

The Hidden Princess At All-Boys Alpha Academy

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Because there's no denying it - no denying who he's pointing to, or what he's smiling about.

And there's absolutely no way to pretend that I'm not laughing, and leaning across this barrier, and grinning at him with joy in every inch of me because I don't feel precisely the same.

The crowd screams their approval of their champion and their Princess, and I let it all run through me, and I pass it to him, and let it bolster him.

My Luca, my mate. Our champion.

Luca laughs a little and stares up at me, almost as if he's unable to take his eyes away, and then he brings his glove to his lips, kisses it once, and holds it back out to me briefly before he turns back to his corner, striding over to speak to his uncle and get his head in the game.

I lean back too, away from the barrier, still smiling like crazy, and when I look around at all of my family and friends I see that they're all looking at me, beaming, and I can't help it. I blush, and laugh, and lift my hands to my cheeks.

Because there's no denying it anymore - the whole nation now knows that Luca Grant is my mate. And I'm so damn proud of it that I don't even care.

I think sensing my happiness, my parents beam at me before they turn back to the ring. And Rafe slips an arm around my shoulders, giving me a little squeeze.

"Baby trouble," Jesse sighs, laughing a little and smiling so hard his eyes crinkle at the edges. "Coming to the boxing match to steal the show."

"I'm not stealing a damn thing," I sigh, crossing my arms and shaking my head as I look down at my Alpha mate, watching him pull his robe off and hand it to his uncle before he slips his mouth guard between his teeth. Then Luca crouches down, nodding seriously

to his uncle as he receives his final pep talk, and I can't help but admire his cut muscles, his lovely tanned skin. "This is Luca's night. How can it not be? Just...look at him."

And Jesse nods, and refocuses on the match, just like everyone else in the booth. "Yup, Luca's dreamy all right."

"He sure as hell is," Daphne murmurs, her voice appreciative, and as I laugh and grin at her I don't miss Rafe's tiny jealous scowl. "Damn, did I miss it?" Ben asks, arriving at Daphne's side, and my smile deepens when I see that his skin is back to its normal hue, that his eyes are shiny with excitement again.

"You didn't miss anything, Benny," I assure him, giving him a happy smile that lets him know that I'm glad he's back. Ben gives me a wink and a little nod, letting me know that he's fine.

The mood in the stadium shifts significantly, though, a moment later. I tear my eyes from Ben and quickly move them back to the ring as a huge pulse of bass sound moves through the stadium. My stomach drops as my eyes turn, as everyone else's does, towards where the lights are now lighting the tunnel on the western side of the arena-

The tunnel towards the dressing room of the Atalaxian champion.

I inhale a deep breath as shadows start to appear at the door to the dressing room. I instinctually take a step closer to Rafe, though I don't tear my eyes away from the figures that start to emerge.

"Oh my god," Jesse breathes next to me, but I don't have to ask why.

At the center of the group of people that emerges, walking in time to the pounding music that the stadium plays for them, is an absolutely gigantic man.

My jaw drops when I see the way that he towers over his coaches and trainers, at the way they almost have to scurry to keep up with his long stride.

"What the fuck," Rafe snaps out, and I briefly glance up towards him before fixing my eyes again on the man who can only be the Atalaxian champion, dressed like Luca is in a boxing robe, his fists already laced into his gloves.

"What?" I ask, frantic now, worried at the size of this man but also because Jesse and Rafe - they're not reacting very well either, are they? "What is it? What's wrong?"

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"He's fucking huge," Jesse whispers, and when I glance at my cousin I see that his brows are knit together as he addresses Rafe over my head.

"Is that bad?" I burst out.

"Of course it's bad, Ari," Rafe growls, though I can tell his anger isn't for me. He flicks his gaze at me before snapping it up to meet Jesse. "This must be some kind of mistake -"

"It's no fucking mistake," Jesse growls out, tossing a hand towards the man as he strides down the corridor towards the ring. "Obviously, they've sent a ringer."

Almost as if everyone's realizing it just as Jesse does, the crowd starts to echo with boo's, enough of them to carry out over the pounding music as the Atalaxian champion reaches the ring. The announcer, standing again at the center of the ring, looks around the room anxiously.

"Ladies and Gentlemen of Moon Valley, please welcome your contender - Anton Spiriatos of Atalaxia!" He smiles widely, raising a hand up to try to elicit a cheer, but the boo's just get louder.

"What's a ringer?" I gasp, glancing between my brother, and my cousin, and Luca down in the corner of his ring. Luca leans casually back against the ropes in his corner, perfectly at ease, studying his opponent. I work very, very hard to keep all of my anxiety to myself, not wanting to pass it down our bond.

But god, it's hard. All I want to do is reach out to him - to ask how he feels to see if he's as freaked out as I am.

"A ringer," Rafe growls, soft, in my direction, "is a guaranteed win, a cheat."

"What?" I gasp, spinning my head to stare up at him. "But - but Luca's so good! We were all just saying that he can't possibly lose! You had such faith in him a moment ago!"

"Faith that's well placed," Jesse bites out, again gesturing towards the ring, "when Luca's fighting in his weight class! But this guy - god, Ari, you can see it, I know you can. He outweighs Luca by at least thirty pounds!"

I snap my head back to the ring and assess the boxer again. Jesse's right - the man is much taller than Luca - is potentially as tall as Rafe, and my dad, and Jackson. Maybe taller, even - it's hard to tell from up high in this box. And he's insanely well-muscled. Luca - he's built, certainly, for the fight - but his musculature is much leaner than this man's.

"We have to call this off," Rafe grits, turning towards my dad.

"What!?" I gasp, desperately worried now - because Rafe, he knows what a big deal that is. I move swiftly, peering around my brother to see my dad already there, moving towards us. Daphne and Ben scurry back, making room.

"We can't call anything off," dad says, shaking his head as he meets Rafe's eyes and then mine. "Everything, on paper, is legit." "What?" I ask, stepping forward. Mom peers around dad in the same way that I'm peering around Rafe, and I can tell that she - like me - is deeply concerned but not truly understanding what's going on.

"How is that possible!?" Rafe bursts out. I feel a presence at my back and glance over my shoulder to see Jesse standing right there, backing me up. "That guy is -"

"They did weigh-in yesterday," dad growls, holding Rafe's gaze. "I don't know how they did it - some kind of trick - but that champion and Luca are somehow in the same class."

"And Luca would never back down," Jesse murmurs, angry.

I look frantically around at my family and friends, trying to put the pieces together, my breath coming quick. "Please," I say, throwing out my hands, stepping forward, begging, "please will someone tell me what is happening here!?"

"Some kind of dirty trick, Ariel," my Uncle Roger says, stepping forward and holding my gaze. "They found a way to lie about their boxer's weight and class, and then sent in that monster as a guaranteed way to take Luca - and Moon Valley - down."

"But..." I say, my eyes wide, glancing down towards Luca now - who still, to his credit, looks perfectly confident. "Isn't that... dangerous?"

"It's incredibly dangerous," Roger replies, his voice low.

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I snap my eyes back to my uncle and a rush of gratitude runs through me that he's not lying or sugar coating this to make me feel better. "Luca could get seriously hurt if he fights," Roger says, holding my gaze.

"Well, don't let him fight!" I gasp, spinning back to the edge of the box, leaning over it and staring horrified at Luca, who pushes himself up from the ropes and moves to the center of the ring, where the Atalaxian boxer is moving as well.

Rafe grabs my arm, holding me back. "It's too late, Ari," Rafe growls. "He's clearly taking the fight. He knows what's at stake. He's seeing what we're seeing and he knows what it means better than we do, surely. But clearly, he's taking it."

I watch in horror as Luca steps close to the Atalaxian champion, staring with grit up into his face, Luca's arms hanging loose at his sides. There's confidence in every line of him - so much of it that it makes me second-guess how freaked out I am.

Luca - he's stubborn, but he's not stupid, right?

If this match gave him no chance to win - surely he'd back down.

Right?

"Maybe we're over-reacting," Jesse murmurs, glancing between me, and Rafe, and the rest of our family and friends. "Luca's beat bigger guys before - he kicks your ass all the time at school, Rafe."

"Jackson too," Ben adds, stepping closer and glancing at me, I think wanting to offer support and encouragement. My eyes go up a little bit at this - Luca beats Jackson?

"Yeah, he beats us in boxing, because Luca's a trained championship boxer," Rafe says, casting a hand out towards the ring. "Just like that guy right there. The size difference means more when they both have the same education and experience."

Ben just shakes his head, crossing his arms. "Luca is...a bulldog," he murmurs, staring down into the ring. "I hear what everyone's saying - but Luca's fast, and he's determined. Small guys win fights all the time. I'm not counting him out just yet."

I find my gaze following Ben's, focusing on my mate down below as he stares up at the Atalaxian champion, both of them listening to the ref's instructions and nodding their agreement to a fair fight.

