

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

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### **Chapter 0381**

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Daphne.

Daphne, the gorgeous, clever, talented, funny redhead my brother is dating. The girl he's absolutely going to have to break up with the moment his mate comes on the scene.

I lift my hand and press my face miserably against it. God, how could I have been so callous, so unthinking to make a joke about his future mate? When he's been so, so nice and considerate to me this entire time?

God, I'm such a jerk.

"Ari?"

I drop my hand when I hear Daphne's sleepy voice and tuck my emotions away. I don't need to make her day miserable too, after all.

"Hey, Daph," I whisper with a sigh as I push the door shut behind me. "Go back to sleep, I didn't mean to wake you

But Daphne gasps, her eyes flying open, and sits up straight in the bed, shaking her head to clear it.

I go stark still, staring at her, wondering what the hell -

"Oh my god, Ariel," she whispers, staring at me in awe, "did you did Jackson -"

"Oh my godddd," I groan, my head hanging back on my neck as I realize what happened - that Daphne scented me, and thinks that Jackson gave me his mark. Seriously, is it that strong!? I thought just Alphas were susceptible to these kinds of subtle changes in scent.

But I guess this one isn't so subtle.

"What!? Are you!?" She starts to scramble out of bed, tripping towards me, her hand reaching for the neckline of Jackson's gigantic black t-shirt.

"No, Daphne!" I say with an exasperated sigh, smacking her hand away. She goes still, staring at me, not understanding. "He just... scent marked me. I didn't know it was going to have this effect."

She stares at me for a long moment and then bursts out laughing.

"Daphhhh," I whine, my shoulders slumping. "Is it seriously that bad!?"

"Oh my god, Ariel," she says, crossing her arms and shaking her head at me. "If he didn't mark you, you must have had one hell of a night anyway."

"One hell of a night, and one hell of a morning." I mutter, slumping down on the edge of my bed.

Daphne does the same, sitting across from me, one eyebrow raised. "Does this have anything to do with Luca tearing through the palace shouting for you?"

"Oh my god," I whisper, my mouth falling open and staring at her a bit. "Are you...are you serious? Through the whole palace?"

She grimaces a little. "He was... not subtle, Ariel. And he's fast - Rafe went after him but...I mean, did he catch him in time?\*

"Sort of," I sigh, and then very quickly I tell Daphne the short version of the story. By the time I'm done, she's shaking her head in disbelief, her arms crossed across her chest.

"He is a piece of work, Ariel," she sighs. "I can't believe he did that."

"You don't see Luca's side of it?" I ask, curious. "All the boys do."

She rolls her eyes. "If he wanted to reserve your time for the full twenty-four hours, Ariel, he should have gone

home with you. Why should you go to bed alone just because he wants to stay out drinking? Especially when your super hot other mate is likewise alone a few hallways away. Where you sleep, and who is in your bed, does not need to correspond to Luca's schedule just because he'd prefer it that way. And it would be different if Luca were your only mate and you were cheating on him or something - but that's not what's happening here, is it?"

I groan a little in relief to hear her support, even if it is perhaps a bit overstated to make me feel better. But still, I throw my arms around her and hug her close. "Thanks, Daph," I murmur. "I think I needed to hear that."

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"No problem, babes," she murmurs, hugging me back. "I'm Team Ariel, all the way." She rocks me back and forth for a long moment. "Now let me go, before you mark me with Jackson's scent too."

I burst out laughing and pull away, grinning at her. "Is it seriously that strong?"

"Go!" she laughs, shoving me away a bit and lifting her chin towards my bathroom. "Take a shower, use your stinkiest lavender soap! And let me sleep, I'm exhausted."

I laugh again, getting up and bouncing away to my bathroom, waving to her over my shoulder. And then, my spirits significantly lifted, I do as my friend says and take a long, long hot shower.

When I get out I sniff at myself - at my arms and hands-frowning and wondering if it's any better. Because even though everyone protests that I've basically got Jackson coming out of my pores right now, I can't smell it at all. But I shrug, and towel off, and slip into some pajamas before heading back into my room.

I smile as I see Daphne fully asleep in my bed, glad that she's getting some rest, and I hop in on the other side, grabbing my phone out of the drawer and beginning to catch up on the thousand texts and messages that I've missed since I've been gone. The afternoon slips by then as I catch up with some old friends, making plans to meet up over break, hearing about their own lives and dramas. I order some food up to the room too around lunch time, truly treating myself to a day in bed while I let Jackson have his space and let the rest of my friends recover from their exhaustion and hangovers.

