

THE LUNA'S CHOICE

Chapter 263: Theo

Ayla hadn't slept all night. So neither had I. The fact that she was so on edge about Kingston being late had me concerned. Regardless of how I felt about him, she had always trusted him completely. The fact that she sensed something was off made me suspicious.

And she did suspect something. Whether she would admit it to me or not..

I don't think she knew why the situation was giving her a bad feeling, but that didn't matter to me. I trusted her intuition. So I didn't fight her pacing and worrying through the middle of the night while she waited for updates from Kingston.

It was now four o'clock in the morning and we were waiting in a darkened packhouse lobby for Kingston and his envoy to arrive. I don't think either of us would settle until both him and

the stone were here.

"Finally," Ayla breathed as headlights came up the drive.

We stepped outside. Three SUVs parked in the round drive at the front entrance. The back door of the middle vehicle opened first and Kingston stepped out, a box held securely in his hands. I heard Ayla release a heavy sigh of relief, but I: wasn't quite ready to do the same. I wanted to see the stone first.

It had been bothering me that I hadn't gone to retrieve the second half myself. I felt like it was my duty to do so. However, I understood the logistical limitations that

prevented me from going even if Kingston would have allowed it. Yes, the stone was Ayla and my responsibility, but the Sablemane lands were still Kingston's. I couldn't force myself into his territory. Right now he was an important ally whose loyalty to our cause was still somewhat questionable.

I still believed he wouldn't do anything to hurt Ayla. But I still didn't trust him not to try anything against me.

He ascended the stairs and Ayla gave him a brief hug.

"I'm glad everything went smoothly," she said.

"I told you I'd be here," he replied with a small smile.

"And you didn't have any trouble on the way?" I asked. "You weren't followed?"

"If they had ambushed us, you would know," Kingston answered. "And as far as we know, they've thought both halves were here the whole time. So it's not like they would need to follow us to figure that out."

I nodded. "Your men are staying on the second floor of the west wing," I said. "Tell them to head there. Someone will be waiting to show them to their rooms. We'd like to take a look at the stone now."

"Of course," Kingston said, his tone a little stiff.

We went up to the privacy of my office. I wanted to put Ayla at ease and get her to bed for a couple hours before I moved it down to the cellar. I locked the door behind us.

"I thought Pierce would be with you," Ayla said as she took a seat on the leather sofa.

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"He will be here later this morning," Kingston said, sitting across from her and setting the box on the coffee table. "He's bringing Emma. So he waited on her."

Ayla's face lit up at hearing her friend's name. "I'm so excited to see her," she said happily. "I'm so glad she was able to make it."

"She wouldn't have missed it for the world," Kingston replied.

"As grand as the small talk is," I interrupted, "the night has been exceptionally long. So I'd like to get this done and Ayla to bed."

Ayla elbowed me gently, but Kingston cleared his throat.

"Yes," he said, pulling a key out of his pocket. "Of course."

He unlocked the metal box and lifted the lid, turning it around for us to see the contents.

It was a mirror image of the piece we had. I pulled the box closer and could feel the same energy flowing from it, although not as strongly as my piece. Ayla picked it up, cradling it delicately as her focus rested on it. She felt the connection. This was her half, after all. Her family was tied to that part.

"Thank you," she said quietly, "for returning this to me."

I glanced at Kingston. His expression seemed... resigned. But only for a second before he masked whatever emotion he was feeling.

"It belongs with you," he said. "I only ever intended to be its protector, Ayla. That's in my blood."

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Ayla's eyes left the stone in her hand to look at her friend.

"I know," she replied.

It was then that I made a split-second decision.

"You know, there's no reason you can't still be," I said.

Kingston's brow furrowed in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"You found this stone," I pointed out. "Without you, and your ability to navigate those tunnels, we wouldn't be here. You understand what it took to protect this for generations. Why don't you design the security at the complex?"

His mouth fell open slightly.

"You do own a security company, Kingston," Ayla said. "You can modernize. I suspect that will be necessary since everyone will be able to access its location."

I wasn't sure why the idea came to me, but it seemed right. No matter what I felt about Kingston, he and his family were connected to that stone as well. It was like it was calling to him.

"I would be honored," Kingston replied.