I jump a little as the Ref claps his hands, hard, once, and then Luca and the Atalaxian champion spring away from each other, tapping their gloves against each other just once before moving to their respective sides of the ring.

And then the bell goes off, and my spine stiffens, and my eyes go wide as I place my hands on the wall of our box. Because the debate is over now.

The fight has started.

And for better or worse, Luca's in it.

The announcer's voice comes over the loudspeaker, speaking so swiftly that he almost sounds like an auctioneer. As Luca and the Atalaxian circle each other, the announcer

quickly gives a short biography of both. Luca's I know - but the Atalaxian's history as a decorated soldier on the front line of the war?

That does nothing to settle my nerves.

Suddenly, the two boxers engage, and I gasp at the speed with which they move. The Atalaxian's right arm shoots out, quick as an adder, heading right for Luca's head -

But Ben was right, and my face bursts into a smile when I see that Luca is faster than he is. Luca ducks low, letting the arm float over his head, and then uses the power of his crouch to launch himself back up, twisting his body and swinging a mighty left hook directly into the Atalaxian's face.

The Atalaxian goes stumbling and the crowd suddenly roars for Luca, me with them. Luca - my bold mate- laughs, of all things, watching his opponent gain his feet. Hope and faith swells in me then, as well as guilt for doubting him -

Because Luca, abandon a fight just because the other guy is bigger than him?

Well, he's never done it before. Why would he start now?

When the Atalaxian finds his feet again, Luca's face falls into more serious lines and he puts his fist back up, getting back into his serious boxer's stance. The two continue to dance around each other, trading what feel like more cursory, experimental blows, each of them looking for an opening.

I glance up at Jesse, and then at Rafe, always returning my eyes to the ring, not wanting to miss any of it. "What are you seeing?" I murmur, wanting their opinion.

"Luca's a better boxer," Rafe murmurs back, and my eyes flick to the right when I see Daphne move closer, squeezing in front of Rafe so that he looks over her head. He puts a casual hand on her waist as she moves closer to me, pressing her arm briefly against mine to let me know that she's here.

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I give her a little smile, grateful for her support, and then turn my attention back to my brother.

"Luca's better?" I ask, looking back towards the ring. "How do you know?"

"Watch how he moves," Rafe instructs, and I do as I'm bid. "See how Luca's always one step ahead? He knows what the Atalaxian is going to do before he does it."

I watch carefully and blink when I realize that Rafe is right - that Luca's running the show down there. Every time the Atalaxian swings his fist, Luca's already on it- either dodging the punch, or twisting to absorb it on his side, or taking the hit and using the opening to deliver a more powerful blow himself.

I lean forward, eager, watching Luca deliver a seriously powerful set of three jabs to the Atalaxian's face, so fast that his opponent barely has time to register them before they're all delivered. The Atalaxian stumbles back, blood dripping from his nose, and the crowd goes wild as the ref steps in - putting his hands out between them so that the Atalaxian has a moment to wipe at his face.

Luca takes that moment to turn towards the crowds, raising his fist up and shouting out at all of us, raising a huge cheer from the vast majority of the people in the stadium - indeed, only the Atalaxians are silent.

It's only then when I realize that we've all been so quiet - and that Luca noticed. That everyone noticed that the foreign champion outweighs Luca, and that Luca's chances got a lot harder. That we all got worried and lost a bit of faith.

But Luca - he's not letting that happen,

As the Atalaxian puts his fists up again, Luca shouts out to the crowd, raising his hands, asking for their support. Our nation's people give it, instantly, loving our champion for his spirit and his skill. Only when we're cheering again at that fever pitch does Luca turn back to his opponent, and I can almost feel the excitement and bloodlust pulsing through my mate's veins.

I grin down at him, bolstered, excited again.

My mate - he's going to win this.

I can feel it.

Only Jesse's tension at my side throws me off.

"What?" I ask, glancing up at Jesse, who has his arms crossed and who isn't

cheering along with the rest of us as the round continues. "What's wrong? What are you thinking?"

He glances at me and shakes his head. "Luca's the better fighter, Ariel, that's absolutely undeniable."

"So?" I ask, pushing him. He grimaces a little like he doesn't want to tell me, so I smack him on the arm, getting frustrated. *Jesse! Tell me!"

He huffs a frustrated sigh and then glances between me and the ring. "Luca can be the better fighter, and have all the support, and be winning every round all he wants, Ari. But thirty pounds of muscle isn't something to discount. One good hit - that's all the Atalaxian champion needs."

"What do you mean?" I ask, my face falling, my words breathless.

"I mean," Jesse says, under his breath a little now, his voice almost guilty that he has to break the news to me this way, "that Luca can win every round in points, but if he gets knocked out?" Slowly, Jesse shakes his head. "Then, it doesn't matter how good he is. The Atalaxian still wins."

I bite my lip, turning back to the ring, anxious again.

I turn my eyes to the enemy now, watching him absorb blow after blow from Luca's fists as if they're nothing. His eyes are fixed, patient, on my mate's face and body. Waiting.

Waiting for that one opening - the only one he'll need.

To deliver the blow that ends the whole thing.

"God damn it," I whisper, suddenly terrified.

"We have to wait, Ari," Jesse murmurs, stepping closer to me, wanting to keep the faith just as much as I do. "Twelve rounds. He just has to make it through twelve rounds, and he'll walk away from this just fine."

"What happens if he doesn't make it twelve rounds?" I whisper, turning frightened eyes up to my cousin.

But Jesse just grimaces and turns his face back to the match before us.

His silence is answer enough.

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The bell rings again suddenly, making me jump, but Luca and the Atalaxian drop their fists mid-fight and turn away from each other, each heading immediately to their respective corners. I know enough about the basics of boxing to know that this is the end of the round, but well, I don't know precisely what that means.

"What's happening?" I murmur, turning my face up towards my brother, my hands tense on the wall of the box.

"Tiny break," Rafe says with a sigh, looking down at me. He frowns for a second, looking around, and then spots my glass of white wine on the edge of the box. He picks it up and pushes it towards me. "Here, Ariel - have some of this. You're freaking out."

"Of course I'm freaking out," I growl, ignoring the glass of wine at first. But when he raises his eyebrow at me I scowl and snatch it out of his hand, taking a long swig of it.

"He's doing good, Ari," Daphne says, biting her lip and looking down at the ring. "At least... I think he is?"

"No, your instincts are right, Daph," Jesse says, stepping closer to me. Ben comes close on Rafe's other side, clearly wanting to hear what Jesse says.

Jesse points down towards the ring at table, where three men and one woman sit, consulting seriously. "Those are the judges," he murmurs. "They decide who wins each round."

"So it's that simple?" Daphne asks, looking between all the boys. "Just...whoever wins the most rounds wins the whole thing?"

"Theoretically, yes," Ben murmurs with a shrug, peering down at Luca. I follow his gaze, staring down at my mate, a little bolstered to see that Luca looks absolutely fine. He's sitting on a little stool in his corner, and his uncle is leaning in to whisper in his ear, rubbing his shoulders as he does.

"Well, what about in actuality?" Daphne asks, anxious.

"Knockout," Rafe says softly in her ear, and I suspect that he's whispering so I won't hear it, "trumps all scores."

"Oh," Daphne says, giving me an anxious little glance that makes me groan and drain my glass of wine.

"Ooookay," Jesse says, giving me a hearty pat on the back that makes me stumble forward a few steps. "We have about thirty seconds for tequila - let's do this!"

"What!?" I gasp, spinning and watching him basically sprint from the bar.

"He's not wrong, Ari," Rafe says with a sigh. I spin to stare at him, slack-jawed. He just gives me a sad little smile with a shrug. "You need to calm down. We all need to calm down, and get a little looser, and cheer for our friend. Us sitting up here tense and frowning isn't going to do anything to help him."

"Yeah, well, neither is us just being bombed," I murmur as Jesse comes back almost too quickly with a tray of shots, each with a little lime perched on the edge.

"Ohhh, clever boy," Cora says, budging in between us to take two shots off the edge of the tray. "I knew you were my favorite." She gives him a little wink and me a sad, anxious smile as she moves back to her place on Ben's other side, handing her second shot to my mom.

Roger scoffs in protest as mom and Cora clink their glasses together and throw back the tequila. "Darling wife! Where is mine!?"

"Probably back at the bar," Cora says, flinching at the harsh bite of the liquor and grinning up at him. "Go get it!" Roger moans but does as he's told, slumping off towards the bar as Jesse hands out the rest of the shots.

Despite myself, I find myself laughing at my family and friends all raise their glasses, toasting to my mate. And as I throw back my own shot, and close my eyes a moment as it slips down my throat, I realize that Jesse and Rafe are right - that I need to relax, for Luca's sake.