Passively, I wonder where Ben is, and send him a message too. But he doesn't answer, and I shrug, assuming that it's just as well to let him have his own space.

It's late in the afternoon, and I'm just settling in to catch up on all the celebrity gossip that I've missed in the months that I've been gone, when a knock comes after the door. Glancing anxiously at Daphne and not wanting to wake her up, I start to climb out of bed and hurry for the door when it pops open.

"Ariel?" my mom calls softly.

"Mom!" I whisper, hurrying towards her, eager to tell her to be quiet so she doesn't wake Daphne up. "Be -"

But she pokes her head into the room, and sniffs once, and then her eyes go wide.

I groan, stopping in my tracks, knowing exactly what this is about by this point. And that my shower apparently did nothing.

"Ariel!" she gasps, looking frantically behind her in the hall and then darting into the room, slamming the door shut behind her and leaning against it. "Oh my god!"

"Mom, it's not what you -"

"What's going on," Daphne murmurs, all her words slurring together as she sits up and rubs at her eyes.

A knock comes at the door and mom's head snaps anxiously towards her. "Ella?"

I go rigid when I hear my dad's voice outside.

Because, I mean, if mom can smell Jackson's scent marking on me -

Oh my god. Dad - he's going to flip.

"Just a minute, Dominic! Mom calls to him, her voice shrill with anxiety.

"What?" Dad calls back, hearing her tone, instantly tensing. He knocks again, harder. "Ella! What's going on!?"

"Ut-ohhh," Daphne whispers.

I glance at my friend, rolling my eyes like that's one hell of an understatement.

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"Ella!" my dad calls again, pounding on the door. "What's going on!?"

"It's nothing, Dominic!" mom snaps back, turning to glare at the door that she's got her back pressed against, like dad can see her expression through it. "We just need a minute! For girl stuff!"

There's a long pause outside of the door and then dad groans. "Fine!" he calls, sounding exhausted, his voice fading as he clearly walks away. "I'll go get the boys up - you handle this girl stuff. Get them up and dressed!"

\*Dressed?" I ask, peering at the door like it has answers. "For what?"

\*Ariel!" Mom gasps again, darting for me now that dad's gone and grabbing for the neckline of my pajamas. "Where is it - where did he."

But I just sigh, putting my hands on my hips and tilting my head back so that mom can see the evidence for herself. "He didn't mark me, mom - god I'm going to get sick of saying that today."

"He didn't!?" she gasps, still looking like I'm hiding it from her or something. "Then what did he..."

But then she goes still, and takes a single step back, and bursts out laughing.

"What?" I sigh, shaking my head at her, kind of embarrassed and trying hard to hide it.

\*So," she says, grinning wickedly at me as she crosses her arms, becoming my mirror image. "Someone discovered the dark delights of scent marking, did they?"

"Mom!" I protest, dropping my hands, my cheeks blushing pink.

She laughs harder, grinning at me and I just scowl, waiting for her to finish. "No, I get it!" she says after a couple more moments of laughter. "You know, your dad used to scent mark me when -"

"Nope!" I shout, throwing my hands up in the air and turning away from her. As I turn I see Daphne sitting up in the bed, grinning, her arms looped casually around her knees. "Too much information, mom! I do not need to know the details of this!"

"It was before I knew I was a wolf!" she protests.

\*Yah!" I say, turning to give her a little glare. "And when you were already pregnant with Rafe!"

"Yeah," she says, tightening her arms around herself like she's giving herself a little hug. "Ah, the good ole days. Anyway," she sighs, shaking her head at me and glancing back towards the door. "Your dad's going to flip about this, either way, little girl. You are trying his patience with this double mate stuff."

\*Is he going to be mad at me?" I ask, anxious again, following her gaze.

"Nah, I won't let him," mom says, flapping a hand in my direction. "Just, um..." she turns back to us, her face falling into more serious lines. "Actually, you two need to get up and get dressed. We have a meeting with the Atalaxians, and we want you all in on it."

"Me too?" Daphne asks, surprised.

"You're Academy staff, my dear," mom says, turning to her seriously, making sure that she understands how welcome she is. "And our honored guest. It's your choice, of course, but we'd appreciate it if you came along."

"My honor," Daphne says, starting to get out of bed.

Mom starts darts forward to give me a little kiss before darting towards the door. "I want to make sure Meatball is up - you'll be okay?" She raises an eyebrow, her hand on the door.

"Well, what should we wear?" I ask, a little confused. "Am I...am I a Princess today? Or a Cadet?"

\*Princess, unfortunately," mom replies, tilting her head in apology. "But, something serious. Black?"

I nod, understanding, agreeing.

