

Jax vs. Danny Akana

Vanessa stood at the entrance to the Neal S. Blaisdell Center in Honolulu where Jackson was fighting Danny Akana shortly at UFC 165. The jerk had switched camps after she emasculated him by breaking his nose with her fist and then made a career of publicly smearing Jax's name and challenging him in the media. Akana only had a few fights under his belt and in no way deserved to fight a seasoned and former champion like Jax, but even the UFC wasn't immune to the politics of ratings and the bigger the rivalry, the bigger the ratings.

Jax, of course, couldn't have been happier when UFC president, Dana White, proposed the fight. Now he can finish what Danny started all those months ago when he sucker-punched Jax after a sparring session in the gym followed by a crass threat of what he'd like to do to Vanessa. Although she would never condone Jax going after the guy outside of the octagon, *inside* the cage was another story entirely.

At last the town car with her guests arrived and she greeted Becca and Christine at the curb with a warm smile and big hugs. They'd interviewed her and Jackson the day before and now they were here to continue their exposé on the couple. Christine would be writing an article on the fight and Becca would be taking pictures and clips of video to accompany it.

Vanessa handed them their press passes to wear around their necks. "Okay, girls, are you ready?"

Becca adjusted the camera strap over her shoulder. "Absolutely. I'm hoping to get so close to the action I get sprayed with sweat."

Christine added, "You never know, Bec, it might end up being blood."

Becca momentarily paled as her friend laughed at her expense, then recovered with a shrug. "I don't care, as long as it's followed by Jackson kicking Akana's sorry a—"

"Ladies," said a deep voice from behind them, "if you'll follow me I'll escort you inside."

All three women turned to see a member of the arena's security team. The guy was massive and could have easily gotten a job as Duane "The Rock" Johnson's stunt double. Vanessa thanked him then followed as he directed them through the throng of MMA fans to a door labeled as restricted access. After navigating several hallways, they finally arrived at a room with Jackson's name beside it.

Vanessa looked back at the girls. "Becca, you're fine to take pictures. Christine, Jax is going to be in pre-fight mode, so don't feel bad if he totally ignores you. Depending on what he's doing in there he might be fine with talking or he might not. Just follow his lead, okay?"

Becca nodded and Christine added, "Got it." Big Man knocked and waited for someone to call out that it was okay to come in before opening the door and waving them in.

It looked like a typical green room where celebrities might wait before appearing on a show or where a band hung out before their concert. A couple of couches lined the back and left walls and a large flat screen TV hung in the opposite corner showing the fights as they happened.

“There she is.” Corey, one of Jackson’s good friends and teammates crossed the room to greet her with a hug and kiss on the cheek. Vanessa introduced him to the girls and explained why they were there. He bestowed them with his signature boy-next-door smile and warm handshake. Then, jerking his thumb in the direction of Jax shadow boxing in the middle of the room, he said, “Have you finally come to dump this poor schmo and ask me for my hand in marriage?”

She laughed at the tall and lanky fighter with his All-American good looks and charm by the mile. “Isn’t it the man’s job to do the asking?”

“I’m all for the feminist movement. I support your right to pursue happiness, and in this case, I think you’d be happier with me,” he said with a wink.

“Now, Corey, what did I tell you about thinking? It only gets you into trouble.” She patted his cheek a couple of times. “Stick with fighting.”

“Can’t say I haven’t given it the old college try. Why don’t you have a seat on the couch over there while your golden boy does his thing.”

All three women sat and watched the pre-fight routine. Corey and a couple of the other fighters who would be “cornering” for Jackson talked amongst themselves and watched the current fight on TV. Jax was now throwing combinations at the hand pads his coach was wearing. Vanessa loved watching him move. He wore a black pair of shorts that looked just like his dozens of pairs of board shorts he owned, only these had his sponsors’ logos all over them. On top he wore a matching sponsor loaded hoodie, hood pulled up to block out his peripheral vision, and ear buds blasting his favorite “get psyched” music straight into his brain.

He was focused. He was ready. He was damn sexy.

Becca took the occasional picture and Christine watched and took down notes on her writing pad. Vanessa was eager to see what the article would say. Hopefully it ended with Jackson’s hand being raised in the end.

