

The Hidden Luna Queen

Chapter 60

MAEVE POV

I had thought I was hidden.

At **least**, **as** hidden as I possibly could be in the banquet hall of the **royal** palace, that was. I'd been **so** careful to choose a seat that was well out of range of any wandering eyes or gossiping lips. And everyone in the room had seemed to be **so** submersed in their own conversations that I thought I could survive the event without issue.

Where I could enjoy myself without worrying about scrutiny or expectations.

Imagine my surprise, then, when I suddenly found myself in the **presence** of a peculiar, noble stranger, who seemed particularly interested in my company for reasons unknown.

This stranger looked no older than his early twenties Ash blonde hair hung nicely in front of his youthful yet chiseled features, though not low enough to conceal the icy blue eyes that regarded me carefully. Eyes that, despite how deeply they could pierce a body with a single glance, radiated warmth and kindness that could only have been borne from one with a genuine heart.

He could have been one of the soldiers. Or at least, the son or brother of one.

"Oh! The startled exclamation burst past my lips before I had a chance to fully **process** what was happening. "Actually," I began to say with an

apologetic smile, gesturing to the empty chairs that were previously occupied by Xaden and Charlotte, “Im...”

And then the words died in my throat.

It wasn't like I could just say outright that I was personally accompanied by the crown prince and princess without drawing attention to myself. That was the last thing I wanted or needed right now. Was I supposed to pretend I was here by myself?

The man seemed to mistake my stunned silence for a refusal of company, quickly adding: “If you'd rather be alone, that's alright...”

“No,” I hurriedly cut him off. Surely there couldn't be any harm in letting him stay **for a** while, especially when he seemed friendly enough. “No, it's alright. You can sit here.”

He smiled, taking a **seat** in the empty chair beside me. “Is this your first banquet! I've never seen you around before.”

And there it **was**. “Ah—yes, it is,” I admitted, and in a way, it was true. It was my first banquet at the palace that was not exclusive to the royal family. “Is it your first time, too?”

“I wish I could say yes, but alas,” he drawled, leaning against his **chair**, “it's not. The thing about these sorts of events is that **once** you've been to one of these, you've been to all of them. So, if you decide to start dancing during a speech or throw food around. trust me, **that** would really liven things up a bit.”

A short laugh slipped past my lips. I had not expected such a blunt answer. That simple quip made him all that more personable to me. The man glanced around the hall for a moment before turning back to **me** curiously. “I thought I saw Prince Xaden and Princess Charlotte over here not too long ago. Are you well acquainted with them?”

I silently cursed my carelessness. How was I supposed to explain being seen with two of the most esteemed alphas in the entire kingdom without exposing myself! No one with half a brain would believe that we were total strangers who happened to spark spirited conversation, nor that Alpha Prince Xaden's infamously tough exterior would subside so easily in the presence of a random girl he'd just

I really had not thought **this** through...

"Only a little," I lied. "They were kind enough to sit with me for a while."

The man opened his mouth to respond, but I was perplexed to hear a woman's voice speak instead. "Prince Kaden **sure is** a lovely man. But he..."

Startled by the sudden interjection, I swung my gaze behind me, where I locked eyes with the short-haired girl who approached me around the same time this man did. She must have taken the liberty of occupying the empty seat at my other side when I told the man he could join me.

This **was** awkward. This was more company than I'd expected to have. where one was meant to socialize. Still, it **was** not like I could just turn her away during an event

"Yes, he seemed **nice**," I conceded with a small smile, trying my best to keep my answers as vague **as** possible.

She leaned in with a coy grin. "He can be even more nice when you **take** charge" she whispered. "He likes that."

I blinked, recoiling ever so slightly. What the heck was **that** supposed to mean? "Excuse me?"

"Or if that makes you uncomfortable, you can also try to wear more black... like you're doing now," she **said**, gesturing to my black dress "He loves the color black."