"And something with a neck tonight," mom says quickly, gesturing towards her own and giving me a wicked smirk. "Basically... the opposite of what you wore last night. Though still Black."

Daphne laughs as I shoo mom out, and then both of us move over to my wardrobe, trying to find something to wear.

Daphne's dressed before me in a serious outfit of boots, tight pants, and a black blouse while I pull on some tights and a dark sweater dress. We're still trying to figure out shoes when a quick knock comes at the door.

"Girl time over?" my dad's voice calls, sounding half amused at himself and half exhausted.

I groan a little under my breath, turning swiftly to Daphne and pulling my high neckline down a bit. "Quick, can you scent mark me too?" I whisper. "Cover it up?"

She bursts out laughing and puts up a hand towards me. "No way, I am not getting my own scent involved in this."

The knock comes again, more insistent this time.

"Come in, Dad," I call, a sigh in my words.

Dad comes in swiftly, and by his deep breath when he comes into the room I know that mom prepped him and let him know that the only reaction he's allowed to have is to be cool, calm, and collected.

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And by the tension in his shoulders, I can tell that he's working very, very hard to embody that.

"Come here, Ariel," he murmurs, standing by the door and beckoning with one hand, the other resting on his hip.

I send one last desperate glance at Daphne before walking to stand in front of my father.

When I stand about a foot in front of him he takes a deep breath in through his nose and reaches out to brush my hair back over my shoulder. "Well, baby trouble," he murmurs. "You smell...different."

The amount of deliberate understatement in that last word makes me fight back a groan.

I bite my lip, tucking my hands behind my back. "Is it bad?" I whisper.

"No, baby," he sighs, shaking his head at me and giving me a small smile, stroking his broad hand over my hair. "It's not bad, not at all. Just...not as easy for a dad. Which is something Rafe and Mark might understand one day, but fortunately for you, you never will."

I can't help it then - I pitch forward that last foot between us and wrap my arms around my dad's waist, crushing myself against his chest. "I'm sorry," I whisper, meaning it desperately, "I don't want to make you...sad."

"I'm not sad, sweetie," he murmurs, his arms wrapping around me and hugging me close. "I'm just... adjusting. You're my little girl, and now someone else has a claim on you, and that's... an adjustment. Two someone else's, at that."

"Well, it's not like you have to give me up," I murmur, shutting my eyes, wanting always - always to be his little girl.

"Oh, they'd have to kill me before I did that," he whispers, and I grin, looking up into his face, nodding.

His face shifts, though, into more serious lines as he glances over at Daphne, giving her a brief nod of acknowledgement and greeting.

"What is it?" I ask, pulling back a little and standing on my own two feet. "What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure yet," dad says, turning back to me and starting to unbutton one of the cuffs on his wrist. He looks at me seriously. "But the Atalaxians have called a surprise meeting and...I don't think it's good. I want us all there."

To my surprise, then, he reaches out his arm and wipes his wrist against my neck and then down over my hair, just as Jesse did every morning and after every shower at the academy. Almost a knee jerk reaction, I hold my own wrists up and he marks those too.

"What's this for?" I ask, confused.

"Camouflage," dad murmurs, re-buttoning his cuff. "It won't completely cover Jackson's scent - I don't think anything could do that right now," he gives me a little raised eyebrow which lets me know precisely how he feels about that, "but it should be enough to confuse the Atalaxians from across the room. Have Jesse and Rafe do it too, when you see them. And your uncle Roger, if you can catch him."

"Why?" I ask, completely willing to do as he says but not fully understanding.

"Because we want you smelling like a Sinclair. The Atalaxians don't need to know about your double-mate situation, and with Luca in the room too they'll notice that you smell like another man. I mean, I doubt they'll be sniffing, but...in case they are. It should be enough to confuse their noses."

"Oh," I say, looking down at my wrists and wondering why Rafe and Jesse didn't think of that this morning. Then I look up at my dad out of the corner of my eye. "Luca...is going to be there?"

"Everyone's going to be there," dad replies, nodding to me seriously. But then his mouth quirks up at the corner. "Or what, did you think Luca would be too tired after his morning dash through the palace, shouting for you?"

I groan, pressing my eyes shut and turning my head away from my father, suddenly terribly embarrassed. I mean, it's not that I did anything wrong, but he is my mate-

"No," dad snaps, and it's surprise enough that I open my eyes and look back up at him. He shakes his head, dead serious as he slips his hands into his pockets. "His embarrassment is not for you to bear, Ariel. He's a big boy- he can take his own shame in hand."