Fifteen minutes later Coach shed the pads and Jax removed the ear buds and his hood to listen to the plan one last time before the older man cuffed him on the side of the head as his own twisted way of showing affection. Apparently, it was *everyone’s* way. Vanessa’s eyes grew wide as every man in the room proceeded to hit Jax on the sides of the head—hard!—as they yelled words of encouragement at him.

Glancing over Vanessa found Christine’s mouth hanging open and Becca giggling as she took shot after shot of the barbaric scenario.

“That explains so much about the male psyche,” Vanessa muttered. “Come on, girls, let’s leave them to their caveman rituals and find our seats. It’s almost time.”

The girls both made pouty faces at having to leave the testosterone filled room and Vanessa tried not to laugh as she ushered them toward the door.

“Wait!”

She knew that deep voice as intimately as her own. Turning, she watched as Jackson strode toward her. Normally her fiancé had a ready smile that showed his dimples and warm topaz eyes that reminded her of gooey caramel. He was a charmer by nature and no one was immune to his powers. But right at this moment all of that was replaced with a feral intensity he only ever unleashed during two things: fighting...and sex.

He stopped in front of her, so close she swore she could hear his heart beating a rapid tattoo against his chest. Or maybe that was hers. “You didn’t think I’d actually let you leave without saying anything, did you?”

“I didn’t think you knew I was here. I mean, I didn’t think you saw me.”

He challenged her statement with an arch of his scarred eyebrow. “I don’t have to see you to know when you’ve stepped into the room, V. You should know that by now.” A shudder ran through her as he lifted his taped-up hands and framed her face. “Tonight, this win’s for you.”

“You know I don’t like the idea of you fighting for me.”

“Yeah, I know. But just this once, I’m doing it all the same. You can yell at me for it later.”

She rolled her eyes and released an exasperated sigh. “Fine. Now go on, get in the zone or whatever. I’ll see you after.”

Jax kissed her firmly on the lips and dropped his hands. He acknowledged Becca and Christine with a nod of his head before bouncing from side to side back to the center of the room. Becca opened the door and they started to shuffle into the hallway, but at the last-minute Vanessa looked over her shoulder and called out to the man she loved. He stopped jumping around to turn and face her again.

Then she said the words she’d been secretly wanting to tell him since that first time he’d been in a cage with Akana. “Kick his ass.”

A shit-eating grin split his face just before Corey shoved a guard into his mouth. The glint in his eyes shone brightly as he started jumping again with renewed energy. As Vanessa finally joined the girls in the hallway, encouraging shouts from the men of Team Titan echoed as the door swung shut behind her.

Thirty minutes later Vanessa, Becca, and Christine were seated in the front row behind the raised octagon platform where Jackson's corner would be. As Becca checked her camera's settings and took some preliminary shots, Christine leaned over to be heard over the loudness surrounding them. "Holy crap, I'm so nervous for him I could puke. How do you deal with this?"

Vanessa gave her a helpless look. "I have no idea. This is his first professional fight since we've been together."

Becca had just sat down and heard the tail end. "Oh my God, are you kidding? This is perfect! We're going to capture every nail-biting, jaw-clenching reaction!"

Christine and Vanessa stared at the woman who looked like she'd just won the lottery. Becca cleared her throat and schooled her face. "What I meant to say was, I'm sure everything will be fine. Despite how it can look, these fights don't result in permanent injuries all that often." Vanessa felt the color drain from her face and she thought she saw Christine jab her friend in the ribs. "I mean, just because there's blood and lots of things swollen ten times their normal size doesn't mean it's all that serious."

"I think I'm going to be sick," Vanessa muttered.

Christine used her notepad to fan Vanessa. "No you're not, you're going to be just fine because we all know that Jax is going to rip Akana to shreds. Isn't that right, Bec?"

"Yes! Absolutely. That's what I was trying to say."

Vanessa laughed despite the knots growing in her stomach and gave Becca a reassuring shoulder squeeze. "Do me a favor, girl. Keep up the awesome work with making trailers and movies and leave the pep talk business to someone else."

They all laughed at that point, but it was interrupted by the walk-in music for Danny Akana. She didn't recognize the song, but it was just as obnoxious as its fighter. When he got into the cage he ran around it taunting the fans, sticking his tongue out, and finally making a lewd gesture directed at Vanessa. As much as she wanted to flip him off she refrained. As the fiancé of one of the fighters, not to mention the publicly-known reason for the rivalry, the cameras were sure to pan to her from time to time. She wasn't going to risk her reputation for a split-second of satisfaction.

