

The Luna Choosing Game

Chapter 151

With the Second Ball only a few short days away, the dressmaking was underway and took up most of my time. My room had become something of a command center, with Charlotte, Elva, the nanny, Mark, and I as regulars. Susie visited quite often, sometimes with a maid or two in tow.

Her gown, leopard-themed, she shared, was already completed.

“The design wasn’t overly complicated,” Susie said. “The leopard-print fabric is what makes it.”

“I’m sure it’s beautiful,” I told her.

“So am I,” Mark added. When Susie looked at him, he quickly glanced away.

She continued to watch him as she said, “Thank you, but I truly have little interest in this event.”

Mark, surprised, finally glanced back at her. “But if you don’t do well, you might not make it through the

elimination.”

If she did stay, it would have to be at the selection of one of the princes. If Nicholas knew Susie and

Mark liked each other, he might select her, just to help them be together. Although he tended to be a

stickler for the rules, of which Susie and Mark were definitely breaking, by crushing on each other.

I supposed there was no easy answer for them. Whatever time they had together was likely to be brief.

“I know,” Susie said, a bit sadly.

Mark frowned but didn’t say anything else.

“Hold on,” I said, a few minutes later, as I put the finishing touches of a wolf mask of faux gray fur. “Elva,

come over here.”

She skipped over to me, and I placed it on her face.

“Keep it right there a second,” I said.

Diligently, she lifted her hand up and kept the mask in place. I tied the ribbons securely behind her head,

keeping the mask in place. It was lightweight so the ribbon should be enough. I wanted to test it now,

though, rather than chance it at the Ball.

“See how that fits for a while, okay?”

She nodded at once. Through the holes in her mask, her eyes were wide and bright. When she smiled, it

was all crooked teeth and gums,

“Look! Look! I’m a wolf!” She gave a little howl and then scurried around the room.

Susie, laughing, started to chase her.

I rose off my chair, about to join in, when I noticed Terry enter the room unannounced. He peered around

the room without anything.

When Mark noticed me stiffen, he followed the length of my gaze to Terry.

“Oh, sir,” Mark dipped his head. “Forgive us. You should have made your presence known.”

As he spoke, Susie skidded to a stop. She was in the back of the room near the window, and came not

closer.

Elva continued to run, until she came to me and noticed my tension. Once she spotted Terry, she hid

once more behind my skirts.

“Well, don’t let me disturb the good times occurring in this room,” Terry said with his snake-like smile.

He walked further into the room and peered down at the assortment of fabric swatches Charlotte and I had fashioned into the semblance of a skirt. It was far from finished and unnerved me to see him taking

such an interest.

I inched closer to him.

“Was there something we can help you with, sir?” I asked.

He looked up at me. “What did you have in mind?”

My stomach twisted with disgust. I didn’t have anything in mind. I wanted to know what he was doing here. But I couldn’t just ask that, as much as I wanted to. With the nobility, very rarely did anyone ever say anything directly.

I stood there awkwardly under his stare, until Elva peeked out from behind me and caught Terry’s attention.

“Oh, little Elva,” he said. He attempted to soften his voice, but it came out breathy and wrong. “You aren’t still afraid of me, are you?”

Elva returned to hiding, indicating that yes, she was

Terry moved closer, like he planned on walking around me to confront Elva a second time.

Chapter 152

I sidestepped into his path, blocking him.

His eyes narrowed marginally for a moment, before his overly–friendly expression returned.

“Forgive her, sir,” I said. “It will take her some time to come around to a stranger.”

“This is what I am attempting to rectify,” Terry countered. “I don’t wish to be a stranger any longer.”

His gaze dropped down to my breasts, even though I was wearing a sweater, not anything revealing. He

kept his eyes there, like he could see through my shirt, I crossed my arms over my chest.

“I wish to be a good friend to you both.” He licked his lips.

Mark moved then, entering the narrowing space between Terry and me, firmly blocking his movement.

Terry’s smile fell. He lifted a brow in Mark’s direction, questioning. Mark held his ground.

“Perhaps I could assist you with whatever you need, sir,” Mark said, voice so much sterner than I’d ever

heard it. This was his soldier voice, I realized, and not the one he used for Elva and I.

“You are being very bold for a Beta,” Terry said. “Especially when I was only being friend. I wasn’t doing anything wrong.” z

“I’m loyal to my prince and his orders.”