I nod briskly, letting my dad know that I hear him, that I understand.

"But Ariel," my dad says, moving lightening fast and grabbing me by the chin - gentle, but serious, seizing my attention. "There is one thing I do want to say to you right now."



My eyes go wide with fear because...

Oh my god, am I in trouble?

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I look seriously up into my father's green eyes, my stomach tuming over with anxiety.

"Never, ever," my father growls, "let a man raise his voice at you like that again. Do you hear me?" I can hear the anger rolling in him now - anger that I can tell he's been tucking away for my sake.

Tears spring to my eyes suddenly, even as they go even wider with surprise. Because that? I was not expecting that.

"What?" I breathe, totally confused.

Dad continues to look into my eyes as if this is the most serious thing he's ever communicated to me. "Remember who you are, Ariel Sinclair. And it's beyond the fact that you are my daughter, and that you're goddess-bom, and that you're a Princess of this nation - all of which are things that should scare the living daylights out of any man who thinks he can talk to you like that."

My mouth starts to wobble dangerously as my dad continues, his voice growing ever softer and more dangerous.

"No, Ariel," he growls, "even if you were the lowest bom girl in this nation, even if you weren't lucky enough to have a whole family to stand behind you in support? You, Ariel? You are magnificent. A creature of grace and light. Brilliant and beautiful, bold and kind-worthy of respect from every person who is lucky enough to cross your path. You have to remember that, daughter, and not accept any less - not from your mate, and certainly not from some angry boy. So don't you ever let him raise his voice to you, ever again."

Dad snarls the last words, and drops my chin, even as two tears start to roll down my cheeks. We take a long moment, just staring at each other, and I have to admit - I'm shocked to my core. Because even though I know that my dad loves me never doubted that, not a moment in my life....I didn't know he saw me like that.

"All right, trouble?" he murmurs, raising his hand again and using his thumb to quickly wipe my tears away. "No more crying over this. Just...remember, okay?"

"Okay," I whisper.

And dad gives me his patented Sinclair smirk, and a nod, turning towards the door. "Ten minutes!" he calls, his powerful voice booming out as his eyes flick over me. "Put on some shoes and meet us down the hall."

I laugh a little, looking down at my stockinged feet, and then over at Daphne as dad leaves. To my surprise, Daphne's just smiling at me, wiping at the tears that slide down her own cheeks. "That was really nice," she squeaks. "He's...he's really nice to you."

"Aw, Daph!" I cry out, running over to her and wrapping her up in my arms, remembering that she doesn't have a dad - that he died when she was much younger. Hearing my dad say that stuff...well. It probably makes her think of the things her own dad never got to say. "You can share mine, he's big enough for both of us."

"I might take you up on that," she says, laughing and sniffing. But then she pulls away and squares her shoulders, taking a deep breath. "Okay, Sinclair. Let's get you some shoes."

I grin at my friend and nod, leading her over to the shoe closet where I keep my trove. Nine minutes later - and I credit Daphne alone with keeping us on time - we scurry out of my room. Our boots click loud on the tiles as I push my braid back over my shoulder, hurrying out of the private Royal suite, down the hall to where the serious conference rooms are. I don't even worry about my crown falling off my head, because I figured out a trick a couple of years ago where if I loop my hair up and over the back of it before I braid it, it effectively holds it in place until I take my hair down. Convenient and chic - but solutions to princess problems I know are mine and Juniper's alone.

I stop beside a nondescript door and push it open, knowing that this antechamber is where my family and friends will gather. It connects to the largest of the conference rooms.

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My eyes go wide when I see how packed it already is with our family, and our closest friends, and all of dad's advisors including, of course, my grandpa.

A smile bursts onto my lips when I focus on the group of young men in the back corner - all of them dressed in Cadet black.

"Ohhh, that's a sight for sore eyes," Daphne murmurs, slipping in behind me and pressing the door shut, likewise looking over at our boys.

I grin and grab her hand, dragging her over to where they're all waiting. Rafe-wearing his own crown, which shines bright against his dark hair - Jesse, Ben, and Jackson, looking just as I remember them, and Jackson looking a bit relieved, if I'm being honest, to be back in clothes he understands. I look briefly around for Luca, but he's not here yet. Still, there's no time to dwell on it.

Jackson instantly opens an arm to me as Daphne and I cross the room and I dart to his side, wrapping my arms around his waist and beaming up at him. "Hi, I missed you," I whisper, grinning. "Everyone's been torturing me all day looking for your mark."

He laughs a little and runs a fond hand over my cheek and down my neck. "Sorry to disappoint," he murmurs, shaking his head with a smirk. But then his face falls. "But really. sorry - I didn't get you in trouble, did I?"

