

The Hidden Luna Queen

Chapter 39

Maeve POV

He smiled ruefully in response. “In the flesh,” he said. “Though I’m guessing I’m not quite what **you** expected.”

To be honest, I was inclined to **agree** with him, and I was filled with shame at having thought so.

People hardly ever spoke of any of the royals except for Alpha Princes Henry, Xaden, or Lucas, due to their ongoing campaigns for the throne. The only things I’d ever heard of the second prince were his name and the fact that he **rarely** ever made public appearances..

Of course, one couldn’t help but wonder why

Different rumors had begun to spread as citizens let their imaginations run rampant. One especially popular theory was that he was even more terrifying and ruthless than Henry, **Xaden**, and Alpha King Arlan combined and that he was locked up in some high–security prison for the good and safety of the kingdom.

That one always seemed to frighten people into silence, fearing that he might somehow hunt down anyone who dared to speak of him behind his back.

And then there was another theory—one that made me feel more sad **than** anything.

I'd heard more and more speculation that Alpha Prince Eric was left horribly disfigured, maimed in a territory battle against the Bear-Shifter Kingdom or an accident of some sort, and that he was hiding out of shame and self-loathing or that he was ordered to hide by his own family to protect their **image**.

That sounded all too familiar to me. Like an echo of something that might have happened to me at Moonstone. Every time I'd heard someone throw out that rumor so casually, I would hope and pray that it wasn't the case.

It was bad enough that I lived through such a hell.

No one else, even an alpha prince, should ever have to experience such a thing.

"I-I didn't mean it like that," I winced uncomfortably, sagging with guilt as I continued to stack the books one on top of the **other**. "I just didn't expect to run into anyone else from the royal family today."

Prince Eric focused his attention **on** sorting the scattered books in front of him as neatly as possible. "It's alright," he said, not looking at me. "I've more or less accepted by now that this is the way things **are**."

A deep, conflicted frown settled on my face. "But why?" I questioned, unable to keep the words from bursting past my lips, subsequently making him halt his movements. "You're still an alpha prince—doesn't the king do anything to stop it?"

As soon **as** I brought up his father, there was a visible shift in the air.

"No." The dejected curtness with which he spoke startled me. "No, he doesn't"

And just like that, it was like my reflection suddenly came to life in the form of Second Prince Eric. My heart ached for him. I'd only just met him and

within only a few words, I felt like I knew him more than anyone else in the world.

He was not a violent terror to lock up or a disfigured soul to hide away. He was only an outcast in his family, unwanted and mistreated.

Just like me.

Prince Eric noticed I was staring at him and an **embarrassed** blush spread over **his face**. “Please, don’t give me **any** of your pity. It’s the last thing I want.”

“It’s not pity. I... I just understand.”

*You understand?” he repeated with a furrowed brow.

I nodded solemnly. “My father he would tell me all the time how much he regretted the day I was born,” I said, biting the inside of my cheek, taking notice of how the prince’s face fell with every word I spoke. “Every day of my life.... as far back as I can remember, I would do all I could to make **it** up to him. Maybe then, I wouldn’t be as much of **a** burden on him... but nothing I **did** ever helped.”

He was silent, but I didn’t need words to sense the change. I could feel him open up to me upon hearing my confession.

“Believe me...” I murmured. “I know better than anyone how you must feel.”

He gazed at me. “It’s no way to live, isn’t it?”

I huffed a short, awkward laugh in response, focusing my full attention back on **stacking** the books.

This time, the titles caught my attention, ranging from the history of our kingdom to the customs, cultures, and histories of our neighbors: the Vixens and the Bear-Shifters. And then there was one book in particular about

something that I had never heard of before...nothing like anything Father ever discussed or that I'd read of in fairytales.

A strange word that rang of a time from long ago.

"Hu... humans...?" I repeated curiously. The word left a bizarre taste in **my** mouth that I couldn't explain. I glanced up at Eric, whose face suddenly shifted into something difficult to read. "What are those?"

"I'm.... not sure," he admitted, smiling politely. "I just enjoy reading anything I can find."

I couldn't help but be in awe of how well he seemed to be at educating himself about the world, real or fictitious. But was that because of how little he got to interact with people? Were books how he got to experience the world?

My interest was piqued. "Would it be alright if I borrowed it when you're done?" I asked as I hoisted myself to my feet.