When I turn back to the edge of the box, I'm a little surprised to see Luca's face turned up towards me, a little question in his eyes. But I just wink, and raise my empty shot glass in his direction, and Luca bursts into a grin.

Because if I were really worried about him, I wouldn't be partying, would I?

Or, at least, Jesse knew that's how it would look. Luca nods once to me and sets his shoulders, getting to his feet as the ref walks again to the center of the ring.

"Thank you," I murmur to Jesse as he comes back to my side, and I lean my body weight against him. "You're clever and you're thoughtful, and I see that, even if you try to hide it."

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"Just don't blow my cover," he murmurs, rubbing my back for a moment as the bell sounds again and the fight starts anew.

I watch carefully as Luca and the Atalaxian champion come together again and again, sometimes trading blows, sometimes moving in fast just to dodge away again. Luca, I notice, gets in quite a few combinations that look very impressive and which always make the crowds cheer. But Rafe, still standing close at my side, doesn't cheer along.

I can't help glancing up at him, wondering what he's seeing that others aren't. Because to all means, it looks like Luca is doing much better than our enemy. "Tell me," I urge, somewhere in the third round.

Rafe glances down at me for a second, I think deciding whether or not I actually want to hear it, but when I look up at him with pleading eyes he leans closer to me. Luca's doing great," he says, and I nod, recognizing that. "But, tell me what you're seeing with the Atalaxian."

I turn my eyes back to the ring, studying him. "He's advancing a lot," I say, narrating what I see happening in front of us, and slightly below. The ring - it's really not very far at all - close enough for me to see Luca's muscles shake whenever he delivers one of his shattering blows. "But not...not punching very much?"

"Look harder," Rafe murmurs, instructing me and sounding a lot like dad.

I frown a little, trying to figure it out. And then, as I watch more closely, I realize that the Atalaxian is landing a lot of blows, just not to Luca's face. "He's hitting Luca a lot in the sides," I say quietly, as if it's a secret between us. "Whereas Luca's hitting the Atalaxian a lot in the head."

"Good," Rafe murmurs, and Daphne glances up at us, likewise listening and wanting to learn more. "I think that's both of their strategy laid out." "Okay," I huff, rolling my eyes a little, "and in terms I can understand, now?"

Rafe smirks a little. "Luca's strategy is to beat the shit out of him, to hurt him as much as he can as early as he can, to get as many points from the judges as possible."

"Sensible," Daphne murmurs, her eyebrows going up.

"Indeed," Rafe says, glancing down at her, pleased, before he continues. "But the Atalaxian - he's playing the long game here. See how he's making Luca dance, always pressing him?"

I watch carefully, and see that Luca is indeed moving his feet probably twice as much as the Atalaxian, always dodging backwards, always getting out of the way as the Atalaxian moves steadily forward.

"What's that mean?" I whisper.

"It means that he's wearing Luca down," Rafe says, his voice a little grave. "And see all those body blows?" Rafe raises his chin now to where the Atalaxian hits Luca again and again in the sides and the ribs.

"Yes?" Daphne says, her voice distracted as she keeps her eyes trained on Luca.

"Those are agonizing," Rafe says, probably from experience. "Especially that often, again and again? They're exhausting, and they make you want more than anything - to drop your hands and block the blows."

"Which leaves your head open..." I murmur, my eyes going wide as I put it all together.

"For the knock-out blow," Rafe finishes, nodding, worry all over his expression.

"Shit," Daphne says as she figures it out alongside me.

"He's wearing Luca down," I whisper, suddenly horribly anxious again. "So that he can finally make that big swing that will take Luca out. What's Luca's recourse here?" "To not get tired," Rafe says, his voice a little sarcastic, because that's basically impossible. "Or to go on major offensives, which he's trying to do - to get this asshole against the ropes and just wail on him. But the Atalaxian - he's not weak enough for that yet."

"Shit," I sigh, folding my arms over each other. "So now it's just a waiting game? To see who runs out of steam first?"

"Yup," Rafe says.

"Tequila?" Jesse offers, holding out another shot to me. I sigh, but feeling the anxiety raising in my best at this new perspective on the fight - I accept it from his hand. The shots go around again, and we all drink, and train our anxious eyes back on the fight.

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Round after round passes, and I'm devastated when I start to see Luca flagging. It's not obvious - not to anyone but those of us who know him intimately. But his blows - they're a little bit slower. His footwork just the tiniest bit sloppier.

He also stops showboating a bit between rounds, instead heading straight to his corner to have a tense discussion with his uncle. The crowd still roars for him, and he's still winning round after round on skill alone...

But.

I can see Rafe's point that what the Atalaxian is trying to do here is not demonstrate his skill, or play fair, or put on any display of ability. No, he's just here to bide his time, to wait for his opportunity, to wear down his opponent, and then strike when the iron is hot.

I glance, just once, at my father and my uncle, who stand tensely together, watching the bout. And I wonder if this has been the method of their opponent for twenty years - if this has been the Atalaxian way.

Or, perhaps, if this kind of brutality is something new. The way dad and Roger talk quietly to each other, their eyes fixed on the bout, lets me know that something, at least, is intriguing them here. That this is not just an opportunity to watch a promising young fighter in the ring that they're learning something.

And I'm quite desperate, suddenly, to know what.

But my eyes are drawn instantly back to the ring when there's a huge gasp and then a cheer form the crowd. I lean forward, my eyes focusing on Luca as I realize that he's making a big move - that he's somehow got the Atalaxian back on the ropes - as Rafe said that he had to- and that he's swinging like mad now, landing blow after blow around the Atalaxian's face and head.

Hope swells in me suddenly and my fingers tighten on the wall - but then I gasp along with everyone else as the Atalaxian lets out an insane roar and thrust himself up from the ropes, swinging wildly for Luca.

Luca stumbles back, getting out of the way fast as the Atalaxian barrels forward like a bull, clearly out of control and in a complete rage. His blows are uncoordinated and wild, easy for Luca to dodge, but the surprise on Luca's face lets me know that this is unexpected - and unprecedented. And that even though he found a way to get the enemy on the ropes, he's not going to have an easy time keeping them there.

The two fighters find their footing, coming back together, but I shake my head suddenly - because the Atalaxian, something is different now.

There's a rage in his eyes as he stares at Luca - his cool patience totally gone.

My breath comes in fast pants now as I look between them, as I watch the Atalaxian move forward with a new aggression.

As I realize that the bout has...changed.

And not in Luca's favor.

I gasp suddenly as the boxer moves forward, his fists lashing out, moving insanely fast, roaring as he goes. Luca falls back as he's done before - but he's tired now, his feet moving slower, and the Atalaxian's hook lands. Hard.

My hands fly to my mouth in horror as Luca's face snaps to the side, as he stumbles back against the ropes, as the Atalaxian corners him there and starts to pound on him. Luca grits his teeth and puts his hands up, protecting his head. But I see him gasp in pain as the enemy hits him again and again in the ribs - always in the same spot harder and harder each time-

I feel it, viscerally, when Luca's rib snaps -

I cry out in pain, my hand going to my own side, feeling it along with him as Luca loses control of his emotions and they all come flooding to me along the band in his panic.

Luca gives a mighty shout, throwing himself bodily at the boxer, desperate to get away - to stop the next blow from landing and doing worse damage to his side- "His rib!" I gasp, looking desperately up at Rafe, who looks between me and Luca in shock-

Luca gets between the other boxer's arms so neither of them can land any big blows, pushing him back. The ref works hard to step between them, attempting to wrench the boxers apart, but the Atalaxian smirks and starts to pound a series of little rabbit punches right into Luca's broken rib, where he knows it will hurt most.

I gasp again, falling to the side against Rafe with a moan as I feel the agony start to echo through Luca, feel the blinding pain race through me.

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"Ariel!" Rafe shouts, his arms going around me, holding me close. I press my eyes shut, my hand pressed to my side.

The bell rings, stopping the round-thank god - and I can feel Luca's relief. But still, the pain radiates, and I stay pressed to my brother's side. "Ariel!" my mom gasps, suddenly next to me. "What the -"

"She's feeling it, mom!" Rafe says, his voice shaking with his anxiety. "I don't know how - but his ribs - whatever happened, she's feeling it too -"

"Oh my god," my mom says as my dad comes rushing to my other side, as our family and friends simultaneously make space for us even as they stand between us and the low wall of the box, shielding us from prying eyes.

Mom looks frantically at my dad. "Dominic," she murmurs, "is this possible? Can she get hurt because he's getting hurt?"

"Let me see," dad murmurs, coming close and feeling at my ribs where I gesture.

"They're broken," I gasp, shaking my head, desperately afraid and trying to look back towards my mate. "Luca's ribs are broken!" I'm panting now in my fear, my pain, my desperation.

My dad's hand moves firmly over my side. "Cora!" he shouts, and she's there in an instant. He murmurs to her, and her hand is instantly on my side too. She looks up at my dad and shakes her head, her eyes wide.

