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Mollusk Match: Chapter 3

To say there was a general air of dread and anxiety would be an understatement. Neither Grace nor Arina could muster up enough courage to smile in the face of Yulia's horrifying announcement.

After what seemed like an eternity of painful silence, Grace took a gulp and steeled herself. "A-- Arina… How do you feel? Have you noticed anything weird?" She asked cautiously, recalling how swollen and hormonal she had felt today. Sure they were already aware of what the stakes were, but actually experiencing and living through these changes was a completely different story.

Arina continued staring down at the floor with a look of bewildered shame. "Yeah… I noticed a couple of things today," she responded with a nearly inaudible whisper. "So that's why-- when I woke up, I… I was just so…" Her words trailed off as she pushed her legs together and her cheeks flushed bright red. "I don't know how to describe what I'm feeling, I-- I am sorry."

Grace watched Arina tear up as she struggled to form complete sentences amidst her mental crisis. *I can't be scared right now. I need to help her.* Grace closed her eyes, taking a slow and deliberate breath as she calmed herself. "It was the same way for me. I know how you feel," she responded carefully, placing a hand on Arina's back as she rubbed her gently. "I feel so violated. Like I don't have autonomy and am completely helpless; it really sucks." Grace's heart rate picked back up as a cavalcade of negative thoughts clawed their way into her mind. *I will never return to nomal society again. The chances of getting out of here in this body are slim, aren't they?* She couldn't stop.

The two sat in silence for what seemed like hours but was more likely just a few minutes. Arina took a deep breath and stood up, turning toward Grace with a weak smile. “I am okay but I think I need to lay down for a little while. Is that okay with you?”

Grace didn’t know if she wanted to be alone. At the same time, seeing Arina in such a downtrodden state brought her pain. “When you’re feeling better, I want you to tell me more about yourself, okay?” Grace wanted to help, even if just a little.

Arina’s lips curled into a slight smile. “I’m good at rambling about things, so I look forward to it. I’ll talk to you later,” she promised, waving Grace off before heading back to her room.

Grace sighed, closing her eyes as she laid back on the couch. “Maybe I need a damn nap as well,” muttered Grace as she closed her eyes and pulled a throw pillow over her face as the soft, fuzzy white noise of central air conditioning washed over her. Despite the unrelenting torrent of anxiety that assailed her, she managed to suppress it long enough to fall into a troubled slumber. She quickly entered a troubled rem cycle, dredging up memories of the past shortly after.

A middle school-aged Grace jolted awake, heart racing upon hearing a metallic bang outside. She sat up in bed slowly, noting the moon’s glow shone through her bedroom curtains. She soon realized that it must have come from the storage shed, hence the metallic sound. “Is someone out there?... Or that cat again maybe?” She mumbled, getting out of bed.

The world suddenly swirled around her before she could react. Just a few seconds later, Grace found herself standing in front of the storage shed. She took a deep breath and broke out into a cold sweat. It was just a crash, so why did she feel so apprehensive? Steeling herself, Grace put her hand on the door.

Creeeee…

The sound of scraping metal quietly sounded off into the night. Grace poked her head in cautiously; it was too dark to see anything. *Why didn’t I bring a flash*-- her thought train was cut off when she felt her hand clenched around something cylindrical. “Oh…” Grace stared down at the flashlight in her hand. It must have been there the whole time. Within the darkness, she thought she heard something of the ordinary; some type of animal rifling around, perhaps?

Click!

As soon as the flashlight turned on, Grace's eyes widened and her heart stopped. A sweat-drenched woman with a well-toned musculature and a tank top sat in the corner, trying to control her breath. She had dark skin and thick, curly hair pulled into a ponytail.

"Oh, fuck…" The mysterious woman grunted, putting a hand on her head. "You-- girl. Could you maybe try not to scream or cause a commotion? I'm no danger to you or your family, okay?" She asked cautiously.

Despite Grace's heightened state of fear, she didn't feel like her life was in danger. She heistated, shifting her eyes away as she tried to figure out what to do. "O-- Okay," timidly responded Grace. "Who are you; why are you here?"