Next came the music for Jackson. Another song she didn't know, but it sounded electrifying and empowering. After hugging his coach and teammates, getting greased up with Vaseline, and proving he wore a mouth guard and cup he entered the cage and jogged around once with his fist in the air as a salute to the crowd. When he stopped at his corner, he found her in the fans, pointed to the sea star tattoo over his heart and then at her.

The crowd cheered even louder, eating up the brief attention he paid her. But the only thing Vanessa paid attention to was the easing of the knots in her stomach. With just one look Jackson had been able to reassure her. She was ready to watch the fight.

The music died down as the announcer rattled off the stats of each man. The referee brought them to the center and went over the rules. Jackson held out his fists to touch gloves in a show of good sportsmanship. Danny ignored it and backed away. The referee asked one last time if each man was ready...then clapped his hands and started round one.

The next five minutes were a flurry of fists and kicks as both men kept the fight on their feet. They bounced back and forth and circled each other looking for the opening they needed to connect their next blow. The problem was that Danny seemed to be landing twice as many hits as Jax. Already Jax's lip was split open and bleeding along with a cut over his right eye. Vanessa had no idea what Jackson's game plan was, but if the shouted orders coming from his corner were any indication, he wasn't following it.

During the round Becca followed the action with the other photographers and captured the damage with her camera. Christine wrote feverishly while glancing between the cage and her notepad. Vanessa's eyes were glued to her fiancé and her hands were wringing themselves in the hem of her shirt.

At the end of the round she watched Corey rub ice bags on his shoulders, back, and chest. One guy wiped the blood from his face and slathered more Vaseline over the cuts to prevent them from bleeding. Yet another guy pressed a cold, metal object to his face to keep the swelling down as much as possible. And all of that took place while they barked orders at him. But Jax didn't seem to be listening. His eyes were locked onto Akana the entire time.

Round two.

This time the fight went to the ground, but other than that the outcome was the same. Five minutes of Akana taking Jackson to the mat, passing his guard, and trying to work submissions on him. He almost succeeded a few times, too, but each time Jackson managed to get out of it before Danny could lock anything in. His coach and teammates were screaming bloody murder at him to do this and that, but Jax either didn't hear them or decided to ignore them.

When the round came to an end, Vanessa watched helplessly as the earlier break played over again like a bad case of déjà vu. She understood enough by now to know that if a fight wasn't called by KO, TKO, or submission, it came down to points and who won at least two out of the three rounds. And it would be obvious to even a newcomer to the sport that Akana had won both rounds so far. Jax needed to finish him in round three, or he'd lose.

Unable to stand by any more, Vanessa ran past security to the black chain link fence. "Maris!" she yelled. He twisted his upper body so he could see her. "What the hell are you doing out there? Stop toying with him and *finish* this!"

He gave her a wicked grin and a wink to match before heading out for round three.

This time things were different. Jackson came out with a vengeance, landing his punches and connecting his kicks. Whatever submission Danny tried to get him in, Jax easily maneuvered out of it. With each new thwarted attack the kid grew angrier, more volatile. But the more he let the emotions get the better of him, the sloppier his technique became.

Finally, the kid threw his hands out to the side in yet another taunt. And that's when Jax struck. His arm shot out like a viper uncoiling, hitting dead center on his target. Danny's eyes rolled into the back of his head and he fell boneless to the mat.

The crowd rose to their feet, their cheers deafening in the arena. Jax was joined in the cage by his teammates and coach as they congratulated him and helped him into his black T-shirt. All the while, the world could have been standing still for all Vanessa and Jax knew. Their eyes had locked onto each other the second he won the fight and hadn't broken since. She mouthed the words *I love you* and he responded by pointing to his heart, then her.

As the announcer named Jackson winner by knock out, Vanessa cheered and screamed with Christine as Becca captured each moment with her camera. She made a mental note to get each and every picture to make a coffee table album so they could look back on this night for years to come.

But she knew even without the pictures and article, this would be a night Vanessa and Jackson would never forget.

And the fight was only the beginning.