Dad catches my face between his hands, making me look at him. "His ribs might be broken, Ariel," dad murmurs. "But yours are not. Okay? You are feeling it down the bond - but all of it is his pain, not yours - you can control this -"

"Is that possible!?" mom gasps, looking between me and my dad.

"Yes," dad murmurs, glancing at her. "They're young - they don't know how to control it. Ariel!" He snaps his fingers in front of my face, drawing my attention back to him. "You have to close it down. The bond - close your end of it, just for now, or else you'll feel everything he's feeling - and he'll feel everything you're feeling - and that will not help him right now. Okay!?"

Dad's barking his words out by the end and I focus on his face, trying so hard.

"Come on, baby," mom says, slipping her hands over my shoulders and stepping between me and my dad. "Deep breaths, do it with me." And I focus on my mom's face, and close my eyes when she closes hers, and then I feel the calming lavender of her gift sweep over me. She's not healing me now - I know - though I desperately wonder for a second if her gift can heal Luca through me -

But no, there's no time for that -

Instead, I just trust in mom's light, trust in her as she guides me down into my soul to where my bonds are. There, I find it - my sweet, shining, silver bond with Luca - and I can feel all of his pain radiating down it.

I breathe deeply with my mom and then take hold of the bond gently in my mental hands, and then as she said - just...gently pinch it off, holding it between my fingertips.

"Just for now," I whisper to myself, perhaps aloud - perhaps in my own head - I don't know. I don't really care. "Just...for now."

"That's right, sweetheart," mom says. I open my eyes to see her smiling at me, and I blink a few times before I realize that... that all of the pain is gone. I look down at my ribs and realize - of course - that they're not broken. That I'm fine.

"What... what's happening..." I ask, my voice shaking a bit as I look between my parents.

"It's okay, trouble," dad murmurs, stepping close to me and wrapping me in a big hug. "It's normal - you just...you're feeling everything Luca's feeling, because you two haven't really practiced yet. It will take time-

But there's no time for this either, as the bell rings again, and I gasp, realizing that the fight is beginning.

I push hard against my dad's arms, desperate to get back to the barrier of our box, and he hesitates for a moment - worried - before he lets me go. Then I'm dashing to the side, holding tight to my bond in my mind, desperate to see what happens next.

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Luca, I'm horrified to see, is not the same as he was at the beginning of the fight. Gone is the brash young man, all confidence and vigor. Now, as Ben said, all that's left is the bulldog: grim determination, his jaw set as he moves into the ring.

The Atalaxian, I can see, is likewise changed. He knows he has the advantage now - knows that Luca has quite a literal soft spot in his side. And as they come back together, the Atalaxian goes right for it.

My eyebrows raise, my breath hitching as Luca dodges the fist that the Atalaxian aims directly for his wounded rib, as Luca moves nimbly away and dodges around to his opponent's side, landing a blow on the Atalaxian's cheek that makes him stumble back.

As I watch I feel my fingers slip on my bond with Luca, desperate to know how he's feeling kind of shocked, really, at how much the emptiness echoes between us now that I've closed it off. I hadn't realized, I guess, how much information I was getting down the bond from him - even when I wasn't trying to, even when he's far away.

But the moment that his emotions start to seep through again it's immediately blinding pain, and I gasp - my knees going a bit weak and I squeeze my fingers shut.

Luca - how is he doing this? How is he still fighting when his body is in that much agony?

The Atalaxian turns towards him now, working hard to back Luca into the ropes again. I clench my hands under my chin as I watch Luca fight hard to change the flow of the fight, to be on the offense instead of the defense. But the Atalaxian - he's got his teeth in it now.

Suddenly, the tice shifts again and my mouth falls open in a gasp as I see the Luca shoot out one hell of a punch, connecting directly with the Atalaxian's already-bloody nose-

But in doing so, Luca left his wounded rib right open.

Which is precisely what the Atalaxian wanted

The Atalaxian almost smiles as he winds his arm up and punches, hard-bone-shatteringly hard into Luca's right side.

I scream as I watch Luca crumple against the pain, dodging his body desperately away from the Atalaxian's fist, and in doing so dropping his hands-

Dropping his hands away from his face, precisely the opening that the Atalaxian was waiting for all night long

The blow comes hard, and fast, the Atalaxian's fist ripping across Luca's ear and cheek with a sickening smack that sends my mate immediately to the ground.

Everyone in the stadium shouts, and moans, and screams - but I think that mine carries out over them all as I stare at my mate laying senseless on the canvas.

I scream my mate's name, desperately scared for him, and I'm hanging halfway over the wall of our box in my desperation to get closer. I feel a hand grabbing for my arm, but I smack it away, my nails extending razor-sharp, refusing to be pulled back

The Atalaxian dodges away from Luca, moving to the center of the ring with his fists still up, like he's ready to punch Luca down again the moment he stands.

But Luca - he doesn't stand.

My breath is shallow in my lungs, like I can't pull it in any deeper, and I can't see anything - anything else in the world right now except the back of Luca's head as he lays limp on the mat.

The ref clodges over, looking down at him, demanding that he stand.

But there's no response from Luca, who lays stil.

The ref, to my horror, begins to count.

I look desperately around now, knowing that Luca only has ten seconds

I look at his uncle, who runs around the ring to shout Into Luca's face, begging him to get up-

I look at his mother, Linda's arms around Gran's shoulders, Gran's face pressed devastated Into Linda's side-

My eyes dart back to Luca now when I see his shoulders twitch - can see the desire in him to get up- "Two!" the ref shouts, his counting too slow as time seems to drift.

And then suddenly I'm moving - without a thought I can't help it. My legs are over the wall to the box, and I'm falling the short distance to the seats below us. My heeled shoes hit the ground with a clatter and miraculously can't break - there are shouts around me as people turn to see what the hell is going on

"Three!"

But as soon as my people see me rise and start to move towards my mate, they make way, pushing each other aside so that there's room for me-

Room for me to run - to get to the aisle - to start down towards the ring itself -

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"Four!"

I hear my name being shouted behind me my family-but there's no time and it doesn't matter if it's not safe

I'm moving fast, thanks to my wolf instincts and my training at the academy, and I can feel my canines elongating to points in my ferocity as a snarl rips from my lips, because if anyone tries to stop me right now - I'll rip them to shreds.

"Luca!" I scream, just as the ref shouts "Five!" counting down the moments until Luce is timed out.

Luca's uncle spins when he hears my voice behind him, his eyes going wide. I think he says my name in protest, putting out a hand to stop me, but I shove him aside, throwing myself against the side of the ring, desperately trying to scramble into it. I shout Luca's name again.

"You can't go in!" I hear Bruce shouting behind me, his hands on my hips, pulling me back. "If you go in, Ariel, he'll be disqualified!"

Something about that rings sense to me, and I shoot a glance back at Bruce alongside a snarl to make him see that I understand, but then I'm moving again, positioning myself, trying to get as close to Luca as I can.

"Sk!" the ref shouts, and I see Luca struggling now - see his eyes fluttering as he tries to pull himself together.

"Luca!" I cry again, my hand pounding on the canvas mat, trying to get his attention as I lean as far in as I can. But it's not working - he's not listening to me-

So I do the only thing I can.

I let go of the hold on our bond, and let it all flood me in a moment-

All of Luca's agony - his pain - his fear - his desperation to get up, to continue fighting, to win-

His weakness, his confusion, and again - again, always-that physical agony that threatens to overwhelm me.

My own eyes flutter back in my head as I'm almost taken down by it.

"Seven!" I can hear the ref's voice hesitating now as he sees me there the nation's Princess - trying to support her mate

Luca - everything he's feeling - it's like a tidal wave, and it threatens to sweep me away.

But it's not stronger than me-not stronger than everything I have all my faith, and my strength, and my love - my love for him, my love for our nation, for our people. And I push it all towards Luca, pushing back against that flood of pain, and I give it to him. I let his pain sweep through me, taking all of it, as I push all of my faith and strength towards him.

Oddly, insanely, at this moment, I think of Jackson.

I think of him passing his strength to me during the Examination - that persistent, unyielding strength. "Fight!"

Because I never, ever thought of what it felt like to him if he had to take an my agony to give me his strength, if our bond opened both ways.

God, and he never said a thing-when here I am, almost collapsing under the strain.

"Too good." I murmur, working hard to dig my nails into the mat, to stay conscious.

And as I do, I see Luca's shoulders raise, see him push himself up, see his eyes lock with mine.

And it's enough.

I can see it, immediately, as the ref shouts out the ninth count, that this faith this gift it's enough. I watch as Luca gathers himself, as he pushes himself up, getting his feet beneath him. He holds a hand out towards the ref, asking for a moment to catch his breath-

The ref nods, and steps back, and Luca pants as he gets his weight up over his knees, and then pushes himself up, his eyes still locked on mine.