The mystery woman seemed impressed by Grace's self-control and ability to reason. "I'm Margaret. You could say I'm having a fight with my family and ran away from home. Promise me you won't tell a single living soul I'm here, okay? Thos bastar-- I mean, my parents are the worst. My family is full of cunts and assholes; it's really the worst."

Grace had never met anyone who spoke like her. Margaret's words were harsh, but she felt oddly drawn toward her. "Okay, I won't tell anyone." She wouldn't admit it out loud, but a feeling of excitement had lit up within her soul. Weird , exciting things like this never happened to her after all.

One of her eyes flashed, her iris becoming an iridescent, glowing purple for just a brief second. "You really aren't scared of me and you're not lying about keeping this a secret, are you?" Margaret grinned, finally starting to cool off. "What's your name, kid?" She curtly asked.

"I'm Grace. Do you want to be my friend?" She gently responded, placing a hand on her arm nervously. Her parents complained about her not having enough friends and being too antisocial. This probably wasn't what they had in mind, but she wouldn't get hung up on semantics.

Grace's eyes shot up as she sat up in a heightened state of alert. She wasn't quite sure why, but had a feeling it must have been some kind of sudden noise. "How long was I out?" She muttered, rubbing her eyes as she sat up. After some of the initial grogginess wore off, she realized someone was shuffling around in the kitchen. *Arina?* She mused, assuming her friend must have woken up.

Grace stood up, stretching her body as she adjusted her pajama shorts and shirt. "Ugh…" She winced at the soreness of her breasts. Her body still felt swollen and not quite right but she decided to repress the mounting existential dread and instead walked to the kitchen. Distracting her brain from negativity was more important than anything else now that she was living out a horrific nightmare scenario.

Upon entering, Grace was caught off guard by the sight of Phoebe actually out of her bedroom. Phoebe's petite frame faced away from Grace as she poured herself a glass of orange juice.

Not who I was expecting, I must admit, thought Grace as she took a few careful steps forward. "Hey, Phoebe. How are you holding out?"

Phoebe immediately stopped what she was doing, setting down the orange juice carton as she stood in complete, unmoving silence.

Grace stopped when she got close, pausing to allow time for Phoebe to respond. Another ten seconds passed before the uncomfortable quiet began to weigh on Grace. *Why does she have to be like this?* Grace felt a slight twinge of frustration. She just wanted to interact with her roommates, was that so wrong? They were all stuck in this horrific situation, so it made sense to her that they would all get to know one another and rely on each other for moral support. She was sympathetic toward the fact that everyone processed their emotions differently but certainly it wasn't good to keep everything bottled up.

"Phoebe, please talk to me," pleaded Grace as she reached out and placed a hand on her shoulder.

Grace's face contorted into a look of horror as Phoebe swiveled around to face her. It was as if all time stopped. *How-- how is this possible?*

"Talk to you?" Phoebe asked in a low, cold voice. Her left eye looked normal and was a shade of gray. Her right eye, however, was a deep, inhuman red. Her pupil

was a dark, vertical slit. Beyond that, her canines had sharpened into fangs. “Pray tell, what would I talk to you about?” Her words dripped with icy venom.

Grace trembled, taking a step back without meaning to. “You--” her words caught in her mouth as her eyes scanned Phoebe’s body in a panic. Upon closer inspection, small patches of skin around her neck seemed to glimmer. The first thing that came to mind was scales. Grace and Arina changed quite minimally from that single dose of serum they were given. Yulia very clearly said that they would all be receiving just one-- so why then, was Phoebe’s transformation further along than their own? What in the living fuck was going on?

Phoebe maintained eye contact with Grace and stepped closer. “You really don’t get it, do you?”

“Get-- get what?” Grace carefully responded, starting to get her breathing and heart rate under control.

“You’ve seen Ella, haven’t you?” Phoebe dully replied. “We’re ALL going to end up like her. You and Arina can be as optimistic as you want, trying to give yourself pep talks. But we’re still going to end up like Ella. Deformed, traumatized, unable to control our urges. Are you looking forward to it?”