"No," I say, quickly shaking my head.

"I like this," he murmurs, shifting his eyes to the shining rose-gold circlet on my head, which mom picked - of course to match my hair. "Very pretty on you." He raises the hand not wrapped around my waist and traces a finger around the curve of it.

"Thank you" I say, smiling with very real pleasure. It's not every day, after all, that your mate tells you how pretty you look in your crown. "But, um.." I turn, quickly, my eyes seeking out Rafe and Jesse. I let go of Jackson and hold my wrists out to Jesse and Rafe. "Scent marking, please! Dad's orders."

Jesse just laughs and obliges me, even though Rafe frowns. "Wait, why?" Rafe asks, though he steps forward too when Jesse finishes.

"I don't know," I say with a shrug. "Dad said something about camouflage. Just..obey your king, all right?"

"Whatever," Rafe sighs, following Jesse's routine and glancing over at Jackson. "Sorry, man," he murmurs, "I know you went through a lot of effort to scent her up good-"

Jackson just growls a little, not liking the joke, but I just laugh when he pulls me possessively back to his side.

"So, um," Daphne says, standing close to Ben- who is unusually quiet - tucking her hair behind her ears. "Do we...have any idea what this is about yet?"

"No," Rafe murmurs, clearly anxious about it. "But.." he sighs, looking over at the door to the conference room, "I think it's big, guys. I don't know what it is but... think it's big."

My stomach drops, and by the looks on all of my friends' faces, I can tell that they do as well.

"I come delivering one more little lost cadet!"

I look over with surprise when I hear Aunt Cora's voice ringing out cheerfully. My surprise increases when I see her walking over with her hand between Luca's shoulder blades, Uncle Roger on his other side. She grins at my mate, a little mischievous. "I found him wandering the hall, looking for a plant to puke in."

Luca scowls a little but doesn't deny it, and when I step closer to peer at him I realize that he's hung over as hell. I blink in surprise, because honestly I didn't think he was that drunk this morning - but that must have been the adrenaline clearing his head. Still, the exhaustion, and the drinking, plus barely a few hours sleep?

Luca does...not look bright-eyed and bushy tailed.

"Ah, it's all right, kid," Roger says, patting Luca on the shoulder in turn as my mate steps into our little circle, settling close to Jesse and not looking over at me. "We've all been there."

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Cora and Roger take a moment to look over all of us with fond eyes. "Damn, you all look so cute," Cora sighs, putting her hands on her hips. "Roger really did this nation's women a favor when he designed these uniforms."

"All for you, my love," Roger murmurs, leaning close and giving her a peck on the cheek. I grin, looking Roger over too and noticing that his own military uniform is cut in much the same style as the Cadet's - though of course, much fancier. Chic, slimming, black, and with lots of medals to display his many triumphs.

"Mommm," Jesse groans, pretending to be upset. "Stop checking out my friends."

Cora grins, wrinkling her nose at him - she always does get a kick out of her son - and nods to me and Daphne as well. "You two also look dashing, though I'd expect no less. Daphne, your designs - they're so beautiful. Do you think you could whip something up for me?"

"Hey!" Roger frowns, turning towards his mate. "I'm the designer in the family-

Cora ignores him completely as Daphne's face brightens. "Really?" Daphne asks, her hands clasping eagerly below her chin. "What are you thinking?"

"Something that will make Ella really jealous that she didn't get to you first," Cora says, reaching an arm out for Daphne and pulling her away a little so that they can converse. Roger nods to us and then goes with them.

The rest of our eyes turn to Luca. "You okay, bro?" Jesse asks, slinging an arm around his shoulder.

"I'm fine," he murmurs. "Don't...fuss. Or I'll puke on your shoes."

"Don't you dare," Jesse growls, even while he grins. "These were expensive."

"I have like, twenty pairs just like them now," Jackson murmurs, crossing his arms and leaning his weight into his back foot as he studies Jesse's shoes. "You can have some of mine if yours get ruined."

Jesse laughs, opening his mouth-surely to tease Jackson about his newfound shoe collection, or the size of his feet, or whatever - but a loud clap comes from the front of the room.

Instantly we all turn to see my dad standing there with his hands pressed together, likewise dressed in his military regalia and crown. My mom stands stoic at his side, and next to her are Juniper and Mark also wearing their crowns. I'm a little surprised by this, actually - they usually don't come to important functions. But, well, I guess mom and dad have decided that they're big enough now.