But the count stops.

And I nod, staring at him, my jaw clenched, my nails still dug into the canvas of the mat. Go, I say, directly into his mind. Finish this.

Luca stares at me, hard, and gives me a single nod before turning back to his opponent.

And the stadium - it erupts in noise.

The citizens of moon valley- they scream for him- scream for us - scream for the persistence of Luca's heart, scream for freedom, and hope, and everything we represent. And inside, my heart sings, and my wolf howls, screaming along with them.

As the crowd roars for him, Luca raises his fists again to eye level, and as he does I feel something shift in our bond. He takes the pain back - some of it, just enough to keep him sharp. And in exchange, he gives me back some of my faith and passion, along with a great deal of his love.

And then, Luca really begins to fight.

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Events move too fast for me to comprehend them all as I stand with Bruce Grant at my side, watching my mate fight for me, for our nation, for our pride against the enemy.

And something is different in Luca now - it's like he's a new man, newly made. His fists move light lightning, and he dodges all of the Atalaxian's stunned blows. The bigger man has no shot, because somehow - and I honestly don't know how it's like Luca's three steps ahead of him-like he already knows where the Atalaxian's punches are going to land and has moved out of their way before he even thinks of it.

Luca gets the Atalaxian on the ropes again and again, delivering blow after devastating blow as our crowd screams for him, chanting his name. The enemy does his best, but he's soon on the defense, just doing his best to keep his hands up. But they slacken, and fall, and Luca lands a series of devastating, snapping blows that leave his face streaked with blood.

With a mighty yell the Atalaxian surges up off the ropes, lurching for Luca, trying to grab him

- to take him down-

But Luca is ready for it - like he was waiting for it - and as soon as the Atalaxian takes his second off-kilter step towards him. Luca looses the final blow.

The Atalaxian's skin shakes as Luca's fist connects with his cheekbone, cracking it, sending him falling to the mat with a thwack that reverberates all through the ring, shaking my whole body, which is pressed to the edge of the canvas.

I gasp, along with the rest of the crowd, as Luca stands over the Atalaxian's prone body-huge, hulking on the ground and roars his victory down over him.

And that's it - we all go wild. The screams that fill the stadium are the loudest that I've ever heard as everyone goes absolutely insane. The ref starts to count but nobody can hear him, because we're all shouting Luca's name -

The Atalaxian - he is completely gone, knocked senseless on the mat. No flutter to his eyes, no twitch to his limbs. His back lifts, just softy, with his breath-

But beyond that, nothing.

I spare a glance for the Atalaxian's coach and trainers across the ring for me, but they just stare at him, shocked and appalled and disgusted.

But I have no room for pity. Because everything in my mind - my entire world-

Is filled with Luca.

Luca, roaring again as he strides around the ring, pounding his fist against his chest.

Luca, triumphant, his pain drowned out by his pride, his victory, the joy that thrums through his veins.

Luca, turning, looking for me.

I laugh, overwhelmed, delighted, and tears of pride streaking down my cheeks as his eyes find mine. And then he's dashing for me, pulling at the laces on his gloves with his teeth, trying to get them off so he can reach for me.

But it doesn't matter, because I'm already clambering into the ring. When Luca sees what I'm doing he laughs and gets to his knees at the side of the ring, pulling me up, pulling me inside, and then he holds his gloved hands out, and I put my little hands in them, and he stands and takes me with him.

The crowd is screaming again - screaming for him, screaming for what, I don't know-

I don't care, honestly, because all I can see is my gorgeous mate as he bends down, wrapping his arms high around my thighs, and then lifts me up so that I'm held just slightly above him, laughing and smiling down into his gorgeous, slightly battered face, running my fingers through his hair.

"You did it," I say, still laughing, unable to help myself - the joy running through me, through us god, it's like a drug.

"You fucking did it, Ariel," he murmurs, shaking his head at me. "God, you're amazing. I could have never-

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"No," I murmur, shaking my head, denying it - categorically. "I helped, Luca, but you..." I take a moment then, looking around at everyone shouting his name - chanting it - shouting and screaming his victory. "Luca, this is all you."

He just shakes his head at me, marveling a little, loving me a lot, and then he loosens his arms just slightly so that I slip down lower against him, until I'm close enough to kiss. Immediately, I lower my face to his, and kiss my mate, cupping the back of his head in my hands, treasuring him- every moment of it. And he kisses me back, passing

me all of his joy, and his thanks, and his pleasure, and his pride. All of it - everything he is - to me.

My sweet mate- my fighter.

God, but I love him.

The crowd now, I know, is cheering for both of us. But I don't care. I don't care at all that the whole nation is seeing this - that our secret is laid bare. The only thing that matters now is being in Luca's arms, his mouth on mine.

Or, at least, it's the only thing that matters for a long, long moment. Until someone comes and taps Luca on the shoulder. "Um, Mr. Grant?"

Luca growls as he pulls his face from mine and shakes his head a little, clearing it, looking down at the judge next to him.

"Um, sir?" the little man says, taking a step back at Luca's ferocious growl, staring wide-eyed at both of us. "There's the little matter of...declaring the victor?"

Luca bursts into laughter, smiling at the man with his most dashing smile, and I can see that the judge is immediately dazed by it by the raw beauty and power of my mate. But then Luca turns it on me, and I swear that if I was standing my knees would go weak. "Got distracted, didn't I?"

"Oh, I think they'll forgive you," I murmur, grinning at him.

His smile deepens and then Luca carefully places me on my feet. "I like your dress," he murmurs, making me burst into laughter. Because honestly- of all things to be thinking about right now-

Luca seems to agree with me though, tugging me close to his side and turning us both so that we face the judges and the little committee that must have climbed into the ring while Luca and I were inappropriately distracted. They all bearn at us, and none of us spare a glance - not really - for the Atalaxian champion, who is being rolled moaning onto a stretcher, begging to be let back into the ring, begging to finish the fight.

But as he's moved away, a woman steps forward, a ceremonial belt stretched out over her hands. I grin when I see it, and then look up into Luca's happy face. A little bit of the pain is coming back now as the euphoria fades, and I know that soon we're going to have to get him into his locker room, and then get my mom down to patch him up-

But for the moment? For the moment, this is all that matters in the world.

The announcer comes forward, declaring Luca Grant officially the winner of the bout, champion of the two kingdoms.

The crowd goes wild again, only softening when the announcer holds the microphone out to Luca, inviting my mate to say whatever he wants in this moment of his victory. Luca looks down at me with a smile, and I know what he wants to do - that he wants to give all the victory to me.

But gently, leaning against his non-injured side, I shake my head, not wanting that.

So, he does the next best thing, and simply raises the belt high above his head with his spare hand and says, his voice booming, "to Victory! And Moon Valley!"

And then Luca drops his hand, and kisses me again, as the crowd again screams their approval.

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I have to admit that the entire world feels a little surreal three hours later when I'm sitting pressed between Daphne and Ben in a booth, laughing and watching as Jesse, and Rafe, and Luca spray bottles of champagne into the air and down onto the crowd below, who are all going mad for it, screaming their approval and their love of the nation's Prince, and Duke, and renewed national boxing Champion.

"Oh, come on, Daph," I say, pressing a hand to my chest because I'm laughing so hard, "how can you go home after this!? It's way too much fun!"

"I have to admit!" she says, having to raise her voice almost to shouting levels so that I can hear her over the pounding music. "You guys are making it really hard!"

And only about to get more difficult, I think as Rafe, grinning, comes over to the table and holds out a hand for her. Daphne smiles broadly as she places her hand in his, and then she laughs as Rafe pulls her up and into his arms, starting to dance with her.

I lean into Ben next to me, who wraps an arm around my shoulder. "I have to admit it," he murmurs, bringing his mouth close to my ear so I can hear him. "It does not make it any easier, knowing that your brother can dance."

I burst out laughing, snuggling closer to my friend and shaking my head. Poor Benny!

But he just laughs along with me and gives me a wink, passing me another shot of tequila from our collection on the table.

I take a little sip from it even as Ben downs his, because I'm already feeling pretty tipsy. It's been an incredible evening. It took a moment, of course, to get out of the stadium.

Mom was waiting for us in Luca's dressing room, as I predicted, to fuss over him and magically heal all his wounds before Luca gave some press interviews.

Rafe pulled me begrudgingly away from Luca's side as mom worked and Luca interviewed, checking in on me and making sure that I was all right. But things got quite a lot easier after mom healed Luca's broken rib, and then after that short bit of press, the party began.

Luca came with us in the limousine, to my pleasure, and brought his mom and his Gran along. His Gran cried the whole time - happy tears as she pressed herself to her grandson's side and looked around at the royals, clutching a glass of champagne that she didn't drink. Gran and Linda declined to come into the club when we arrived, instead taking the limo home, but my parents and aunt and uncle shocked me by coming in with us.