A shock of complete terror shot through Grace’s body, Phoebe’s words piercing her soul. She took a step back and shook her head. “You’re wrong… There are no guarantees-- Ella was punished for trying to escape.” As she spoke, her words and demeanor grew more confident. We could win. We could get out of this together! So stop pushing us away!” Seeing her roommate already so transformed shook Grace to her core. But it wouldn’t be fair to Phoebe to treat her poorly because of it. It wasn’t like she had any more say in this than anyone else.

“Have you even tried to have a real conversation with Ella?” Phoebe retorted. “It’s easy for the two of you. I can’t even tell you’re changing when I look at you, so I’m sure it’s just so easy for you and Ariana to hold each others’ hands and comfort one another while you live in a little bubble. Poor Ella, going through something so much worse, yet you walk past her room and ignore her.”

A twinge of anger flashed within Grace. “Wait a moment! I’m not ignoring Ella!” She shouted, suddenly feeling attacked. “She deserves privacy as well. When she’s ready to leave her room and come out, I’ll gladly be her friend!”

“Oh, so you’re waiting for her to reach out first? Did you know I’m already friends with Ella?” Phoebe asked, crossing her arms over her chest. “When her room is quiet, I come by to check on her. I’ll rub her back, reassure her, and listen to her fears. But you and Arina are scared to look her in the eye, aren’t you?”

Grace felt the confidence get sucked out of her. On one hand, she felt justified. It had only been a couple of days. Everyone was on edge and just doing their best; it wasn’t fair of Phoebe to act like they were deliberately hiding from Ella. On the other hand, did Phoebe have a point? Even if she didn’t want to admit it, the thought of even looking at Ella made her blood run cold. Living with a stark reminder of her own increasingly likely future was an incredibly tough pill to swallow.

“It’s-- it’s not that easy… It’s more nuanced than you make it out to be. If you knew Ella needed support, why not reach out to Arina and I? If you told us how she was feeling, we would have helped!” Regardless, Grace felt awful now. Phoebe’s attack scored a clean hit.

Phoebe raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, sure. Okay. I’ve met plenty like you before. I am sure you would say anything to make yourself feel less guilty.”

Grace winced, turning away from Phoebe. “Ella could use some more help and you’re a raging asshole. Okay-- both messages received, thanks so much,” spat Grace in frustration as she made a beeline for her room. As if this day hadn’t already been bad, grace now felt worse than she could ever recall.

Finally reaching her room, Grace flopped into her bed, lying on her back as she put her hands over her face. She attempted to reason with herself, employing her usual breathing exercises and mental techniques for calming down. After some time, her efforts proved to be in vain. Phoebe’s words were the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back; she could only take so much. “Why is this happening to me?” Tears welled up in her eyes and trickled down her cheeks and onto her pillow. “I’m so scared-- I” The weariness in her words escalated, a complete emotional breakdown drawing near.

Margaret, what would you do?

“Just wait here. You will be called in when ready,” plainly stated a gruff, male guard as a fully-tracksuited Grace was led into a waiting room.

As the door closed behind her, Grace hesitantly looked around. She seemed to be in some kind of lounge room with couches, a mini-fridge, and a large monitor on the wall furthest from her. She was told that she would be waiting with two others for the first game to start.

Grace took a deep breath, collecting herself as she walked forward, noticing the two girls with her. An incredibly pale, petite woman with short, pitch-black hair sat hunched over on the couch with one hand over her face. Not too far away, another girl with short, orange hair lay in a lounge chair with her head back and eyes closed. She didn't recognize the black-haired girl but quickly realized the other was Rose. *That bitch from orientation.* Grace remembered how she snapped at Arina and then got completely schooled by Yulia shortly after.

Deciding it was best to stay quiet, Grace took a seat on the couch, keeping some distance between her and the black-haired girl. She sat in silence, gradually festering in a stagnant pool of her own negative thoughts. Phoebe's words pierced her soul, threatening to send Grace over the edge and back into the depths of despair. *I have to break this silence; I can't just sit here.* Grace thought to herself, turning toward the girl to her right.

