

The Hidden Luna Queen

Chapter 79

XADEN POV

When I woke up **that** morning. I was completely and utterly alone.

Mauve's delectable, sweet scent, which had been so potent when I went to sleep, was resorted to little more than a gentle waft in the morning breeze.

With a groan, I let myself **wake** up, my **eyes** fluttering open. Soft beams of the morning sunlight shone through the windows, basking the bedroom with the golden-red glow of the rising dawn. The spot next to me, where she slept mere hours prior, was empty. All **that** remained was the indentation her body left in the mattress.

Instantly. I got a jarring sense of déjà vu.

The last time I experienced anything remotely similar to this was the morning after we first slept together. Back then, we were still perfect strangers with no real belief of ever seeing each other **again**. Now, after how tightly wound we'd become, it was more than a little unsettling.

But this was nothing like that first morning. She was here. I could feel it deep in my soul.

I just had to find her.

After throwing on a robe, I wandered the house in search of my mate, letting my body guide **me as** if I knew subconsciously where she tucked herself away. It **was** like there was an invisible thread that bound the two of us, and

all I had to do was follow it, listen to the thrums it hummed. With every step, the hums vibrated louder and louder until I found myself in the archway of the kitchen.

And there she was.

Standing alone at the counter, illuminated only by the rising sun that shone brightly through the kitchen windows, was my future mate, still dressed in her nightwear with her back facing **me**. Her black hair, which had been braided last night, dangled in loose, disheveled waves, not yet brushed.

My chest swelled with warmth. Maeve was here, although she didn't seem to be aware of my presence just yet. As I got closer, I could see she was busy stirring something in a large bowl.

But I didn't **have** the patience to find **out** what. **My eyes** were glued on her dazzling figure.

Wordlessly, I pulled up behind her and wrapped my **arms** around her lithe frame, feeling the startled jolt she made until she realized it **was** me.

"You scared me," she said with a short exhale, relaxing into me as she put down the bowl she'd been holding. The warmth of her soft body against mine and the sensation of her fragrant scent flooding into my system once more invigorated me, more so than any cup of coffee could ever dare to try.

"I could say the same to you," I countered lightheartedly, pressing kiss after kiss over the curve of her shoulder. "You were nowhere to be seen when I woke up,"

"I'm sorry..." she said, sounding a little guilty. "I had some trouble getting back to sleep after a strange dream."

"So you **decided** to come down here and cook?"

I felt her stiffen underneath my touch, making me frown a little. "I-I can sto-

“What were you in the mood to make?” I prompted gently, letting **my** hands roam down to caress her hips.

To be honest, seeing the woman who was to be my Luna cook something herself came as **a** shock. That was no longer a responsibility of hers. **And** because she had only recently been freed from a life of servitude, I’d thought she wanted **as** little a reminder of her past **as** possible

But maybe this wasn’t about reminders.

Maybe this was a matter of falling into a habit she found familiar something that made her comfortable.

I knew her reaction to my prodding was only a defense mechanism she’d developed from her days at Moonstone, under the unforgiving **eye** of those low-lives she called family, but I couldn’t deny the pang in my heart to know that it was still there.

How long, I wondered, would it take for her to be completely free from such thoughts?

Curious, I glanced over the open page. “Pancakes, hmm?” I mused, letting my gaze wash over the counter, where a variety of ingredients were splayed out. “And apples, I see. Hopefully out of range of any salt and pepper this **time**.” I teased lightly.

She let out a giggle. The sound **was** music to **my** ears.

“Perhaps not, since this is supposed to be **a** sweeter recipe, she remarked, and I could hear the smile in her voice without seeing it. “But I may change my mind by the time I’m done with everything.”

I didn’t know **what** sort of dream she must’ve had that was able to frazzle her so significantly, but whatever it was, it did a number on her.

So, the question I subsequently **asked** came as a shock to not only her but myself, as well. “What can I do to help?”

She blinked in sheer disbelief. “You want to help me cook?”

“Of course.” I tried to seem nonchalant although I had no idea what I was getting myself into. “How hard can it be?” I asked, to which she raised an amused eyebrow. “Don’t you just mix ingredients together and then heat it up?”

The corners of her mouth upturned. “It’s **a** little more complicated than that. Since you’re a beginner, why don’t you take this,” she suggested, offering me a small bowl filled with a few eggs, “and whisk them together? Once you’re done, **you** can pour some cheese and these diced vegetables into the mix. I’ll tell you what to do next afterward.”

