Chapter 0340

And right in time to see Luca come out of the dark tunnel on the eastern side of the stadium, the lights flashing all around him as a confetti cannon filled with silver and gold rectangles explodes above him, filling the air with fluttering flares of light.

I shout and cheer along with everyone else as Luca raises his gloved fists to the crowd, moving forward in his black robe, which he wears with the hood up over his head. The fabric flows down his body, open at the front, and then streams behind him as he strides steadily forward. And even though a small part of my mind is still worried about Ben, still wanting to check to make sure he's really okay-

I have to admit, most of me is swept away by the sight of my mate moving powerfully towards the ring, shouting out at the crowds, pounding his glove against his chest one moment, then turning in circles and pumping his fists up into the air. The stadium full of people screams his name, riled to a fever pitch.

I can't help it - I shout my support as I clap and grin down at my mate-

My mate!

Mine!

Luca Grant, my mate, so handsome, so powerful, so charismatic. He just looks so confident and good striding down the line of people towards the ring that suddenly all of my worries disappear.

Because who - who on earth could take on that man?

My man.

Jesse nudges me with his elbow, and I flash my eyes away from Luca for a second to see my cousin grinning at me, clearly picking up on my proud energy. And I laugh a little, leaning far over the edge of the box, shouting Luca's name and continuing to cheer for him with all of my heart.

We're all cheering - everyone in the box - everyone in the stadium except the Atalaxians - as Luca stops at the end of the corridor that leads to the boxing ring, stops to duck down and give a woman standing there at the edge a quick kiss on the cheek. When we all realize that it's his mother, the crowd roars louder, loving his support of her. He likewise takes a moment to wrap his Gran in a big hug before moving to his corner of

the ring, where his uncle and the rest of his coaching team are waiting with crossed arms.

Bruce Grant pats Luca warmly on the back, his face serious, as Luca climbs up the side of the ring. And then when Luca ducks beneath the ropes, and steps in, and begins to dodge around on the canvas, punching out some practice blows and showing off his footwork, the entire crowd screams louder. I see Luca laugh, loving it, and then he stops his faux boxing to pause in the center of the ring, cupping this boxing glove at his ear and gesturing for everyone to make a great deal of noise.

The crowd complies, to say the least, and the stadium roars with love for our champion - a sound so loud and echoing I have to think that they can hear it in the city all around us. I laugh to hear it, absolutely loving the idea of the entire nation all cheering for my mate.

My heart soars with joy and pride as I clap and cheer, unable to tear my eyes from him. My cheeks ache with smiling so much when I see Luca laugh - laugh, and drop his hands, and simply turn in a circle, soaking in all the love and the support of his people. Because Luca's a showboat, but he loves this the most - loves the fight, and the crowd, and the pride that comes along with it.

Slowly, as he turns, I see his expression change because he's searching now. He narrows his eyes, his smile falling just a bit as he concentrates, scanning the crowd for something. He goes still when his gaze lands on our box.

When his eyes land on me.

And then he bursts into a wide, dimpled grin that carries with it all the love he has for me. I feel it pulse down our bond like a physical blow, hitting me so hard all at once that I stumble back a step, and then I'm laughing, and leaning forward, shaking my head at him a little, sending everything I have down the bond to him -

All of my love, and my support, and my joy, and my pride, and my pleasure. And just a little bit of a hint at how good I think he looks in his little boxing shorts under all that light.

This all passes between us in a blink, and no one is aware of it but us, but when Luca's grin deepens and he raises a single gloved fist and points it directly at me?

The crowd sees it now, and absolutely explodes.