The things she was trying to say seemed to be anything, nor where any of it was coming completely random. I was **not** sure what taking charge or wearing black had to do with

“It’s okay! I’m just-“

“Ma’am...”

“I-I’m sorry.” I stammered, “what’s all this for?”

The man’s sudden interruption seemed to suffice enough to quiet her down for the time being. “I apologize for cutting you off,” he said. though the tone of his voice indicated that he very much felt otherwise. Inwardly, relief bloomed within me once she had stopped her probing questions. “You’re married to Sargeant Paul from the Night Watch, aren’t you?”

Her eyes lit up. “Yes, I am!” she exclaimed, nodding emphatically.

“It seems like he might be looking for you,” he said, gesturing toward a small gathering of guests near the center of the room, where several young men **could** be seen. “Why don’t you go on and keep him company! If neither one of us **is** busy later, perhaps fate will bring **us all** together once more before the banquet comes to an end.”

“Oh—**okay**. The girl promptly rose from her chair, bid the two of us a short and sweet farewell, and took off without another word.

As soon as she left, I sunk into my chair, my **face** feeling hot from embarrassment “I-I’m sorry about all of that.” I muttered. “I don’t know what she wanted.”

“Please,” he said, shaking his head. “You don’t **have** to apologize for any of that. **Delaney’s** a peculiar creature.”

That caught my attention. Apart from saying her name, there **was** a particular tone to his voice that told me he was familiar with her and that behavior of hers. “Are you friends with her and her husband?”

He gave a vague sort of nod. “More or less. I suppose,” he relented. “Her husband and I serve in the same division, so I’ve seen her at the occasional event.”

Instantly, my curiosity piqued. So—my first impression of him had been correct!

“You’re a soldier,” I breathed, turning **in** my chair to face him head-on. “Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for your service **on** the border. Everyone here **is** safe because of your heroic actions.”

He rubbed his hand over the back of his neck, looking rather bashful. It added to his boyish charm, I thought “Thank you. It means more than you know.”

Admittedly, I had a question that burned at the forefront of my mind, and there **was** something about this man that seemed so open and kind, **that** I felt like I could ask him. “I happened to hear that the alpha who led you was very inspiring,” I said, prompting him to raise an eyebrow “And apparently, he’s supposed to speak today.”

“Ah,” he remarked. “You’re interested in learning about him?”

“I just would like to know a little bit about him, I admitted, feeling like I could be honest with him. “The basics, at the very least—his name, what he’s like, that sort of thing. It’s my first time coming to one of these events, and I feel like everyone seems to know what’s going on except for me.”

The corners of his **lips** suddenly up lifted into **a** small smile. “Actually...” he murmured with a brief pause, his eyes sparkling with something secret and knowing as they flickered up to meet my wonderous gaze. “I personally know all there is to know about the man, if you’re so curious to find out.”

“You do?” I questioned “Who is he?”

“But I’m telling you now—he’s dreadfully boring.”

I blinked. Was that even safe for him to say out loud “Tell me, please.”

His broad frame tilted ever so slightly in my direction. "His name is Nicholas," he said, quiet **as** if to keep the information between us alone. "He graduated with top **marks** at the Royal Academy for Alphas five years ago, joined the royal army shortly after, and this is his first year serving as **a** commanding officer. Everyone seems to think that he's this big, brave hotshot, but truthfully, he was just as terrified as everybody else that night on the border,"

I could only imagine what he must **have** felt.. leading **those** men in what looked like a hopeless defense. To be the only ray of hope in what must **have** felt like the darkest of nights. How much strength it must have taken to put on a brave face for everyone.

"What else?" I pressed,

He cocked his head, and I could practically see him scan through his mental book of tidbits to share. "I hear that when he's not in arms, he enjoys hunting on the weekends, loathes the taste of coffee with a burning passion, and.." He trailed off once more, keeping me on my toes like a born storyteller.

"And" I repeated, intrigued.

He let out a small chuckle. "Well, he's me."