Mollusk Match: Chapter 21

The girls froze in place, swallowing hard as they awaited Yulia's instruction. There was nothing else to do.

"The next Mollusk Match game will take place within the grand 'Casino Mirage,' a haven for the upper crust of society to gamble and indulge to their hearts' content," Yulia continued. **"Each contestant will be allotted a number of points to gamble with. Simply put, you will be participating in casino games as you see fit, with the ultimate goal of accumulating as many points as possible. Further intricacies and nuances of the 'Casino Mirage' game will grow apparent as you make it to the casino and participate."**

Grace put a hand on her head and let out a low breath, trying to absorb every tidbit of information. So they'd be gambling with the goal of coming out ahead of the pack? There would undoubtedly be much more to it than just that, which would become relevant later.

"Just as with the first game, there may be more than one way to earn points. Please be ready at 1:00PM tomorrow as an escort arrives to transport you. More details will be provided at this time."

The group of girls waited in silence while the weathered farmer leaned against the fence and let out a low whistle.

Phoebe offered quiet reassurances to Ella, who was shaking and muttering under her breath after the most recent announcement.

Kalea was still reeling from her altercation with Lisa and the interjection by Charles when Yulia's announcement boomed through the fields. "I don't have time for this shit," she growled before turning and taking her leave.

Grace took slow breaths to keep herself calm and balanced; there was no reason to let herself get worked up over things outside her control. She needed to consider what she could glean from the limited information. Before losing track, she returned to tilling the field with the other girls, hesitantly rejoining the efforts.

Arina neared Grace while tilling her row and looked over. "What do you think? I mean-- about what Miss Yulia just told us. The next game," she quietly mumbled, shiting her eyes forward with a doubtful expression.

Grace weakly smiled and briefly placed a reassuring hand on Arina's shoulder. "Let's not overthink things. Considering her statement about multiple ways to earn points, and because we'll be at some ritzy casino, I think it's safe to say the VVIPs will be involved once more." She'd have to make a good impression without going overboard and getting another target on her back.

Arina nodded and decided not to push it further right now. All the girls had a lot on their minds, and they would simply need to focus on the farm work for the moment. Nothing indicated it was safe to stop working on the second Mollusk Match game, after all.

At the end of the day, Grace's group retired to their room for the evening. Ella quickly skulked to her room while Phoebe turned toward the other two. "I'm going to make sure Ella is okay. Let's clue each other in if we have any ideas. I won't pretend we know all the details, but we'll work together if possible."

Grace agreed, and they said their goodbyes before she turned toward Arina, who had a strained expression. "Why don't we go to my room for a while? We can talk or-- well…" She thought for a moment. "It would be nice not to be alone," she suggested, slightly embarrassed.

Arina nodded. "Sure. That's not a bad idea at all," she agreed with a weak smile.

Grace retired to her room, her heart rate picking up as a warm, milky sensation enveloped her body. She wasn't sure if these sensations were related to her transformation or if she was just excited to get some alone time with Arina. She convinced herself it was the latter and entered her room with Arina, closing the door behind them.

Grace sat on her bench and laid back, spreading her arms and legs as she stared at the ceiling. The last days' events swirled in her head, and she struggled to make heads or tails of everything. There had been confrontations, revelations, back-breaking labor, and plenty of unwanted mental and physiological changes all around. Also, Arina had spent a few days in an aloof and disinterested state.

Arina sat on the bed beside Grace and laid back, closing her eyes as she inhaled and exhaled. "We really don't get a break, huh?" She asked with a weak laugh, shaking her head slowly.

Grace grunted and put her hands behind her head, still staring at the ceiling as she allowed time for her emotions to process. What was the best course of action for now? Should she sit there and analyze the information Yulia provided them with? They'd be playing casino games, and she was sure the VVIPs would be involved. "I doubt we'll get more than a day of rest before *something* ruins it," she responded with a weak laugh.

She closed her eyes and tried to relax, enjoying the warmth offered by Arina and the admittedly comfortable bedding they were provided. Slimy sweat had proven to be a continuous issue, one that deeply embarrassed her and one she tried not to think about. Ignoring physiological changes proved nearly impossible when she was the one going through them. Images of Ella and Kalea's advancing transformations crept into her head, causing her to shudder as a chill ran down her spine. *'What will they make us suffer through at this casino?'* She mused, a scowl spreading across her face. She could already imagine Lucius sitting comfortably with a leering grin, his fangs glistening in the light as he stared her down like prey.

"We'll make it through this… Thanks to you, we've managed to get through game two so well," Arina warmly offered, rolling onto her side to face Grace.

Grace stared into Arina's brown eyes, her heart rate picking up as a torrent of solid emotions consumed her. "You're right. Thank you," she replied with a weak smile, touching her friend's shoulder.

Arina paused and shifted her eyes away with a look of apprehension.

Grace winced but did well to hide it on her face. "Sorry, should I not touch you like this?" She cautiously asked, withdrawing her hand.

Arina's cheeks flushed as she quickly looked into Grace's eyes and shook her head. "N-- No, that's not it at all," she said quietly. "I love it when you touch and spend time with me like this." After the words left her mouth, she blushed more deeply and pulled a pillow to her chest. "I just overthink things a lot."

Grace relaxed slightly, happy to hear she wasn't bothering Arina. She then shifted focus toward Arina's emotions, feeling a pang of concern. "Is there something you're overthinking right now? You can talk to me about anything," she promised.

Arina offered a slight smile and gently clasped her hand over Grace's. "I appreciate it." Her visage soured as her eyes turned away. "I haven't told you everything about me. There's still quite a bit I've stayed silent on," she suddenly confessed.