"Oh, we need a little fun, mom said when Rafe protested that it wasn't safe - or appropriate - for the King and Queen to be out at a nightclub. "Besides, the people should see that their monarchs can party."

Honestly, I think that the whole reason they came was because it was very clear that Markie and Juniper really, really wanted to go in. The two of them were having a blast, and Jesse was doing a wonderful job of making sure that they were included in all the laughs, even slipping them a couple of drinks when our parents pretended not to be looking.

Still, about after an hour of that, mom and dad declared that they were taking Mark and Juniper home, and Cora and Roger sighed that they had to get home to the rest of their passel.

"They've probably tied the babysitter up again," Core murmured to Roger, her face genuinely worried.

He just shrugged and took another sip of his drink. "Kind of a crappy babysitter, if she allows her charges to tie her up in square knots that she doesn't know how to un-do."

Mom had kissed us all goodbye and wrapped Luca in a warm hug, telling him again how proud she is of him, how proud he's made the nation. And Luca had bearned to hear it - I think needing it after a lifetime of his uncle subtly implying that he's not good enough.

Since then, it's just been this drinks, and good times, and dancing, and all of us blowing off a great deal of steam after a crazy semester and an even more stressful night. We've been dancing, and singing, and celebrating our hearts out - and I've done most of it in Luca's arms, which has been...amazing.

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Something has shifted between us now, after tonight after I've finally realized how deep our bond really goes. Luca and me- we're tied now, both in the nation's mind and in our souls. I don't really know how to describe it, even now as I watch him dancing with Jesse, both of them singing along to the music, looking gorgeous and young and free, like they haven't got a care in the world.

"Where do they get the energy," Benny murmurs, his arm still slung casually around my shoulder, and I glance at him, pleased to see as much love for our boys as I'm sure is beaming from my own eyes.

"I don't know," I say, a little wondering. "Must be something about warrior track that gives them...a crazy amount of stamina."

"Drugs," Ben says, nodding wisely and making me laugh. "They must put some kind of drugs in their water bottles. Or steroids."

"Very plausible," I say, grinning. He's right, though - Ben and I are wiped, but the boys - it looks like they could go all night.

Daphne, however, is defying our predictions - because the way she's dancing with Rafe right now, with a huge smile on her face as he turns her around and then pulls her close to him...

Well. To be honest, I think she'd be perfectly happy spending the rest of her life doing this. Unlike Ben and I, she doesn't have a tired bone in her body, and clearly has no intention of going home anytime soon.

Still, even if I am more tired than the rest of them, I'm more than happy to stay and bask in the happy atmosphere, quietly sipping at my drink and relaxing. Because it was a stressful and taxing night. I definitely need to unwind.

"So, you're okay, after all of that?" Ben asks, easy and conversational.

I turn to him a little. "What do you mean?"

He shrugs. "It just looked very upsetting," he says, looking at me seriously. "The way you ran down there, and were pounding your hand on the mat, shouting his name - it was intense, Ariel. And obviously way more intense for you, since you were living it."

I laugh a little, shaking my head. "It was intense," I murmur, shifting my eyes back to Luca. But worth it. He needed me."

"It was awesome," Ben replies, a little mystified. "Like, everyone could see the two of you connecting, see the way you brought him back. It was very cool."

I hum a little in the back of my throat, remembering that moment, wondering what it looked like from the outside. But, I mean, obviously there's footage of it - I guess if I really want to know, I could watch a recording.

I grimace a little, thinking that that might be a little embarrassing and deciding against it.

"Is it always like that?" Ben murmurs, his words a little slurred and curious.

"Is what?" I ask, needing clarification.

"Your bond - being mated. You're just...always connected like that? Can feel what each other feel? Can...like pass emotions around, trade them?"

"Oh, god, no," I say, my eyes going wide as I glance over at Ben before returning my eyes to my beautiful mate, laughing with my cousin as Rafe and Daphne come back over to them at the end of the song, the four of them easily chatting. "I mean, like, I can feel that he's happy now -"

"You can also see it," Ben points out, gesturing towards Luca, not really getting it.

"I know," I say, grinning and tapping my chest. "But I can feel it too. But what happened tonight - and it happened before, with Jackson, during the examination - where we really connect like...super deep?" I hesitate, knowing I'm not being very eloquent or very clear, probably because of all the drinks. "That's not...every day."

"Hmm." Ben says, nodding as he takes another sip of his drink, his eyes going a little far off.

We sit quietly, companionably for a moment, before he surprises me by continuing to push on the subject. "What did it feel like?" Ben asks softly. "When you...when you first knew? That they were your mates."

"When I first knew?" I ask, kind of surprised that he wants to go this far back. Ben meets my eyes and slowly nods.

And then I tilt my head to the side, wondering why on earth he's asking about this now.

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I hesitate for a second, trying to remember what it was like when I first realized that my mates were in the room. "Um... it felt like... like someone threw a brick at my wolf. But I didn't know who threw it."

He bursts out laughing, and then I do too, because I realize it's ridiculous.

"Clarity, please, Princess," Ben murmurs, drifting his drink casually through the air in invitation for me to continue.

"Well, like, because it didn't hurt," I say, laughing again. "But...I felt it, in my soul, in a very visceral way. A shock, like being hit out of nowhere, to recognize that he was there - it was just Luca at first, and then Jacks a moment later. And I didn't know who it was yet - just that they were around."

Ben hums, considering.

"And then," I say, tilting my head to the side, "it felt like...gravity changed? Like...like if I was a compass, all of a sudden north wasn't north anymore. Everything in me pointed towards Luca. And then to Jackson. And then to...both. Does that...offer any clarity?" I ask, frowning a bit, turning towards him, very much hoping that it does.

"Yes and no," he says, giving me a little smirk, because we're both aware that my description is heavily metaphorical and not based at all in any reality.

But, well. That's having a mate for you, isn't it?

"Ari," Ben murmurs, frowning again, and hesitating like he's not sure if he should ask. "Did... did either of them...hit you harder? Pull you more, in one way, instead of the other?"

"No," I say instantly, shaking my head. "Both ways at once. Both directions. Equal pull in each."

Inside, my wolf bares her teeth and then nips me, getting my attention. I sit up straighter, looking around because - is something wrong? Why did she-

"Come on," Luca says, making me jump a little as I break out of my reverie and look up into his smiling face, at the hand he's holding out to me. "Come and dance with me,

Gorgeous. It's been six minutes since you've been in my arms, and it's six minutes too long

I laugh, accepting his hand, but then I hesitate and look back at Benny, not wanting to leave him here by himself.

"I'm up!" he says, grinning at me and pushing himself up from the seat. "It's been six minutes since I've been in someone's arms too! Please, someone! Come and hold me!"

I burst into laughter at my friend and open my other arm to him even as Luca pulls me to his side. Then, between my mate and my pal, I walk out onto the dance floor and proceed to get swept away in the music.

"This has been the most amazing night," Luca murmurs in my ear about forty-five minutes later, holding me close to his chest and tucking his head down close to mine as we lean against one of the booths, still both swaying to the music but taking a minute to ourselves.

"I know," I say, resting my chin on his chest and grinning up at him. "You were so amazing, Luca, Did our nation real proud."

"And you?" he asks, quirked an eyebrow at me. "Were you proud?"

"Luca!" I say, laughing and standing straighter. "Of course I was proud! I was so proud - am so proud!"

"And do you... mind?" he asks, grimacing a little.

"Mind what?"

He shrugs, and I can see he's a little anxious, even though we've both had enough alcohol at this point that we should be far beyond that. "Mind that...well, I mean, you jumped out of the box, Ari. And then you sprinted down to the ringside, and connected with me, and pulled me out of a stupor, I mean, that, combined with the article - people are going to know,"

"Oh, that," I say, waving my hand and rolling my eyes, completely dismissing it as I lean back against him. Luca laughs but squeezes me a little, urging me for an answer.

"Luca," I sigh, smiling up at him, "I never minded if people knew that you're my mate- I never wanted to keep it a secret because I was ashamed of you or because it was shameful. I just - I mean, we as a family, we just keep things close. It's like mom's magic -

"Ella's insane magic," he murmurs, his hand drifting up to his ribs, where she knit the bone together this afternoon with half a thought.

Inod, eager. "Exactly. Mom's never kept it a secret - she'll heal everyone, anyone. She's just... never made a public announcement before." I frown a little, hoping he sees the difference. It's about...discretion? Not secrecy."

"I get it," he murmurs, holding me close and sliding his hand up my bare back and burying his fingers in the roots of my long hair. "And I'm sorry about all that. I'll make it up to you."

"You don't need to," I murmur, letting my eyes drift shut a bit, relaxing against him.