"If we're all gathered," dad says seriously, looking around at us, "then let's get started." When no one protests, he nods once and opens the door to the council chamber, gesturing for us all to enter before him.

I take a deep breath and glance at both Jackson and Luca before stepping to Rafe's side. Luca, to my surprise, meets my eyes and gives me a serious nod. I smile at him, nodding back and passing a warm pulse down our bond, letting him know that we're okay.

But then I turn my attention to the task at hand, filing into the room.

I'm looking around a little anxiously, wondering where I should sit or stand - with my family. amongst the royals? Or with my fellow Academy Cadets? But my thoughts are interrupted with the sound of a slamming door.

I jump, spinning, to see the door to the room shut behind me but..wait, where is my dad?

I look around, but he's not here - and...

Well, he's not the only one, is he?

My mouth drops a little when I realize that we're all in the room together-

Except for Luca.

Who is currently trapped in the antechamber alone with my dad.

The antechamber rings with quiet as Luca stares wide-eyed at his King. "S-sir?" He sputters out, not knowing what else to say.

"I wanted to take a minute with you, Luca," the King says, his voice so low and dangerous that Luca almost has to strain to hear it. But he doesn't dare lean forward to try to catch the words - not with the rage that's obviously pulsing through the King right now. "To have a little chat about your behavior."

Luca gulps anxiously, his stomach turning over, acid climbing up his throat. God, shit, he was going to puke before - but now staring down the most dangerous man in the kingdom? A man who tore the last monarch's throat out with his own teeth?

God, he really is in danger of puking all over someone's shoes.

"The correct response," Sinclair snaps, "is yes, sir. Can you say that, Luca?"

"Yes, sir," Luca instantly responds, nodding and working to stand up straighter, shame pulsing through him with every heartbeat. Shit, this is bad. Really bad.

"Good. Now. On to the matter at hand. Do you think that it's appropriate, Luca? For you to go running through my palace early in the morning? Shouting at the top of your lungs? Not only shouting, but screaming for my daughter, demanding that she appear? Demanding that she come skittering to your side at your beck and call, like some kind of whelp under your command?"

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If Luca could melt into a mortified puddle of humiliation, he'd do it, right then and there. He presses his eyes shut and hangs his head.

"Answer me!" Sinclair barks.

Luca's shoulders start to tremble. "No, sir."

"No, sir' is right," the King growls, stepping forward and snatching Luca's face, pressing his

cheeks tight between his fingers, making the boy look up at him. "Now listen to me, you fucking spoiled child."

The way the King, his mate's father, calls him a spoiled child makes Luca want to just... shrivel up and die.

"I don't want a single one of your excuses, and I know that you have them. That you were drunk? Learn how to control your liquor," Sinclair gives Luca a shake as he bites out the words, a pulse that vibrates through Luca's entire body. "You were angry? Control your fucking emotions. That she betrayed you? She has another mate, Luca, and one who comports himself far better than you did this morning - so fucking learn from him."

Luca groans aloud now, unable to help it, completely miserable.

Sinclair shoves Luca away from him, hard, like he can't stand to touch him any longer.

"We're all well aware that you only won that fight last night, Luca, because my daughter saved your ass - came running down to your rescue and pulled you out of that stupor. And don't even think that it slipped my attention that your incredible luck at being her fated mate also recently made you a very rich man."

Luca's head whips up at this. "Sir, I offered

"Oh, cut the shit, Luca," Sinclair growls, the ferocity of his expression stealing Luca's breath and his will to speak. "You offered to give her the money - Ariel told Ella that, so of course the news got back to me - but you also know my soft-hearted daughter by now, know she'd never take it, or that if she did she'd put it right back into your gym. My daughter, no matter how you look at it, made you incredibly rich - prize money and media farne, both."

Luca's eyes press shut and he hangs his head - because Sinclair is right. The offer - he'd have given her the money if she'd have taken it. But... deep down, he'd known she wouldn't take it.

"You will keep the fight money," Sinclair says, and Luca raises his head to meet the King's eyes again, not understanding. "But within twenty-four hours you will transfer all of the money from the magazine article into an account that I will provide an account in her name. And then she, alone, will decide how she wants to allocate it. You're not her accountant, Luca even if you pretended to give her the funds, and she said she wanted them to go to the gym, I'm not as naïve about money as my daughter is. You were still in full control over how the funds would be allocated. An empty. Fucking. Offer."

Luca takes a deep breath and then nods once, agreeing. "Yes, sir," he whispers.

"We'll discuss the matter of your uncle, and his incredible hubris, at a later date," Sinclair

snarls, taking a step forward and grabbing Luca by the collar, hauling him close so that Luca can feel the Alpha's breath on his face. "But in the time we have left, I have one more thing to say to you."

