

# The Hidden Luna Queen

## Chapter 81

### XADEN POV

Patrolling the rest **of** the area went by well enough.

Once Nicholas had said what he needed to say, he'd calmed down significantly and otherwise left me alone for the most part, unless to point out certain parts of the border that had been weakened during the attack.

Nor did he bother **to** question me about my decision to hide the bracelet for the time being.

Good. This was my business, and my business alone.

**I wasn't** sure **what** I would do if Maeve's necklace was somehow actually tied to this confounded bracelet we stumbled upon. Maybe there was a logical explanation for it to be in the middle of scenic nowhere, where a battle just so happened to take place. Maybe it was pure coincidence that they happened to look the same.

But maybe it **wasn't**.

I rubbed my temples with tense fingers. All this damn thinking was making my head throb. This was an obstacle for another time.

Before long, **we** circled back to the rendezvous point, where Henry and Lucas were waiting for us.

“So,” Henry drawled, straightening himself back up **as** we approached, “the kingdom’s Golden Boys return unscathed and unharmed.”

I pushed my hair out **of** my eyes, letting out a low exhale. His sly tone didn’t slip past me.

“Yes, yes,” I muttered, “perhaps you should tone down that overwhelming enthusiasm of yours.”

Meanwhile, Nicholas chuckled, unfazed by the nickname. “We could say the same about you two,” he remarked, gesturing to my brothers ‘relatively clean appearances. “No valuables left behind for you to find?”

“Not a damn thing. What about you? Did you two happen to find anything?” Henry asked, directing the question to Nicholas, who didn’t even so much as sneak a glance at me.

I, on the other hand, said nothing but paid close attention. Whether he would cover for me or not was up to him.

And then Nicholas shook his head.

“Nothing, I’m afraid,” he said, sounding so nonchalant that, if I hadn’t been the one to give him the order, I never would have guessed he was lying through his teeth. “Just foliage and wildlife.”

I let out **a** breath I wasn’t aware I was holding.

He kept his word, after all. Maeve’s secret was **safe** for now, and I could investigate the matter without worry.

Despite his previous recklessness, he was a good, trustworthy man. Perhaps it was worth letting go of this petty grudge I held against him. After all, he was now an accomplice in hiding this from my family. From my father—the Alpha King, himself—of all people. All to prove himself and his loyalty.

What a noble alpha—to know where his loyalties and priorities lay.

Something I could resonate with.

“What,” Nicholas pressed, talking to Henry, “were you expecting another showdown **so** soon?”

“It would’ve made things interesting, that’s for certain,” Henry answered. “It’s been a while since I’ve seen any sort of action around here. You’re lucky, you know that? You’re the only one of us all to knock the shit out of those brutes in months.”

“Perhaps you should’ve volunteered to lead the patrol, rather than shack it up in the palace with that wife of yours,” Nicholas quipped.

“Children-” Lucas mockingly scolded, bringing the two alphas to **a** slow stop.

“Don’t you **have** better things to do than engage in locker room **talk**?”

“And who **are** you **to talk**, Mr. Arranged Marriage?” Henry taunted, ruffling the hair of our stiff little brother. I watched carefully **as Lucas** ‘face fell a little with the reminder. “You’re only **a few weeks** away from meeting your little vixen bride.”

Fidgeting under the sudden scrutiny, **Lucas** shoved Henry’s hand away, “I know, I know,” he mumbled, avoiding all of our gazes.

Before long, we found ourselves surrounded by **upwards** of thirty **troops**, all sent by Father **to** aid **us** at the border. Many were new recruits, but there were **a** few familiar faces from **last week’s** banquet. We **were** quick to show them where to focus their attentions and strengthen the edge **of** our territory.

At one point, I heard some of the newer recruits engage excitedly with Henry.

“What **an** honor **to** be in your presence, Your Highness! **I’ve always** been **inspired** by your ambition and courage, even when the **going** gets tough!”

“That’s **the** only **way to live**,” Henry boasted. “There’s nothing I wouldn’t do to keep our kingdom **at the top of the pack**.”

There **was** very little that I actually agreed on with my exceptionally opinionated eldest brother, whether **it** be the politics we supported **or** the company **we** kept or.... **or** really anything for that matter, but we did **have** one thing in common. One thing that, I thought, mattered more than any squabble **we** might have.

We **cared** about our kingdom.

**If** anything **posed** even the slightest threat to our home and those we loved, we would not hesitate to rain down hell to keep them safe. Differences aside, I knew I could always count on him in the heat of battle.

**That** damn silver, **however**, threatened to burn a hole through to my skin. Its very presence gnawed at the back **of** my mind like a pest.

**Was** I... a traitor for withholding the bracelet?

**No**—I firmly thought. I just need to know more. For Maeve’s sake. Then, I’ll know how to act.

While my brothers were still preoccupied with oodles of excited troops, I thought I **was** able to sneak a private moment for myself when **a** small group of young men approached me, eyes bright.

“**And** what about you, Prince Xaden, sir?” one of them asked.

“Me?”

“How do **you** plan to end the war?”

