

# The Hidden Luna Queen

## Chapter 86

Maeve POV

It is just a dinner.

As I sat in the center of the palace banquet hall, feigning confidence as I sipped my water as was taught, surrounded by Xaden and his younger siblings while they engaged in light conversation, I tried to breathe.

Alpha King Arlan and Luna Queen Leonora were a distance away at the head of the table, speaking with their eldest son, and I continued to inhale... long, slow, and shaky as I feebly tried to calm my nerves.

It's only a dinner, so relax and think of something else.

Shockingly enough, I would find my advice to be easier said than done. Everything I saw and breathed just reeked of wealth and status and pure alpha bloodlines and I felt more than ever that I did not belong.

Even more so than I ever did in Moonstone.

Who on earth was I trying to fool with my nonsense? Considering that every member of the immediate royal family would be in attendance and that I was to employ every etiquette rule I had learned over the last few days, it became extremely apparent that this was way more than just a dinner. It was yet another test I needed to pass, regardless of what Xaden or his mother tried to say otherwise.

I was just a waste of space here... a fraud-

"Just breathe, Maeve," Xaden murmured by my ear, the calm in his deep voice magically enticing me to obey his words despite my pitiful attempt's mere minutes before. "You trained for this for days with my mother, and I've seen the change in you, even if you don't feel it just yet. You can absolutely do this."

I twisted to gaze at him, seeing nothing but sincerity.

"Tonight is all about you," he said. "And I know you'll blow us all away."

Setting my jaw, I forced myself to nod in agreement. The queen had repeated many a time about maintaining a strong,

invulnerable composure when in the company of nobility. Ally or not, anyone could-and would-find my weaknesses and exploit them for their benefit, if given the opportunity.

Not that I necessarily believed these three people would do that... but this was not about what I believed. This was about practicing what I learned.

If I didn't get the hang of this, I might find myself tangled with the wrong person.

"So, Maeve," Lucas chirped, nursing his wine as he shifted his posture. Tonight, in his navy-blue suit, he looked more like a prince than ever, much unlike the youthful, bright-eyed young man I encountered in the palace hallways. "This week marked your first time setting foot inside the palace, correct?"

I nodded.

"How has it been for you? I know it can be pretty daunting to newcomers," he added with a tinge of sympathy.

I couldn't help but think how kind it was of him to ask. "It was daunting at first... but actually," I mused with a small smile, "I've had a nice time here so far." I went on to describe how much I admired all of the beautiful artwork

and architecture, and how it felt like exploring a new world every time I arrived.

And, of course, I had to attribute my positive experiences to some of the people I had met thus far, from Charlotte to Lucas to...

And that was when the realization hit me.

Someone was still missing from the banquet.

"Eric's not here yet," I pointed out. The subsequent exchange of glances and unspoken communication between the siblings did not slip past me they seemed to know something that I did not. "Is he not coming after all...?"

Xaden started to answer. "Eric does not-"

"Chances are he won't come."

Having suddenly appeared near our end of the table, Henry sighed with a lowly shake of his head, feigning sympathy. "That poor failure I'm forced to call brother can hardly carry his own head around on that scrawny body of his. If he's feeling under the weather, he won't be able to lift even his little finger, let alone lug himself out of bed."

Charlotte looked uncomfortable. "That's not fair of you to say. It's hardly his fault he has to miss events so often."

"I disagree," Henry said with a casual shrug. "One's weak constitution is not an issue of the body; it's one of the minds. He just doesn't care enough to even try to better himself. He's an embarrassment to Father's legacy."

The bluntness with which he spoke startled me, but before I could even think to react, I felt a cold presence materialize behind me, while his siblings dealt with his rude comments before he retreated back to his seat.

"Hello, Maeve."

Immediately, my skin crawled with unease. I did not want to do this-I was not ready to meet with Isabelle yet... not after how deeply she had humiliated me with her little test, but even I knew I was only attempting to delay the inevitable. She was mated to Xaden's eldest brother, after all, so we were destined to run into each other more often than not.