As he led me down the hallway, Prince Eric seemed a bit reluctant to answer, making me realize that I'd just asked to borrow **a** book that belonged to the **palace**. Embarrassment crawled up my throat. Perhaps I'd become too comfortable too fast with him.

"Of course," he **eventually** said, "but I'm afraid I still don't even **know** who you are."

"Oh." That... was a fair question to ask. "I'm sorry. I'm Maeve."

"I'm very familiar with almost every face in this palace, and... I've never seen yours around before," he remarked, cocking his **head**. "Did you come here to visit someone? Charlotte, perhaps?"

We stopped in front of a door, where he struggled to balance the stack with one arm before moving to open the **door**.

“I was just with the Luna Queen. She’s **training me** to become a... Luna Princess.

With the door finally open, he turned back to me, eyebrows raised in surprise. “You’re marrying one of my brothers?” he inquired as he delved deep into the room. “Which one, if I may ask?”

I prepared to follow him inside, opening my mouth to **answer**, when...

“Maeve, there you are!”

I halted in my **tracks**, whirling **around** to see the **familiar** figure of Xaden jogging over to me from down the opposite end of the hallway. The mere sight of him made my heart soar. “Hi,” I breathed, momentarily forgetting where I was. “What are you doing here?”

He smiled. “I’m here to bring you home. You’re all done with my mother, are you?”

“Ah, yes,” I said, before gesturing to the books in my arms. “But first, I—”

“What are you doing, carrying all those heavy books!” Xaden scolded softly, lifting the stack I was carrying into his well-built arms. “You should be careful not to overexert yourself in your condition.”

I blinked. It had not been so heavy to cause concern, I thought. “I was only trying to help your brother.”

With a creased brow, **Xaden** moved to peer inside the room I was standing outside of. The **pensive** look that marred his handsome face led me to believe he worried which brother had enlisted my help, when Prince Eric quickly re-emerged from the room, having put his stack of books down.

“Eric,” he murmured, surprised. “Are all these books yours?”

The aforementioned brother looked uncomfortable. “Y–Yes, they are,” Eric stammered before hastily continuing. “But don’t worry. I didn’t order her to help...” he said, lowering his gaze to the floor. “She offered to.”

Xaden sighed. “You’re always so quick to defend yourself,” he said, planting a large hand on his older brother’s thin shoulder, and suddenly I was made very aware of the height difference between the two as he towered over Eric by nearly half a foot. “I wasn’t going to accuse you of anything.”

“I’m sorry...”

As Xaden slid past his brother into the **room**, tiredly reminding Eric to be more confident in himself while carrying the **books** with ease, I couldn’t help but notice just how different they seemed to be. Physical differences aside—with which, there were many—one would **not** guess that Eric was one of the elder brothers with that passive nature of his.

In fact, he seemed more like me than anyone else here. But that was impossible to have developed **naturally**.

He was an alpha—it **was** in his blood to be dominant and assertive.

That still begged the question: why was he brushed aside in the first place? Maybe it was something I could ask the Luna Queen during my next visit with her. Surely, she could give some insight into her son and my future brother-in-law,

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After making sure Prince Eric was settled with all the books he’d intended to bring over, Xaden and I left the **palace** and headed home for the remainder of the day. Dinner **and** whatever spare time we had afterward passed by uneventfully and quietly enough.

Once we were in bed and preparing to sleep, however, my mind couldn’t help but wander again.

There was something I was bothered by that I needed answered.

“Xaden,” I whispered into the silence of **the** bedroom, knowing he was not yet asleep.

He hummed in response, an invitation for me to continue.

“You don’t bully your brother Eric, do you...?” I asked, squeezing the blanket as I anxiously awaited for any reaction or answer. The way Eric had practically bowed to Xaden, almost out of fear or retribution, unnerved me.

What if he was contributing somehow to his brother’s state of mind?

He was quiet for a moment before rolling over to face me. “Of course not,” he said, frowning. “Why would you ask that?”

“I talked quite a bit with him before you showed up. I **heard** what he goes through.”

Xaden sighed. “We’re not particularly close,” he admitted, tucking closer to me, “but our relationship is better **than** others around here. He’s uneasy when it comes to everyone else. But believe me, I’m not the one you should be worried about.”

That made me feel a little better, I supposed. Any other concerns I had could wait.

I let him pull me into his arms as I closed my eyes, ready to submerge myself in sleep.

But then I kept falling and falling

Back in those mysterious clutches.