Terry tilted his head. “And your prince’s orders involve keeping me away from Piper?”

“I am to protect her and her child from anyone, sir.” Mark’s words sounded like a threat.

Terry must have heard it too, because he straightened. “It’s awfully presumptuous to assume she would need protection from me.”

“I am to keep anyone from getting to close.”

Terry tilted his head back, like he was sizing Mark up. Mark was taller, with more muscle. Unless Terry had a deceptively strong wolf, I’d wager Mark could take him in a fight if it came to that.

“My nephew gives strange orders regarding his ex-girlfriend,” Terry said.

I swallowed hard. I didn’t like the way he emphasized ex, though I couldn’t exactly pinpoint why. It felt like he was mocking me somehow, or Nicholas. Neither of which I liked.

“But I will see myself out, if it would give you peace,” Terry continued.

“Please.” Mark didn’t move, even as Terry did. He shifted only to continue to stand between me and

Terry, as Terry moved to the door. Once he disappeared outside of it, Mark sighed so hard, his shoulders

slouched

“I’m so sorry, Mark,” I said at once. I remembered how Mark had told me that Terry was good to the staff. “I hope I didn’t put you in an awkward position.”

Turning to me, Mark shook his head. “I don’t care if it did. And Prince Nicholas would back me up.”

“But you said...”

“I didn’t like the way he was looking at you,” Mark said.

“Me either,” Susie added, stepping away from the window. She crossed the room to stand beside us.

Elva switched from hiding behind my skirt to hers.

“I don’t like him, Mommy,” Elva said.

“We have to be nice,” I told her gently. Truthfully, I didn’t like him either, but he held a lot of power here. We were all in trouble, I gathered, from standing up to him.

“I’ll alert Prince Nicholas of this at once,” Mark said. “He will likely want to add more guards to your door, especially overnight.”

“Overnight?” I had never had visitors overnight, unless it was the doctor when Elva was sick.

Mark gave me a sad soft of look, like he was holding something back.

“The way he was looking at you, Piper,” Susie said instead. “It was like he... owned you.”

The word made my stomach flip. A hint of bile rose up my throat

That wasn’t unlike what Julian had warned me of too. For more than one person to have noticed it was

alarming.

I looked to Mark for confirmation.

He nodded. “It was possessive. Please be careful, Piper.”

#Chapter 153 - Read The Luna Choosing Game Chapter 153 Online

Chapter 153

Nicholas

I wanted to talk to my father about the state of the people that I had seen when I had taken Piper shopping, but the King was too busy to see me for several days. When I was finally allowed audience

Inside of his chambers, he had his war map stretched out over the dining table.

My mother was seated in one of the cushioned chairs, with Terry in the one beside hers. My father was

standing, peering down at the map with his chin in his hand.

Nathan allowed me into the room, then followed me back to the table, where he stood quietly behind the

King.

“Nicholas,” my father said. My mother nodded. Terry stared at me blankly.

“Father, I’ve come to talk to you about a most pressing issue,” I said.

My father sighed. “Everything is a pressing issue, it seemed. What is it that is troubling you?”

“The welfare of our people. Father, they are starving and living in destitute conditions. They need more

assistance than we are...”

I trailed off as my father raised his hand.

“We have enough to worry about as it is. While I admit the conditions for our people are not as

generous as they have been in the past, our people are strong. They can overcome any hardships on their

own.”

Did he not truly understand how dire things were? That people were homeless and hungry, and needed

help.

“If I could just explain

“That’s enough, Nicholas,” the King said. “I have given you my answer.

“You are too young, little prince,” Terry called. “You’re naïve, concerning yourself with... how did you phrase it? “The welfare of our people‘ Don’t you understand that our borders are at risk?”

frowned and looked back to my father for explanation. He waved me closer to the map, and then pointed at the crude black line meant to replicate our border with the Bear People in the North.

“Tensions are high on our northern borders,” the King said. “There have been reports of their soldiers crossing into our territory in large numbers. They are likely planning something.”

“We should call on our alliances,” I said, alarmed.

“Who, exactly?” Terry said with a harsh laugh. “The Merfolk are basically useless unless the Bears attack by water. But they are too smart for that. At least for now.”

I gave Terry a sharp look. He seemed keen on tearing down others’ ideas without producing any of his

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The Dragons, then,” I offered.

My father shook his head. “The Bear People and the Dragon Clan have a very old agreement. They have

both sworn not to raise arms against the other, in the name of peace.”