"Yeah, but I want to," he says on a sigh, dropping a kiss to the top of my head that makes me smile, that makes warmth drift all the way through me. "I'm just...so damn in love with you, Ariel Sinclair. I'm going to give you the world, whether you want to or not."

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I just grin, a soft breeze swirling up around us, cool and fresh, as I tighten my arms around him.

"Booo, lovebirds!" Jesse calls over to us, cupping his hands around his mouth so his voice echoes. I laugh, opening my eyes. "Come on, stop being boring! We're doing shots!" He points to a tray of flaming shots that a very good-looking waitress, who Jesse currently has his arm around, is holding

"Oh my god," I say, my eyes going a little wide at the sight of them.

"Come on!" Luca says, laughing, starting over and pulling me along with him by the hand.

But as we go, I can't stop another yawn from crawling up my throat. Honestly I don't know how Luca's still up - he's had a much more taxing day than me. Must be the adrenaline. When we get to Jesse and his new friend, Luca takes the shots off the tray and hands them round, but when he holds one out to me I wave it away, even though the flames dance prettily and catch my eye. Rafe and Daphne come over too, and I grin to see that she is wearing a little less lipstick than she was earlier, but I don't say anything as she and Rafe take shots off the tray.

"Whaaat!" Jesse says, grinning at me a little devilishly. "Princess first to cave!? Honestly, Ari, you're doing the espionage track no credit here."

"Ambassador too," Ben says, likewise refusing the drink and rubbing at his eye. "It might be last warrior standing tonight. Warrior or seamstress." He turns his head to me,

raising his eyebrow, cocking his head towards the door, silently asking me if I want to go.

Hope blooms in me because honestly, I'm exhausted, and my bed is calling.

"Ari!" Luca exclaims, and I turn to see him frowning at me, looking devastated. "No, let's stay out! We're having so much fun!"

"I think have to be pathetic," I say, slumping my shoulders and fighting yet another yawn. "I'm sorry."

Luca grimaces, looking at Rafe, Jesse, and Daphne - all still clearly ready to continue the good time. And I can tell immediately that he's torn that he knows he should take me home but he really, really wants to stay out.

"Luca, stay," I say, smiling softly up at him and stepping close, putting my hands on his chest. He sighs and looks down at me, feeling guilty. "It's your big night! You should stay out till dawn! You don't have to turn in just because I'm being a big baby about being tired."

"Ari," he murmurs, running a hand over my hair with a frown-but... can see he's tempted. "If you don't stay out," I whisper, shaking my head up at him with a grin. "Then you lose, and Jesse wins. And we can't have that."

"It's true," Jesse says, nodding seriously, and I grin over at him- glad he gets the game, and that he too wants Luca to stay out and enjoy his big night. "Last man standing is the King. And gets Rafe's crown."

"Hey!" Rafe protests, laughing, but we all ignore him.

Luca fakes a grimace, looking down at me. "Well," he says with a shrug. "I've always wanted a crown."

"Good," I murmur, standing on my toes and begging for a kiss, which he gives me.

When he lets me back down, Luca looks seriously over at Ben. "You're going too? You'll make sure she gets home safe?*

"And face your left hook if I don't?" Ben asks, quirking an eyebrow before dipping into a bow. "You have my word, your highness."

"Hey!" Rafe protests again, as his title has been wantonly claimed now alongside his crown.

I squeeze Luca's hand before moving to Ben's side, linking my arm with his and giving him a nod. There are some brief goodbyes, and a lightning fast half-slurred lecture from

Rafe about where to find the car and the million ways Ben will be murdered if I don't get to the palace in one piece, but then we're off.

I doze in the limo, my head resting gently against Ben's shoulder, but he nudges me awake when we arrive in the garages below the palace - a safer entrance, when it's just the two of us. I'm still yawning as we get into the elevator that will take us up to my family's floor.

"You're gonna sleep good tonight," Ben murmurs, leaning hard against the elevator wall.

"Lock who's talking," I say in response, way too tired to say anything truly witty. When we step out of the elevator into the quiet palace, I give Ben a big hug and wave him off towards his room as I turn to my own, thinking fondly of my fluffy duvet and cozy sheets.

But then, as I turn towards my family apartments, a certain scent hits my nose just right...

And my wolf perks up...

And I wonder, suddenly...

If I don't want to make a pitstop on my way to bed.

Read Chapter 0357

Chapter 0357

Chapter 0357

My wolf yips inside of me, suddenly incredibly eager and awake, tuming in circles as we walk closer and closer to Jackson's door. Suddenly, I stop in the hallway, my jaw falling open as I look down at my chest-where she lives, alongside my spirit.

"You little brat!" I whisper aloud, appalled at her. She snickers, of all things - god, can wolves even snicker? "You were just pretending to be sleepy!"

My wolf doesn't answer me, just curls up demurely in my soul and crosses her paws, prim.

I laugh and roll my eyes, propelled forward, deciding not to think about it. I've had quite a bit to drink, after all - I probably won't get anywhere anyway.

The hallway is cool and dark as I tiptoe up to the door I know is Jackson's - the big suite in a quiet part of the palace where mom thought he'd be comfortable. Biting my lip a

little, excited and anxious at once, I step close to the door and raise my fist, giving a quick little rap before whipping my hands behind my back.

At first, for a long moment, there's silence.

And then I burst into a grin, and my wolf gives an unintentional little howl, when I hear movement inside of the room - the soft rush of sheets, and then the soft sound of Jackson's footsteps - shockingly light for such a big guy.

The knob turns, and the door opens just a crack. I'm still grinning as I tilt my chin up to look into his gorgeous face, just barely visible in the dark

Unfortunately, there are sort of two of him right now, because my vision is...a little hazy from drinking. So, I close one eye and peer at him, grinning stupidly. "Hi," I say, pressing my hands together behind my back.

Jackson works hard to keep from smiling, but I can tell by the way that his eyes crinkle that he's not displeased. Nope, not one bit. Slowly, he pulls open the door, still not saying a word.

And my mouth pops open as my eyes drift down over him, taking in his bare chest, the pajama pants slung low over his hips.

Because...god...god damn it but Jackson is fit.

I just stare at him, shaking my head a little and realizing that I actually have not had many good opportunities to see Jackson shirtless- and certainly not this close. A few times, perhaps, during candidacy, when we were outside and it was hot and a couple of guys were working out without their shirts on? But that was always from a distance.

And I certainly never saw him in the showers - Jackson, he always took his showers privately, like I did.

So, I never-

"Ari," Jackson murmurs, laughing a little, reaching out a hand and curling a finger under my chin, turning my face up to look at him. "What are you staring at?"

"Nothing," I mutter quickly, blushing beet red to have been caught just ogling him. I whip my hands up, smacking them over my face, covering my eyes as well as my cheeks.

He laughs harder now, letting go of my chin and gently grabbing one of my wrists, trying to pull my hand away. But I hold tight, and he just succeeds in pulling me slightly off-balance in my ridiculous six-inch heels. "What are you doing?"

But I just shake my head, laughing with him now. "Nothing," I reply, keeping my eyes covered. "Just..not looking at you."

"Why not?" he murmurs, his voice dipping deep in that way I really, really like.

"Because," I sigh, stumbling again to lean against his doorframe. "You're just...very ugly, Jackson. Very difficult to look at, in the face area. And your body in particular-just-yuck-It's self-preservation, really, covering my eyes -

He bursts out laughing now, laughter that turns into a sharp snarl as he leans forward and grabs me around the waist. I squeal a little, in delight as well as a little visceral fear-Jackson, he is very frightening, after all, on like, a basic, bodily level and wrap my arms around his neck. Jackson pulls me up against him in the same moment that he yanks me into the room and pushes the door shut with a satisfying, definitive smack.

Chapter 358

Chapter 0358

"I missed you," he murmurs, holding me close and falling back against the wall next to the door.

I grin at him in the dark of the room, my face very close to his, my feet nowhere near the ground. God, I love how he always picks me up. I don't know why it's not like he carries me anywhere or it does any productive good. I just...love it. "You did?" I whisper, delighted.

"I always miss you," he murmurs, leaning forward a little to nudge my nose with his.

"Oh yeah?" I say, sighing a little. "Even like, when I'm in the same room?"

Jackson just frowns at me like I'm crazy. "No, Ariel, that's ridiculous."

I burst out laughing, tilting my head back on my neck.

I can feel him grinning - feel it down the bond, feel it in the way that his chest rumbles. "Why would I miss you when you're still in the room?"

"Because!" I protest, laughing, pulling my head back up to look into his shining eyes. "It's romantic."

"It's dumb," he says, sighing happily and staring into my face, searching it like he's

memorizing the details. "If you're in the room, I'm glad you're there. I can't miss you in the same moment that I'm glad you're there."

"So, you're glad I'm here?" I whisper.

