

The Hidden Luna Queen

Chapter 80

XADEN POV

The journey from the royal palace to the border was substantial, but nothing we wolves couldn't handle.

It had been months **since I** last shifted, but it still felt like second nature to me. Running on all fours as the world whooshed past me in **a** beautiful blur of greens, feeling the wind brush through my thick, dark fur in long, cool strokes, enveloping and entangling my body **deep** within the lush scents of nature.

It was something I could never tire of.

After about an hour of navigating the woods that stretched beyond the **walls** of our kingdom, Nicholas's silver wolf **barked** and slowed to a **stop**, signaling my brothers and me to follow. We watched as he pawed at the ground, taking long and deep whiffs of the area before letting out a low grunt.

The area was clear.

Before long, our furs melted away, giving way to bare skin **and** normal tufts of hair, rendering us all stark naked after transforming. One of the quirks of being a shifter. Since it was established, the area was completely safe, we quickly redressed ourselves into our everyday attire, packed into small satchels that had been tied around our waists.

“This is it” Nicholas said, taking a good look **around** once we all were fully dressed. “This is where we were ambushed.”

Glancing around, I could see how that might have happened.

Right now, we were wedged deep in the heart of a forest that expanded into not only our territory but that of the **bear** shifters, too. Thick, bushy trees scattered across the horizon that made it virtually impossible to see more than fifty feet in front of you and, considering the attack happened in the **dead** of night, with the thick overhang of leaves and branches obscuring any significant light from peeking through, the chances of being able to spot anything, even with our excellent vision as wolves, were **slim** to none.

Frankly, it was a miracle every one those troops survived.

Henry was quick to take charge. “We’ll cover more ground if we split up,” he **said**, glancing between the three of us. “Let’s rendezvous back here in thirty minutes, but alert everyone if or when you find something?”

I was about ready to head off on my own until Lucas decided to speak up.

“-We should probably split up into groups of two,” he added, likely under the impression that he was being clever and helpful, but all 1 felt at that moment was pure disdain. “In case there’s another ambush lying in wait deep in the forest.”

Henry nodded. “Good idea. You, come with me. Xaden you go with Nicholas.”

I gritted my teeth. It seemed the Moon Goddess was in a mood to test me

Still, I kept my mouth shut. I had decided I would play nice, and **that was** precisely what I would do to a certain extent. And once we were all in agreement, we went our separate ways

The search started off quiet enough, with my begrudging partner and I marking our scents along our side of the border and **scanning** our immediate surroundings for anything that might have been left behind by the enemy.

And then I heard Nicholas take a breath, as if he was preparing to say something. Immediately, I tensed up. If he wanted to talk about what happened at the banquet, I wanted none of it.

“Prince Xaden, if I may-“

I sped up, rushing deeper into the brush. I did not want to hear anything he had to offer right now.

Nicholas, however, would not let up.

“Your Highness,” he beseeched, trailing closely behind me despite my blatant attempts to keep distance between us. “I only wanted to extend my most **sincere** apologies for my behavior at the banquet.” I heard him swallow nervously. “My adrenaline hadn’t yet recovered from what happened at the border and I let it get the better of me.”

I huffed a quiet, impatient breath. What a pathetic excuse. I knew exactly what adrenaline smelled like, and **that** was far from **what** he’d reeked of that day.

His alpha pheromones **had** gone wild in Maeve’s stunning presence. Though whether it **was** done knowingly or not was beyond me.

But Nicholas **was** not going to stop in his desperate appeal, and I had no interest whatsoever in letting my brothers catch wind of what was going on

This matter was to be kept between him and me, alone.

Reluctantly, I forced myself to slow down, which prompted him to follow. “What’s there to apologize for?” I replied gruffly, keeping my eyes firmly locked on the forest surrounding us. “You were only speaking the truth.”

“Be that **as** it may, I spoke out of turn. Even an alpha like me can admit to my **faults**

Good, I thought. He’s finally acknowledged that Maeve is strictly off-limits.

“Nicholas,” I said, coming to a **halt**, to which he did, **as** well. “I do not wish to linger over such matters, but before we put this mess behind us once and for all, let this serve **as** a lesson to you.”

Briskly. I swiveled around to **face** him, straightening myself tall and proud with every intention of looking down **at** him for what I was about to say. He seemed momentarily taken aback by the sudden motion but did not waver, deciding to meet my gaze head-on, albeit warily.