Luca crumbles in fear and mortification, his knees almost giving out beneath him. But Sinclair ignores this, holding the nation's champion up with his fist alone.

"If you ever," Sinclair whispers, "ever again raise your voice at my favorite child - Princess Ariel Sinclair, goddess-born, a fucking angel on this earth- if you ever dare to yell at her like that? Ever again?"

Luca's whole body shakes as Sinclair brings his mouth very, very close to his ear. "Then I'll fucking rip your heart out, Luca Grant. And I mean that very, very literally."

With a vicious shove, Sinclair casts Luca away from him, disgusted.

Luca stumbles back a few steps, his head still hanging, his shoulders slumped.

"Get yourself together," Sinclair snaps, and get in there. You're still her fucking mate and I won't have you humiliating her further by aniveling."

Luca takes a deep breath and does as he's told, straightening up, even though his skin is still ashen and his expression slack.

Sinclair studies Luca as he puts a hand on the knob to the conference room. "It would do you a world of good, boy," he quietly seethes, "to spend a great deal of time licking her god damn boots. Do you hear me? You're on thin fucking ice - and I expect you to treat her like the very literal goddess that she is."

Luca musters his courage, and all the love he has for Ariel in his heart, and raises his eyes to Dominic Sinclair's. "Yes, sir."

Sinclair nods once, and pushes the door open. The two enter with Luca trailing a few long steps behind.

## **Read Chapter 0389**



## Chapter 0389

### Chapter 0389

My eyes are fastened on the door the entire time it's closed. Even when Rafe tries to pull me away I hastily shove him, not caring who sees.

Anxious as hell, I send shout after shout down the line of my bond with Luca, trying to figure out what's happening, what he's feeling, what on earth my father is saying to him right now.

But there's nothing coming back - our bond is completely sealed off. Banging against it is like pounding on a concrete wall - I'm not sure that Luca even feels the echo.

Still, as desperate as I am to know what the hell is going on? Not a part of me even thinks about interrupting.

Because when my dad is mad?

You do...you do not get in his way.

The door snaps open and dad strides in and my eyes, if possible, go wider. Dad storms into the room and quite frankly it's impressive - whatever angry conversation he just had with Luca definitely put him in the right mood to intimidate our foes. But my mouth falls open when I see Luca.

God, his skin is ashen - actually grey. He doesn't look up - not at me, not at anyone - just walks hastily to Ben's side at the end of the line of Cadets and takes his spot there, standing perfectly still.

Rafe elbows me, hard, as the door at the other end of the room opens. I ignore him, my eyes fastened on my mate, seriously worried about him-

\*Ariel!" Rafe hisses, and the anxiety in his voice breaks me out of it. I snap my head up to look at him. "Luca later - now, this."

He nods, hard, at the entering Atalaxian delegation. I snap my mouth shut, realizing that he's right that I have a job to do today as the Nation's Princess. So I square my shoulders and exhale a long breath from between my teeth, focusing.

To my surprise, I am immediately distracted by the men who march into the other side of the room and begin take their places seats before us, some sitting and some standing, as we are. All of the Atalaxians march with military precision, dressed in black uniforms - I guess neither of us are very creative there - and looking entirely like a unit. I

take a moment to look around at our own more heterogeneous gathering of people, deciding that I like it more. Not only do we have women and people of many ages represented, but there are people here from many walks of life - not just military.

Moon Valley, I know, has celebrated diversity as a strength since the moment my father took the throne. I raise my chin, proud of that, proud of the group of people we've mustered here to meet the Atalaxians, who value the complete opposite. C6ntent from N6velDr6m6!!

The room is square and arranged almost like a parliament, with rows of chairs on either side so that everyone can see each other. I stand with Rafe slightly to the right of center- the spot reserved for our parents, Cora, and Roger - and I take special note of the people who stand directly across from us, likewise taking the place of pride. An older man is clearly their leader. He wears no crown, but instead an impressive number of medals across his chest that mark him as a senior member of their military. The young man standing next to him, however - slowly studying us with stunning sapphire-blue eyes - wears a crown - just a thin band of silver, or perhaps of iron. But still, a member of their royal family. I hadn't noticed him at the fight - had he perhaps not been there? Or just not wearing his crown?

When his eyes land on me he pauses for a moment, and then smirks, a derisive laugh pulsing quickly through him. My eyes narrow just slightly, but that's the only reaction I let him have. I hold his gaze for a moment and then move on as the last of the Atalaxian delegation files in. My eyes move next to the young man standing next to the Prince about my age.