"Yes," he whispers back, simple and sweet. "Always want you near." And then he moves his head forward, as I hoped he would, and brings his mouth to mine, and kisses the daylights out of me. I moan a little, loving the feeling of his lips on mine, the way he kisses me languidly, like he has all damn night to do it. I love the way his hands tighten against the silk of my dress, the way his skin feels hot under my hands as I let them slip down his neck, and over his shoulders.

Jackson shudders against me and then breaks away, loosing a long breath. In that, I can feel that he's working very hard to keep his control.

"What?" I mummur, closing the distance between us, wanting him to kiss me again.

"I just, um..." he clears his throat and quietly starts to lower me to the ground. I squeak in protest, bending my knees so that my feet lift far from the floor, so that when Jackson expects my heels to hit there's nothing there.

He bursts out laughing again and straightens up, and I grin with pleasure when I'm pressed again against his chest, right where I want to be. "Your parents were right," he murmurs, taking a deep breath and smiling at me, "trouble."

"Why are you trying to put me down?" I frown at him, not liking that he ended our kiss right when things were getting interesting.

"Because," he murmurs, looking at me seriously, shaking his head slightly. "It is..difficult, to not let myself get carried away with you, Ariel -"

I look at him wide-eyed, like that's kind of the point.

Jackson's face bursts into a grin like he can't help it, but then he forces his face into more serious lines. "And," he continues, like he needs to get this out while he can, even as his arms tighten around me, "you're kind of drunk, and you're exhausted-"

I squeak again, displeased and a little offended. "I am not very drunk, Jackson McClintock!" "You have to close one eye to look at me!"

"Vision aside, I am perfectly able to consent to...stuff." I growl, narrowing my eyes at him.

"All right," Jackson says, smirking a little now as he gets to what I can tell is the truth. "If you really want to know, Ariel, I am having trouble with this at the moment because you smell all over of Luca Grant."

I gasp, my eyes going wide. Then I groan, and slip my arms from around Jackson's neck, covering my face again in my embarrassment.

Chapter 359

Chapter 0359

"And yeah," Jackson says, his voice humming with a little apology that he has to break it to me like this, "I'm having a little trouble getting in the mood to rip your clothes off when I can smell your other mate all over you."

When Jackson lowers me to the ground this time I put my feet down and consent to stand on my own.

"Oh my god," I murmur, shaking my head and taking a step away, mortified, dipping my face into my hands again. Because of course I smell of Luca - he has been all over me tonight. Holding me, hugging me, making out with me, putting his hands all over me. "Jackson, I'm so Sorry -

"It's fine," he says, laughing a little, reaching out and pulling my hands away from my face. I look up at him with my blush still on my cheeks, my eyes apologetic. "Honestly, Ariel, I don't care - I'm just going to have a little trouble losing myself in you until we fix that. I hope that makes...sense. I don't want you to feel bad."

"No, it makes total sense," I say, dropping my hands completely and standing straight, reaching for the zipper sewn into the side of my dress. "I totally get it."

"Ari," Jackson says, a little confused - and then I feel his panic as I swiftly tug my zipper all the way down and shimmy out of my dress, which drops to the floor in a heap of silk and satin and secret hidden underwire. As it falls, I turn away from Jacks, lifting my hands and crossing them over my chest to cup my suddenly cold breasts in my palms, a shiver running through me as I start towards Jackson's bathroom.

"An!" He groans, and I turn in surprise to see him slumped against the wall of his room, staring at me like he's devastated. "What on earth are you doing?"

I pause, confused as hell, and then nod my head towards his bathroom. "I'm going to go take a shower, Jacks."

Jackson groans, and hangs his head, his shoulders trembling slightly.

And then, faster than I can see him move, he's suddenly crossing the room to my side, grabbing me again with a snarl so fierce it makes me gasp. I stare at him for a split

second, into his cold, determined eyes, before he gives me a wicked grin and tumbles into his bed, taking me with him.

I gasp as I land on top of Jackson in his bed, my hands still cupping my chest, my eyes wide. Not because it hurt at all-Jackson's far too careful with me for that but because it all happened very fast, and now all of a sudden I'm in Jackson's bed wearing nothing but my underwear and my heels.

"Jacks!" I gasp, staring first at him and then over at the bathroom door. "What are you doing!?"

"I'm taking you to bed, Ariel," he growls, rolling over me so that it's my back pressed into the mattress now and his body is leveraged over mine. I can't help the teeny little moan that slips from me when I feel the weight of his body pressing into me.

"But," I murmur, deeply distracted right now. "What about my scent - I can take a shower -

He growls as he shakes his head. "I'm not going to be able to handle that, Ariel," Jackson murmurs, his voice dead serious as he raises a hand and softly brushes my hair back out of my face. "The idea of you, naked, in that room? All wet and soapy? Your scent alone in the stearn, drifting out of the door..." He pauses, and then groans, and then ducks his head down against my shoulder like he can't handle it.

I laugh lightly, delighted that even the idea of me in the shower drives him that crazy. But still, I don't understand. "Jacks," I groan, pouting a little, wiggling down lower so that I can see into his face. Not even thinking of what it reveals, I lift my hands away from my chest and raise them to his cheeks. "I don't get it. ...still smell like him."

Jackson lowers his face slowly until he presses a soft, lingering kiss to my mouth. "There are other ways to fix that," he murmurs, and I shiver at the way his lips feel moving against mine as he speaks.

And then, to my shock, Jackson quickly slips a hand under my back and uses the leverage there to flip me over so that I'm laying on my belly. I gasp a little in my surprise, but he just laughs at me - a low, pleased, controlled noise - and then lays his weight gently down on me again, beginning to slowly move his hands all the way down my sides and then back up, touching every inch of my skin with his hands, with his wrists.

Chapter 360

Chapter 0360

At first, my eyes flutter shut because of how good it feels - Jackson, something about when he touches me, it just...lights something in me, kindles a warmth, makes me feel so cozy and warm and adored. But then, after a few minutes after I realize that he's taking quite a bit of care to ensure that his wrists come in contact with my most important pressure points, and that his hands spread out from there-

I realize what's happening.

That Jackson is scent marking me - every inch of me, and taking a great deal of care in doing it. I smile, pleased at the idea that this is Jackson's very own version of claiming me, of marking me as his own, of wiping out every inch of Luca's scent by gently covering it with his.

The minutes slip by and I fall almost into a daze, my body moving with Jackson's as he covers me. I'm nowhere near falling asleep, but the state of calm into which I slip - it's like nothing I've ever felt before. Jackson's hands are gentle but firm as they move over my back, and down each of my arms, and then up over my neck. He presses gentle kisses to my skin as he goes, and I honestly don't think that they're part of the scent marking - I think it's just him being very sweet, and slightly unable to resist.

A little bit to my chagrin, Jackson leaves my underwear on - flimsy as they are-as he moves downward over my legs. A delicious shiver pulses through me, though, when he brings his face close to my ass, and presses his cheek briefly against it, and then gives my cheek a tiny nip with the edge of his canine. I laugh, pleased, and so does he.

But then he moves on, continuing down. When he gets to my feet, I hear him click his tongue in disapproval

"What?" I ask, turning my head a little to peak at him as he kneels at my feet and bends my leg at the knee, lifting my shoe high.

Jackson gives me a dubious look. "These shoes are ridiculous, Clark.

I burst out laughing, delighted. "They are very fashionable and very expensive, McClintock." He grins at me and shakes his head, his fingers making fast work of the little buckle around my ankle. "They offer no traction, and I don't see how you can run in them-"

"They're not for running -* protest, grinning a little as I lay my head down on the pillow, peering at him over my shoulder.

"You're a spy, Clark," he growls. "You always need to be able to escape."

I shrug, conceding the point as he pulls the first shoe off and lets my leg drop. "They're supposed to be sexy," I murmur, still wanting to defend my little shoes just a bit.

Jackson moves his eyes to mine, perfectly serious as he grabs my other ankle, making me grin at the satisfying smack his palm makes against my skin before he bends my leg at the knee, lifting my foot higher.

"You have the world's most perfect feet, Ariel," he says, like it makes him kind of mad that I even wear shoes at all. "The idea that you could improve them by shoving them into some

stupid shoe..."

I grin at him, laughing a little, but he just shakes his head at me still dead serious - before he unbuckles the second shoe, slips it off, and then dips his head slightly and presses a kiss to the arch of my foot.

I gasp a little at that - at the feel of his soft lips against my ticklish skin, at the light stubble that grazes my toes, at the idea of being touched somewhere that I've obviously, obviously never been kissed by any other person.

God damn it, but I just start to come undone. Something in me, in my spirit, goes completely to pieces for Jackson - just crumbles down, until I'm completely bare. And it has nothing to do with the fact that I'm very nearly naked as Jackson finishes running his hands over my feet, and then crawls forward over the bed, and then slips a hand under my hip, pulling, asking me to roll onto my back.

Moving slowly, I comply.