"Hey! I don't think we've gotten a chance to meet. I'm Grace. Could I get your name?" She gently asked, forcing herself to smile.

The small woman shifted, pulling her hands away from her face as she looked over. She had skin like fine porcelain and appeared to be of Asian descent. "I'm Eun-Ju. Everyone calls me Eun though; it's nice to meet you, Grace," politely responded Eun, maintaining eye contact.

Grace calmed, having half-expected Eun to tell her off for trying to be friendly. "Yeah, it's nice to meet you as well, Eun. I-- I don't know what we will be doing today, but let's try to help each other if we're able to."

Eun nodded. "Yes. if we're able to, let's do it. For now, I am going to rest my eyes. I am sorry, I didn't sleep well." She closed her eyes and adjusted to rest her head on the arm of the couch.

"Fair enough. No problem," responded Grace as she shifted her focus toward Rose. While Eun appeared petite and human-like with no signs of transformation, Rose didn't seem to be having similar luck. Her breasts seemed uncomfortably packed within

her tracksuit jacket and her ass seemed larger and more supple than before. Through her red hair, Grace noticed white fur sprouting from her ears. Not only that, but they appeared to be set a bit higher up on her head than human ears should be. *Even though everyone has only gotten one dose, the degree of transformation differs between each person. Huh…* She scanned Rose's body as her mind raced, attempting to unravel the mystery.

Rose grunted, shifting in her seat as her eyes cracked open. Her now-yellow eyes peered over at Grace as a look of anger spread across her face. "The fuck you staring at? You're lucky they threatened to give me more doses of this bullshit if I attacked anyone." There was no doubt that Rose meant every word.

Grace winced, feeling slightly intimidated, but mostly annoyed. "Okay, sorry." This wasn't a battle worth fighting. She rested her own head back against the couch and closed her eyes. Engaging in conversation wasn't going to happen, so she would have to find a different way to combat her own self-destructive mind.

Before long, the three girls were escorted from their room and unceremoniously marched down the hallway. Grace felt her heart and breath rates rise with every step. A powerful cocktail of icy numbness and pure adrenaline churned within her, slowing her perception of time as the fluorescent lighting overhead droned. *What are we going to be playing-- or doing? What the hell should I expect?*

After an agonizingly long journey, the three girls were led through a reinforced door and brought into what seemed to be a dressing room.

"Ah, there you are! Our first three contestants of the day!" A well-groomed, middle-aged man chimed, waving at the guard. He wore a darkly colored, fancy suit with a navy-blue tie and was clean-shaved with well-styled, short, and graying hair. "It is nice to meet you, ladies! Please follow me this way," insisted the man. He oozed charisma and had a smooth voice.

Grace hesitated and looked back at the guard, who was still behind them. It wasn't like she had a choice. She took a deep breath and continued forward, following behind as they were led out a door.

Grace didn't know what she expected, but it wasn't this. There were prop boxes and cords going across the floor. Combined with the lighting, she realized they were

likely backstage somewhere. Was there going to be some kind of stage set? Her mind raced, thinking up multiple, horrific scenarios that could play into the idea of being forced to perform.

"What the fuck is this…" Rose muttered from in front of Grace as she looked around nervously. She shared a similar state of bewilderment to Grace while Eun acted rather unphased by her surroundings by comparison.

Grace watched Rose from behind as they walked, noting that her hips had a more pronounced shape than before as well. She felt a sense of pity, realizing how much harder that first dose must have hit Rose than it did for herself and Arina.

"Here we are, ladies! I am today's host, Gregory, by the way. I got excited and forgot to introduce myself," laughed the host as he stepped through a dioorway.

Grace stared forward, finally seeing the stage. There were three podiums and a large screen standing a little ways behind them. Her pace slowed as she cautiously walked behind the man, scanning the room as quickly as possible. Stage lighting fixtures hung overhead as the whole stage dripped with an eighties game-show aesthetic. A large, crimson curtain was drawn over the front of the stage, blocking an assumed audience or recording devices from sight.

"Holy shit-- what the hell? A game show?" Rose asked in disbelief as she held herself nervously. She bit her lip, losing more of her grit and determination as the seconds passed.