It made sense. The Dragons and the Bears were two of the fiercest types of shifters. They lived for war and combat. If they invaded each other, neither would stop until the other was totally wiped out. This

would lead to mutually assured destruction.

“There must be something we can do,” I said.

“Pray,” Terry said.

The Luna nodded, agreeing with the sentiment.

“We must find a way to negotiate with the Bear People,” the King said. “If only we knew what they were really after.”

They know what th

“They know what they are after, dear brother-in-law,” Terry chimed in once more. “They see the

weakness of the royal family and wish to claim our land for our own.” d

“We have shown weakness,” the Queen agreed.

“What would you suggest, then?” the King said, frowning.

“A show of force,” Terry said. “Send our own troops north.”

“And risk full conflict?” I said.

Terry clucked his tongue at me. “Little boy, don’t you have other things to do? Like worry whether people

can afford new sweaters, or whatever you were worried about.”

I grit my teeth. The welfare of the people was not something to be mocked. Feeding our people and

protecting the people were two problems, sure, but we didn’t need to sacrifice one for the sake of the

other. We could care about both.

Yet bit my tongue. For whatever the reason, my mother and father too—often deferred to my uncle’s

Chapter 154

If I wanted to help the people, I would have to do it on my own. As for the border, I could only hope. Terry’s arrogance didn’t lead us into full-scale war.

“I’m not sure it’s wise to send that many troops north,” the King said. “If this is an innocent endeavor on their part, we might then look the part of the aggressor.”

Rather an aggressor than a coward,” Terry said.

“We should listen to my brother,” the Queen said.

The King frowned deeper.

“Why don’t you run along, Nicholas? Terry called to me again. “If you truly care so much for the welfare

of the people, perhaps you should start with that pretty little commoner and her daughter. They’ve been very... vulnerable lately.” He smiled. “We wouldn’t want anything to happen to them.”

Red hot anger burst in my mind and my wolf snarled under my skin. novelbin

Was he just threatening Piper and Elva?

But if he was, what could I do about it? He had my parents’ favor. A seat at the right hand of the King.

I raged in my mind, desiring to jump over the table and throttle him.

As it was, I turned on my heel and stormed to the exit of the room.

I burst into the hallway, then startled to find Julian jumping away from the door. He had clearly been

eavesdropping.

I was so angry at Terry, that I didn’t even mind Julian’s presence. In fact, I welcomed it.

I closed the door behind me, then grabbed Julian by the shoulder and roughly dragged him down the hall

into my

chambers. I threw him inside, then closed the door behind us.

“Don’t take your rage out on me, brother,” Julian said. His smile took on an edge. “But if you want to

sabotage our dear uncle Terry, I’m all for it.”

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The thought was tempting, but I was never good at subterfuge. Julian knew that. I preferred a more

direct route. Like a challenge perhaps.

But that was neither here nor there, and had nothing to do with what I wished to speak to Julian about

“You need to take Piper on another date,” I said.

Julian’s smile slipped. His brows went high on his forehead. I’d surprised him. Good. That was a nice

change

“That is not something I thought I’d hear you say,” Julian admitted.

It wasn’t something I’d thought I’d say. But for Piper’s safety, I was desperate.

“If you

can further establish her as your favorite, it will help protect her against whatever Terry and the

rest of our family has planned for her.”

“You think the King and Queen are in on his plans?” Julian asked.

“I don’t know, but they seem fully submissive to the rest of his ideas. I’m not willing to take the chance

with Piper’s life. Elva’s either.”

Julian crossed his arms. “Yes, I see what you mean.”

“I can’t give her my protection. Not publically, anyway. Mark has told me that Terry has already

approached her in her rooms.”

“He was leering at her during the banquet as well,” Julian added, a detail that made my stomach drop.

Terry was already moving his pieces on the chessboard then. I felt too many turns behind.

“I can continue to date her. Something more public this time,” Julian said.

“That would be best.”

Julian watched me in that unsettling way of his, like he could see through my skin to the heart and soul

underneath. Sometimes I felt like I was standing under a microscope.

“If I date her like this, won’t it make you jealous?” Julian asked.

Yes, it would. Not that I would admit that to him. Especially now, when it mattered so little.

“I just want her safe. I can deal with anything else.”