“Do not,” I warned, slow and deliberate with my enunciation, “ever try to take things that don’t belong to you. It will not end well,”

For a moment, I thought I caught the subtle motion of his **jaw** clenching, but it disappeared as quickly as it happened. If he had any idea of rebuking me, it was all but abandoned, with him choosing to instead dip his head. The sight of him yielding to me and all my superior prowess filled my simmering inner beast with immense gratification.

Nicholas, however foolish he might have acted, was no idiot.

So, he does not **have** a **death** wish, after all.

I’d never had any qualms with the **man** before. Considering his lineage and recent achievements, I’d thought him to be an exceptional example of an alpha, but after what happened at the banquet, my patience with him had quickly run thin. Impressive or not.. decorated or not, I would be damned if I let him think he had any claim whatsoever on my Luna.

Even if he **was** not yet aware she was mine.

“Believe me, I have no intention of being so disrespectful again,” he said.

“You have my word”

Setting my jaw. I nodded, turning away to return to the task at hand.

Nicholas, **however**, seemed to have more to **say**. “If I may” he added with a touch of reluctance, “I would **like** to arrange a meeting with Prime Beta Burke I wish to personally apologize to him, as well.”

I fought back the urge to scoff. I had to keep up with the charade my sister so graciously crafted as best I could. “There will be no need for that. Any apologies can go straight through me. I will be sure to pass them on.”

“**With** all due respect, it was his-“

“Stop,” I commanded, halting in my tracks and holding a hand up

Briskly, I heard Nicholas stumble to **a** stop, startled by my sudden action. “Your Highness, I only mean to...” And then he trailed off,

It didn’t take long for me to realize that he saw what I saw.

Slowly, steadily, I approached a bush some twenty feet away from where we had been standing, with Nicholas trailing closely behind **me**, where something small and shiny caught my eye. After making sure we were completely **alone** and safe, I bent down and picked **up** this strange object that dangled from one of the branches of this bush.

My brows pinched together in deep concentration as I investigated the object more closely. It **was** not just an object, I realized... but a trinket.

A bracelet, to be more precise, that was wound with a delicate silver chain. But what stood out to me the most, and struck me to my core, was the small violet gem that lay embedded in the middle of the chain. A vibrant **shade** of violet that appeared to **almost** glow from within despite the looming shadows of the trees that surrounded us.

I... it looks an awful look a like...

“Prince Xaden?”

I blinked, shaking myself awake from my stupor as Nicholas' voice brought me back to reality. My eyes flickered from the bizarre bracelet that rested in my palm to the bewildered face of my fellow alpha

"Do you recognize these origins?" he questioned, looking over my stunned expression very carefully.

I felt at a loss. This, bore a striking resemblance to the amulet that **Maeve** claimed belonged to her long-lost mother. The first and only thing I'd seen thus far that looked even remotely similar to that amulet. But that was not something I could just say out loud in mixed company, not if there was any risk of the information somehow getting back to my father.

He could not, under any circumstance, find out about Maeve's illegitimacy, nor of the grave likelihood that her mother was not of our kind.

Was it possible this type of jewelry belonged to the bear shifters...?

If that was the case, did this **mean** Maeve's mother hailed from that kingdom...? Such a thought made my heart lurch. What did that mean for **us** if that was true?

No, I ultimately answered, switching my gaze back to the trinket. "I don't recognize this craftsmanship."

It was not a lie, but it was not quite the truth either. No one in the palace, with the exception of Burke, knew about the existence of the unusual necklace in Maeve's possession. That being said, those who did know about it lacked the faintest idea of where it came from.

"Whatever this is, Nicholas mused looking pensive, "it looks like nothing I've ever seen here before. It has to have been left behind by one of the bear shifters"

Hearing another confirm my thoughts made my stomach twist into knots.

"I **can** let your brothers know"

“No.” I interjected, cutting him off. I could feel his confused gaze bore into me before I turned to look at him. “Let me look into this privately first. For all we know, this is just a necklace that was dropped in the battle. I don’t want to raise any cause for concern if it ends up being nothing significant after all.”

For what seemed like forever, he was silent as he regarded me **1** tensely waited **for** a sign of his cooperation. Nothing good would come from my father or brothers learning about this yet.

As much as I didn’t want it, I needed his help right now.

And then he sighed, followed by a brisk nod, much to my subtle relief. “If that’s **what** you want, **Prince Xaden**”