"Come now! From left to right, let's have Eun on the left-hand podium, Grace in the middle, and Rose on the right! Once you're settled, I will explain the first game to all of you."

Grace felt a simultaneous sense of relief and dread upon hearing Gregory's words. She wanted to know what the hell was going on already. *Please just tell us already, I can't take this anymore,* she thoughti n frustration. She took a deep breath and approached the middle podium, looking down in front of her. The only object of note was a circular, bright red buzzer-- or at least what she assumed to be a buzzer. "They're going to ask us questions?" She muttered to herself, casting a glance to the left and right to see the others taking in their respective surroundings as well. Another thought hit her. Why hadn't she seen Yulia yet? From what Grace had seen, she seemed eager to give presentations and watch the young ladies suffer. She would have expected to see her by now.

“Excellent!!! I am sure all of you are very curious to know what you’ll be doing today.” He walked to the very edge of the stage, standing in the center as he turned back to face the girls with the curtain directly behind him.

“Today’s game is called Variety Hour!” Gregory called out in a bombastic fashion. “Three of our VVIPs expressed interest in being part of today’s game, so you get a special treat today.”

Grace just stood there, stupidly staring at Gregory. “V-- VVIPs? What?”

“I’m getting to that! All will be explained, so please save any questions for the end,” smiled Gregory, giving her a bright grin as his pearly white teeth glistened. “Today is the first game of Mollusk Match-- not just for our twelve lovely ladies, but the first-ever! As Mistress Yulia told you before, all of you are pioneers. We thank you very much for your service.”

Mollusk Match? Is that what this whole nightmare is being called? Grace thought to herself as a bead of stress sweat dripped down from her forehead. *What an odd name.*

Gregory cleared his throat before continuing. “Mollusk Match is, in part, sponsored by our lovely VIP and VVIP guests. Our VVIPs, in particular, have gone far beyond the others in offering financial help and resources for Mollusk Match. Not only that, but for the sake of scientific progress itself.” His voice was filled with reverence as he spoke.

“Our Variety Show starts with introductions. The three of you will be introducing yourself to our VVIP guests,”

Rose grunted, that familiar look of discontent spreading across her face. “So we’re going to be performing for a bunch of creepy ass rich people? What the fuck-- are they getting off to this?” She barked, growing more frustrated by the moment.

Gregory laughed. “Perhaps they are. They all have their own motives, so it’s hard to say.” His expression grew serious, “However, what I can tell you is that you should clean up your language by the time that curtain is drawn,” insisted Gregory. “"It would be wise to make a good impression on them today, and I would suggest that you remain in their good graces for the entire duration of Mollusk Match.”

Grace's eyes narrowed, watching as Rose shut her mouth and grew more frustrated. She wasn't sure if she liked where this was going.

"They may ask you questions; it's a good sign if one of them shows interest in you! After introductions, we will be starting the quiz show portion of the show. You will be answering questions related to the State of Union government in order to earn points. Questions are separated into five grades of difficulty. E, D, C, B, and A rank questions, each corresponding with the average level of knowledge a high school student would have. For example, an A level State of Union history question is something we would expect a high school senior with an A in history to know the answer to. E rank questions will provide ten points, each rank up giving ten more than the last until we hit A rank questions, which are worth 50."

Gregory brightly smiled and gave the ladies a moment to process the influx of new information. "The first question of the game will be randomly selected. When a question is asked, a contestant must buzz within five seconds or the question is discarded and a new question will be picked at random. The first person to hit their buzzer will be given five seconds to answer the question. If you exceed this time limit, or if you answer incorrectly, you forfeit your right to the question and the other two contestants will have five seconds to buzz in and attempt to answer. If we receive one more wrong answer from either of the two remaining contestants or if one of them buzzes in and exceeds the time limit, the question will be discarded and another one will be picked at random for the group." He tried to take a break here and there so they could absorb everything; these girls were obviously deep in concentration.