Ah, yes... that **was** the question any alpha in the council had trouble answering, one no one could really seem to agree on. All of **us** alpha princes **were** tasked with answering it, because this war very well could bleed into any of our tenures once my father’s reign came to an **end**.

This would one *day* be our responsibility to undertake.

I knew Henry **was** eager to **see** our enemies burn, and Lucas wanted to ensure they paid for any and all pain they inflicted on our men, but I was not convinced their solutions were the correct ones.

Yes, what the bear shifters had done was wrong... but were we completely innocent in all of this? Relations with the neighboring kingdom had been fine for ages, up until some ten-odd years ago.

Would there ever be a chance to regain that alliance?

“When I am king,” I said, feeling a sudden burst of inspiration, “I’ll make sure that, whatever I decide, we won’t have any enemies to **worry** about, and everyone will be able to come home, safe and in one piece.”

My answer **was vague** and not very well thought out, but it seemed to appease the boys well enough.

Once they **felt** satisfied and left me alone, I stepped away, preparing to head back towards the kingdom, when I **heard** someone address me.

“Don’t **tell** me you mean to settle this diplomatically.”

I glanced toward the sudden voice, where I saw Henry standing a short distance **away**, his **face** creased with deep disapproval.

“And what’s so wrong with that?” I asked.

Henry scoffed. “**If** you truly believe your little peacekeeper plan will work, you’re even more incapable than I thought. We might **as well just roll over** and **expose** our vulnerable little bellies and give them the kingdom **keys**.”

“Don’t **you** think we’ve been **at** this **for** too long?” I questioned. “If there **is a chance to** call a **ceasefire** and bring everyone home once and for all, **then we** should **take** it.”

“Victory **can** take **however** long it needs,” **he** retorted curtly. “There’s no way I’d **ever** let the enemy get the better of us.”

“Figures you’d think that. Of course, the most boorish of us would rather **lay waste** to every **single** one of our enemies than actually **put in** the hard work **to** establish **what** could be our strongest alliance. How fucking predictable.”

“Well, look who’s suddenly **all** interested in political affairs **once again**,” **Henry** sneered, leering **closer** to me, “Last I thought, all you could think about **was** that girl you brought in.”

The way he talked about her made my blood boil.

“She’s going to be my mate,” I spat. “**She’s** not just any **girl**.”

He hummed, unconvinced as he loomed closer to me. “By the **way**, Xaden,” he said, his voice brushing **over** my shoulder, “I caught wind of that little press conference Samson held.”

I couldn’t help but stiffen from the unwanted reminder.

“I can’t imagine how your little mate must be feeling, to hear what the kingdom thinks of her. It’s truly a shame a nice girl like her must endure such deplorable **treatment** because of you,” Henry said, and, to my surprise, I detected sincere pity for a moment, however fleeting it might have been. “Though, I suppose one can’t help but wonder if there’s a hint of truth to any of the rumors?”

In a **flash**, I grabbed him by his forearm, squeezing with painful intent. He did not so much as flinch, which pissed me off even further.

“You,” I growled under my breath, “will **leave** her out of this.”

“Whoa, whoa-” Lucas suddenly came out of nowhere, trying to intervene. “Time and place, guys! Can’t you at **least** pretend to-

“Don’t interfere,” I snapped, not looking at my little brother. “I’d kill to teach him a lesson.”

Henry rolled his eyes. “First of all, knock that ego down a peg. Secondly,” he muttered, prying my hand **away** from his arm, “whether you believe me or not, I have no personal qualms with the girl. But if you are hiding any secrets from me, you’d best be certain I will find them.”

He leaned in closer.

“And I will use them to bring you down?”

I bristled, locked in a stare down with my eldest brother for the longest of moments. **Was** he bluffing...? Was it all a ruse to get a rise out of me? I did not care what he did to me... but using Maeve to strike at me was dirty, even for the likes of him.

She was not to be a pawn for anyone—not anymore.

And then, he suddenly pulled away.

“But that’s all in good nature, little brother,” he said, smiling **as** he walked away, **as** if nothing had happened. “All I want is my birthright.”

As he strolled away to join the rest of the troops, Lucas let out a particularly exhausted sigh. “Can’t you two get along for just ten minutes?” he mumbled, rubbing the back of his neck. “It’s not particularly fun always having to play the mediator.”

“Then don’t,” I answered simply. “I don’t like it either, but I don’t see an end to it.”

“Unless....” he trailed off, looking me in the eyes, “one of you becomes king.”

I set my jaw. “No. He will only stop if he wins.”

**If** I wanted any sort of peaceful future with my small, growing family, then I could not let that happen under any circumstance. If he were to find out that **Maeve was** possibly connected to the bears, he would not be so forgiving. But he was not the only threat. If he **saw** that damned press conference, then others surely did.

Others who knew the true identity of my intended Luna.

Right now, her father and **that** wife of his could be walking around, exposing the truth for all to **hear**. Maybe they discovered newfound pride in their daughter, carrying the child of an alpha prince. I certainly wouldn't have put it past them.

**It** was decided.

I **had** much to talk about with Moonstone's alpha... but I wanted to hear from **Maeve** herself when I returned home.

Maybe she could **give** me some much-needed **answers**.