I nodded, taking the materials, “I just have one question.”

Maeve watched as my expression shifted from one of false confidence to total bewilderment. “What on earth does ‘whisk’ **mean**?”

She burst into laughter—a success **in** my book and proceeded to give me detailed instructions on what to do. Following her guidance, I managed to put together an egg mixture and scramble it up on the stove. She prepared her apple pancake mixture on a separate pan, allowing us to cook alongside each other, with Maeve keeping a watchful eye over my progress.

There was something about this that felt wonderfully domestic.

No royal duties nor expectations. Just me and my mate preparing breakfast.

Before long, **Maeve** and I surrounded the counter, each with a plate full of apple cinnamon pancakes and loaded eggs. Nothing had been burnt, thankfully, but what mattered was taste. With Maeve’s encouragement, I took a cautious bite of the eggs I’d cooked.

And, to my surprise, they tasted wonderful. The addition of cheese and bell peppers **was** a stroke of genius—a perfect complement to the savory egg flavor.

“It’s actually delicious, I murmured, surprised. I couldn’t deny the tuft of pride that swelled in my chest with the realization that I hadn’t ruined the food.

Maeve smiled at me, light twinkling in her blue eyes. “You’re a natural, she complimented, scooping up another heaving forkful of eggs and taking a greedy bite. “They’re the best I’ve ever eaten.”

I knew she only said that to encourage me. Still, I found myself grinning alongside her.

Once she’d swallowed her food, I took my chance, leaning in and stealing a kiss—my personal favorite taste of anything in the entire world, mixed together with the flavors of our breakfast. The pleasant surprise written across her face as we pulled apart made my heart flutter with adoration.

“What was that for?” she asked, her cheeks turning pink.

I want to tell you, I thought, filled with yearning. But, no—another time.

“I just can’t believe how lucky I am,” I said, deliberately repeating mirroring my words from last night

Still, Maeve lit up. Any sign of her previous distress was long gone as she gazed at me, looping her hands into the collar of my silk robe. “Me too,” she murmured, pulling me in for another sweet taste.

Shortly after finishing breakfast, which had turned out pleasantly well—so much so, that I swore to myself to do this again with **Maeve** more often—I received a call from Royal Beta Samson, who alerted me to a summons made by my father.

There was no mention of what or why. Just that he expected to see Henry, Lucas, and I posthaste.

After getting dressed and giving Maeve a goodbye kiss, I left for the **palace**. It wasn’t long before I stood before my father alongside my brothers.

What could be possibly he have wanted the three of us for.

Father, however, wasted no time in getting to the point of his summons. “I want you three to visit the border.”

“The border. Father? **Lucas** repeated.

“We cannot,” Father enunciated, “under any circumstances, allow the events of that night to happen again. If those damn bear shifters somehow get **it** in their heads that they can try to strike a second time, they won’t **just** stop at the border. They will make a push right for the heart of our kingdom.”

That was something we could all agree on.

“Before you go—swing by the barracks and find Nicholas. You should take him with you.”

A frown settled on my face before I fully could process the motion. I hadn’t seen the **man** since the banquet, and I wasn’t exactly eager to hasten our next meeting. If I was expected to go along with pretending that Maeve **and** I were not really together, then I needed **adequate** time and **space away** from the one who openly flirted with my mate in front of me,

I wasn’t sure I could keep myself in check if I saw him again, otherwise,

“Father, we’ve visited the border many times before, I protested. “This is something the three of us can do on our own.”

Surely, he had enough faith in us, as **his** very capable sons, to be able to do this without outside help.

Instead of agreeing with me, however, he cocked his head, feigning thoughtfulness. “If I recall correctly, none of you were there that night like he was. He can pinpoint what **sections** are the weakest and require more attention.”

I resisted the urge to groan. He made a good point, and that frustrated me.

Henry shrugged. “As long as it gets the job done faster,” he said nonchalantly, **already** beginning to step away. “I’ll go find him, then.” **And** with **a** wave of approval from Father, he dismissed himself from the room,

As much as I wanted to protest further, to ensure I wouldn’t **have** to work with him, I couldn’t, in good conscience, do it. It was true that Nicholas was the only one of us who knew where our attentions would be needed the most.

I didn’t want to work with him, but I had to. Anything to ensure Maeve could be protected.

As long as that priority was met, I would have no qualms. I could play nice if necessary.

It was up to him to not push my buttons