Chapter 155

I sat in a sitting room at a table for two, having tea and pastries with Julian, I wasn’t surprised when

Julian asked me on another date. We had plenty left to investigate, after all. But I was confused when he

led me here, to what seemed like a legitimate date.

I was startled that Nicholas and Lilliana were also here, having the same assortment of tea and snacks

at an identical table on the other side of the medium-sized room, In the corner, one of the servants

masterfully played the pianoforte.

Cameras covered almost every angle of the room, coming in closer to our faces every now and then.

I leaned closer to Julian so the cameras wouldn't overhear.

"So what's the plan?" I asked him.

He looked at me with a lifted brow. "Enjoy our tea and pastries?"

I frowned at him. "Are we not... Investigating?"

"Here?" He glanced around. "Heavens, no."

"But... you asked me on a date." novelbin

"Maybe I just wanted to enjoy the pleasure of your company."

I gave him a flat look.

He relented with a sigh. "Fine. My dear uncle Terry clearly has some suspicions about us. It makes sense

to prove them untrue by going on an actual date. Think of it as a cover for our cover."

That didn't feel like the full truth. "There's more, isn't there?"

He smiled at me for a moment, then gestured to my teacup. "Would you like more tea?"

He wouldn't tell me, then. Julian was always so secretive, sometimes it was downright frustrating.

As Julian poured more tea into my teacup, I glanced over to the other table, where Nicholas was sitting across from Lilliana. They hadn't talked much, just quietly enjoyed their tea. Nicholas's back was ramrod

straight. A frown was heavy on his lips.

I couldn't help but worry about him. Was this the future he truly wanted for himself? To sit across from

someone every day who he couldn't even speak to?

Don't worry about him," Jullan said, speaking softly near my ear. "He's probably still sulking from when

That caught my interest and I swiveled back to Julian. "The King lectured him?"

Julian shrugged. "Good little Nicholas was trying to convince our parents to care about the plight of the common people. Unsuccessfully, I might add, especially with Terry there."

My heart warmed from the inside out. Nicholas had tried to advocate for the people? Could he have truly

listened to me when I told him about the common people's hardships?

A smile tugged at my lips.

Suddenly, Julian's hand was cupping my face. Gently, he brushed his thumb against the corner of my

mouth.

He smiled at me. "Crumbs," he said, like that was a reasonable explanation for why he was touching me

so familiarly, or for so long.

A sharp crack sounded from the other table.

"Prince Nicholas Lilliana gasped.

We all turned to look.

Nicholas had cracked off the handle of his teacup

Julian, chuckling, lowered his hand. I glared at him.

"You did that just to upset Nicholas!" I said, hushed.

The producers, meanwhile, pulled the cameramen closer to Nicholas.

“What happened there?” one of them asked him. “Faulty cup?”

“It’s old,” Nicholas said and pushed it aside. He offered no other explanation. The camera crew waited a

moment more, then pulled away, disappointed by what they perceived as a lack of story.

Julian cleared his throat, and I knew he meant trouble.

“Prince Julian –“I tried to cut him off, but he simply spoke loudly, talking over me.

“Please tell me what you are dressing as at the ball, Piper, so that I can coordinate.”

The producers gasped and redirected the cameras over to us.

Julian had put me on the spot. If we coordinated, this would solidify our status as a couple. I was not

ready for that move.

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Glancing over, I noticed Nicholas watching me with piercing eyes. His mouth was a hard line, and his

jawline tense. He looked about ready to flip both tables.

Chapter 156

His gaze sent a pleasant shiver down my spine. Blushing slightly, I glanced away from him and toward the cameras instead. Their presence reminded me of where I was and what Julian had just asked me.

I cleared my throat. To Julian, I said, “You’ll have to wait and see.”

He laughed.

Ten minutes later, Julian held out his hand, “Will you dance with me, Piper?”

I knew he was up to something, but with the cameras watching, I couldn't refuse.

I placed my hand in his. He closed his fingers around mine, and tugged me closer to the pianoforte.

Then he pulled me into his arms.

At the same time, Nicholas led Lilliana to dance as well. They held each other stiffly and at a

respectable distance. They moved with formal, stilted steps.

Julian placed my hand on his chest, and Nicholas nearly tripped over his own feet. Yet he immediately

righted himself and continued dancing.

Julian smiled, but it wasn't quite as cutting as it had earlier been. "This isn't as fun as I'd hoped."