"However, if you answer the question correctly, you will be rewarded points according to the question's grade. At which time, you get to pick the grade of the next question asked. So-- you answer a question right and pick a grade; we then ask a new question, and the three of you all have the chance to buzz in and answer. If you fail to answer or go over the time limit, the other girls get a chance to answer. If they fail, a new question will be pulled at random and we start the process again. You get five seconds to buzz in when a question is asked and then five seconds to provide an answer after buzzing."

Grace felt her mind swirl as she desperately clung to every bit of information. *So, we want the VVIPs to like us, but we'll also be answering questions for points. It sounds simple on paper.* She pushed back the wave of anxiety brewing within her and tried to come up with a plan. Something didn't make sense to her though.

"I have questions," stated Grace as she raised a hand up.

Gregory warmly smiled, gazing over towards his precious contestant. “Of course! What can I clarify for you, Miss Grace?”

“There’s only three of us. I get that we want to have more points than everyone else, but where are the other nine girls? Are we only competing against the two other people in our own group?” Grace asked, finding her line of questions fair.

“All twelve of you are competing,” replied Gregory. “There will be four rounds of Variety Hour; each one with three participants. You will only be aware of the individual scores of your own group. However, the total scores of all twelve participants will be considered when deciding the winners and losers.”

Eun spoke up this time. “How will the losers be decided,” she asked calmly, her expression unflinching.

Gregory jovially laughed. “I must admit, the two of you know how to get down to business. It’s simple, actually. The six with the highest scores will be declared the winners while those with the six lowest scores lose. When the game-show portion starts, you three will have forty-five minutes to answer as many questions as you can; I would suggest going as quickly as possible.” After a moment of silence, he continued. “You will be allowed two three-minute timeouts, which can be initiated by any of you. During a timeout, the forty-five minute clock stops and you will be allowed a recess to converse amongst yourselves. Is that understood, everybody?”

Grace solemnly nodded as her eyes darted back and forth in an attempt to take in the mountain of information Gregory provided.

“Excellent!” Gregory beamed, flashing his pearly-white smile. “Then, without further delay, let’s get the show st--” his bombastic proclamation cut off mid-sentence. “Oh, one last thing I should probably mention.”

An audible groan escaped from Rose’s lips. “For crying out loud…” She muttered, anxiously tapping her fingers on the podium. Only Eun appeared mostly unphased by this influx of new information.

Gregory snickered upon hearing Rose’s protest. “There is actually a second way to earn points; one completely separate from the quiz portion. Remember how I mentioned it was a good idea to make the VVIPs happy?” He briefly waited, allowing an air of uncomfortable fear to fester. “They will be awarding points to their favorite

participants after today's game concludes. We will not be elaborating upon how these points are distributed."

Rose winced in frustration, growing more agitated by the moment. "Hey! What the hell does that mean? Are we supposed to play this stupid game show or make these VVIP people happy?" She barked in an animated fashion.

While Grace often didn't see eye to eye with Rose, she agreed with the general sentiment she shared. Her breath rate picked up as she worked to stop the wellspring of uncertainty and dread that erupted within her body. Damn it-- what's the best way to win this? She thought in desperation. It was, however, futile. The information surrounding the VVIPs and their involvement was currently too vague to formulate any type of strategy. "Gregory! I have another que--" Grace started.

"My apologies, but we're out of time! The show must start after all," Greg responded in an exaggeratedly sympathetic tone. Upbeat, trumpet-heavy Jazz music suddenly flooded the room as the curtains started to move. With that, he turned away from the girls and faced the direction of the audience.

Time nearly stopped for Grace as she watched the curtains pull apart. *You got this-- you can do it. Deep breaths, Grace.* She psyched herself up, swallowing before wiping some anxiety-induced sweat from her forehead. Despite her best efforts, she still wished Arina was here with her; having someone familiar and comforting would have, at least, been a consolation.

"Welcome to Variety Hour!!! Gregory shouted out in an over-the-top manner. "I would like to thank our three very special VVIP guests for joining us today and for making today's game possible!"

As the curtains fully separated, the lights temporarily blinded Grace from viewing the audience. She had no idea what to expect, what kind of people the VVIPs would be. The fact that her fate was being left, in part, up to these mysterious individuals she just learned of didn't sit well with her.