He's tall, broad-shouldered, lanky and handsome. I blink for a moment, and then look between this young man and the Prince next to whom he stands. God, they could be brothers, couldn't they? But this one doesn't wear a

crown. Still, the family resemblance is incredible - I know without a doubt that they're related, that there's another royal of some variety standing across from me. As I study him, this second royals eyes suddenly meet mine, and as they do a shudder passes through me.

I stand up straight, my eyes widening. And he does the same.

We stare at each other for a long, long moment, both shocked and curious. Because what... what the hell was that?

But in a moment he looks away, frowning a bit, clearly as confused as I am. I don't look away though, watching him closely, trying to figure it out. He continues to study our group passively, but then his eyes flare, and he drops them to the ground. I tilt my head, still watching, and see that he does not again look up.

## Chapter 0390

### Chapter 0390

Inside, my wolf nips me, her hackles a bit raised. You watch him, she murmurs, wary.

What? I ask her, looking between this young man and the Prince next to him who I'm not sure why - seems... much more vicious to me. Which one?

The one with the crown, she replies. I don't know what, but he... he gets under my skin, makes me itchy, makes me want to run, roll in fresh mud, climb in a river and wash myself clean. His wolf - not right...not right.

I frown a little, anxiety turning in me, because...what's happening here?

\*Thank you for meeting with us," my father booms out, and my head snaps to the left, to where he stands with my mother, his beautiful Queen, stoic by his side. "Though I admit that I don't understand the purpose of this meeting - not when we have at least ten smaller peace councils scheduled over the course of the next few days of your visit."

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The older man at their center, the one to their Prince's right, breathes in a heavy breath, as if he's almost tired by it all. "There will be no need for those," he says, his voice soft and stem. "This will be our last meeting. And it will, in itself, be quick."

I stand up straight in my surprise - because this is... unexpected. Unprecedented! This whole visit was arranged around peace, with the boxing match meant to be a public sporting event between nations, an olive branch extended to demonstrate that we're not as different as we think we are. But then to cancel the peace talks after that?

What...what went wrong?

I glance up at my brother, worried. He glances down at me, a frown on his own lips, clearly feeling the same.

\*Speak plainly, Gibson," my father snaps out. "What is the meaning of this? Why cancel early? We haven't even begun."

"Because," Gibson, their military commander, replies. "We saw everything we needed to see last night. Our reaction is unanimous. We are ready to end this war."

Hope swells in me alongside the rush of whispers that break out amongst my people. Is it... is it really that easy? But my father's voice is wary, not buying it. "Should I take this

to mean," he asks, his voice low with his disbelief," that you wish to draw up a peace accord? Because rest assured, we can do that...very quickly."

\*No, you misunderstand," Gibson replies on a bored intake of breath. And then he exhales slowly, a wicked grin shaping his mouth. "What I mean to say is that...after your shameful display last night, with your weak champion - who relies on a woman for strength - that Atalaxia is recommitted to our original plan."

I clench my jaw to keep my mouth from falling open in my shock because...what!?

"Yes," Gibson drawls, looking around at all of us with distaste, like we're horrible scum and he's at risk of infection just by breathing the same air as us. "We find your champion," he sneers at Luca here, who hangs his head, "as emblematic of Moon Valley's rather faulty prowess: short-lived, weak, and too dependent on women for its strength," Cóntent from NóvelDrámá!!

His eyes flick to me here and I raise my chin, not letting him intimidate me. Luca did need my help last night against his opponent, who was a cheat and a ringer, emblematic of Atalaxia itself. All it proves to me is that with the help of its women, Moon Valley can beat even the worst odds. I won't let myself be cowed by this man's ineffectual insults.

\*You will keep a civil tongue," my dad snaps, his voice dangerous and low, "when speaking of my women. Especially my daughter."

The Atalaxian waves a hand, dismissing the point. "The fight served its purpose" he continues, sounding bored." That Moon Valley is weak and in need of guidance. After this Atalaxia is newly determined to conquer Moon Valley, to take over the governance of your lands and to teach your people about proper modesty and morality."

A snarl threatens to break from my throat at his words and only years of diplomatic training keep it down. Others in our party are not so successful, and as I glance around I see even Daphne bearing her teeth at the insult.

\*I will return home today," Gibson continues, ignoring the protest, speaking over our people. "And recommend a full onslaught. Prepare yourself, Sinclair." His smirk deepens. "We're going to throw everything we've got at you - and we've been holding back. Your pathetic little kingdom..." he sneers and looks around at all of us, "won't exist in a month."