Grace's heart raced as she gazed into Arina's weary eyes. She remembered what Phoebe said about Arina's secrets, though she had done her best to push such thoughts away and to put her complete faith in Arina. "You don't need to tell me anything you don't want to. If you ever want to share, I'm here for you. But, I trust you," she promised.

Arina's face softened, her lips curling into a weak smile. "I know you've doubted and questioned yourself, but I think you've handled everything amazingly so far." she shuffled closer to Grace and wrapped an arm around her, resting her forehead against her shoulder.

Grace reciprocated and loosely wrapped an arm around Arina, enjoying her warmth and sweet scent. At moments like these, it was almost easy to forget the waking nightmare they and the other contestants found themselves in. Had she handled everything appropriately up until now? She appreciated Arina's reassurance but couldn't shake the seeds of doubt planted after the events of Mollusk Match's first game. "I'm happy you feel that way, even if I've used you as an emotional crutch," she murmured.

Arina quickly shook her head. "That's definitely not something you need to worry about." She pulled back slightly and looked into Grace's eyes. "If anything, I'm the one who has been using you for emotional support. I have-- well…" She paused to gather her thoughts, weakly clenching the hem of Grace's shirt.

Grace wanted to shake her head and protest, but she felt Arina wished to speak and share something important. "I can assure you that I've never seen it that way. I'm here to support you and listen."

Arina took a slow breath and closed her eyes. "I have codependency issues," she confessed. "I latch onto someone-- I become possessive. I use them to keep myself sane." Her words came out hushed, her voice wavering.

Grace put a hand on Arina's side and gently sighed. "I don't mean to diminish anything you've said, but I feel the same way. Like I" 've used you to keep myself from going mad."

Arina bit her lip and pulled back further, shaking her head. “N-- No… It's been a real problem. I've never felt the way I feel about you with anyone else before, but I also don't know where the line is," she said pleadingly. "Are my feelings genuine? Or am I attaching myself to you because I'd be empty and useless without you?"

Grace heard the genuine concern in her dear friend's voice. What could she say to Arina? She wasn't remotely concerned about how Arina saw and thought of her. "I won't pretend I know what you've been through, Arina," she stated warmly, touching her cheek. "When we lay together like this, are you happy?"

Arina opened her eyes again and met Grace's gaze, seeing no judgment or concern. "Yes, of course."

"Why does this make you happy?" Grace inquired as she gently ran a hand up Arina's side, brushing her fingers under the hem of her shirt to touch her bare skin. Grace wasn't sure where she found her confidence, but she was optimistic she could help the woman lying beside her.

Arina paused and considered her thoughts. "I-- I like you a lot. I enjoy talking to you and feel better when you're here."

Grace blushed. Maybe it would be okay to ask a question that had been on her mind. "When you were aloof for a few days, was it because you were worried about relying on me too much? Or did I do anything else to upset you?" She asked.

Arina shifted and pulled a blanket close to herself, her cheeks turning deep crimson. "I told you about my codependency issues, and-- I just… I knew you were sharing secrets with Uma, and she went out of her way to give me doubts. Or, at least, I think she did," she confessed. "The thought of you getting closer to someone else than you are to me terrified me. Then I remembered my codependency issues… Whenever I cling too hard to something-- or someone, I end up losing them." Before Grace could respond, she continued. "Then there's my transformation. I don't know what I'm becoming, but I've felt more aggressive. More forceful. I have no idea what will happen when all of my negative traits coalesce. I don't want to hurt you or lose you."

Grace saw the genuine pain on Arina's face and felt a burning need to comfort her. She scooched close and wrapped Arina in her arms, holding her face to her chest. "Spending time with you just like this also makes me happy… For the same reasons," she admitted, gently stroking her fingers through Arina's hair. "I enjoy talking to you. I enjoy your warmth-- your scent, your voice. All of it, no matter how embarrassing it is to say all of this." Grace bashfully turned her eyes away while still tenderly holding her dearest friend.

Arina clutched Grace's arm, her body trembling. Tears welled in her eyes as she tried to keep herself together. "You don't think I'm selfish?" She whispered.

"If you're selfish, then I am as well. I'm not a Psychiatrist, so I don't know what's considered healthy and unhealthy. I don't know if we're trauma bonding or what, but I don't care," Grace insisted confidently. "But, look at where we are. Look at what we're forced to do-- forced to suffer through. Who cares if our bond is healthy or unhealthy in anyone else's eyes? Isn't it important to keep one another optimistic and upbeat? We can worry about our emotional problems when we ace the next Mollusk Match games and make it through intact."

Arina shifted and pulled back to make eye contact with Grace, her mouth slightly open as she took slow and steady breaths. "Grace…" She slid her fingers under Grace's shirt, touching her side and abdomen.

Grace shuddered, her body shivering from the touch before heating through with a slight throb between her legs. “H-- Hey… What's up?" She asked in befuddlement, noticing as Arina leaned in closer. Moments later, their faces were only inches apart.

Arina felt a swelling of primal desire stirring within, commanding her to do what felt at this very second. "I've never felt anything like this before," she purred.

Before Grace could respond, Arina leaned in and pressed her lips deeply against hers. Grace gasped and trembled as Arina's hand slid over her abdomen and side, touching her bare skin while their faces locked together. Her mind swam, and she couldn't string together a coherent thought. She had never even considered whether she might be a lesbian or bisexual, but every cell in her body screamed at her to reciprocate. She shakily slid a hand under Arina's shirt, touching her side and back as she heavily leaned into Arina's embrace.