Julian was only being so flirtatious with me to bother Nicholas. But I struggled to understand why it was working. Although Nicholas had made it clear from the start that he didn't like the idea of Julian and me together, particularly since Julian was a known playboy.

I supposed Nicholas's reactions were still tethered to those feelings.

Though the way he was looking at me did not seem like the glare of a man who was simply trying to protect me from his promiscuous brother. He looked... jealous.

"Ah, I thought of something," Julian said suddenly.

While spinning in our circles, Julian led me closer to Nicholas and Lilliana. Before I could truly react, Julian abruptly disappeared, so when I came out of my spin, I was pressing flat into the chest of Nicholas!

I glanced, and Julian had masterfully switched partners. Now he danced around with an annoyed-

looking Lilliana.

Nicholas looked down at me, and I, up at him. I thought he might walk away or suggest we return to our

original partners.

Instead, his arms went around my waist

By now, Julian had led Lilliana – and the cameras – mostly to the door.

Even if Nicholas wasn't jealous, I didn't want him to think that I was interested in Julian, so I told him, "If you wanted to know what costume I'd be wearing at the Second Ball, I would tell you."

The hard edge in his gaze softened a little. "You wouldn't need to tell me. I'd always be able to recognize

you, in costume or not."

My heart pounded in my chest. novelbin

He seemed entirely confident. How could he be so sure?

I

I didn't ask him. I was afraid to hear what he might say, or if he might take the words back instead.

"I mean it, Piper," he said, just as softly.

"Nicholas..."

Before I could finish my thought, one of the cameras had appeared beside us, and the producer spoke

up, "What do you think of Prince Julian's little games, Piper? Do you find them delightful? Are they part of

the reason you've been falling for him?"

"..uh..."

I looked at Nicholas, hoping for a rescue, but he totally shelled up again, hiding his emotions behind his

princely façade.

Slowly, he ended our dance and removed his hands away from me.

The growing distance between us felt like a canyon. I wanted to close it again, but I couldn't with so

many people watching.

Even if they hadn't been watching, Nicholas might not have been receptive.

"Julian is... fine," I managed..

The producer furrowed his brow. "That's it?"

"If you will excuse me," I said and retreated, from the cameras, from the producers, and from my budding feelings for Nicholas.

Chapter 157

On the night of the Second Ball, Charlotte helped me add the finishing touches to my costume.

My sheer butterfly wings hung close to my shoulders, not extending too far, just enough to show. My hair was up and mostly hidden under a sea of brightly colored flowers. My mask covered most of my face.

leaving only my mouth and chin exposed.

Looking in the mirror, I barely recognized myself. I doubted anyone else would either. Despite what he

said, I even had my doubts about Nicholas.

Charlotte handed me my gloves one by one as I slid them on.

"Tonight, you can be anyone," she said.

No one would know me. No one would know that I'm the outsider tonight. I would simply be part of the

group.

I nodded, unsure what to say. I didn't know how that made me feel. I wasn't ashamed of who I was, but I

had always wondered what it would feel like to belong

As I finished getting ready, Elva, in her wolf costume, ran circles around the bedroom. She gave a little

growl at the Nanny and then at Mark, who both pretended to be intimidated.

Mark himself was looking dapper tonight, wearing a crisp tuxedo with Prince Nicholas's insignia on the

cuff. He would be attending the ball himself, alongside the nanny, to help keep an eye on Elva

Elva and I were supposed to pretend we didn't know each other. If we spent too much time together,

everyone in the ballroom would be able to guess my identity simply from Elva's presence.

I bent down to give Elva a hug. It would hurt me to have to pretend not to know her, though I maintained.

to keep an eye on her myself. If she needed me, I would be there in an instant, rules of the event

damned.

Elva didn't seem to mind so much. She hugged me tightly, her lanky arms around my neck. "Goodbye,

stranger Mommy." Then she giggled.

I laughed too, just a little. "If you need anything tonight.

"Oh, Mommy," she said, and patted my arm, like I had done so many times with her. "Everything will be

alright."

I nodded. She was right of course. She was in very good hands, and I didn't need to worry.

But worrying about Elva was easier than worrying about myself. I had no idea what to expect tonight.

Elva, Mark, and the nanny went down to the ballroom first. After waiting a few minutes, I followed in their

path.

"Good luck tonight," Charlotte said at the doorway.

Down in the ballroom, we weren't formally announced this time, to maintain the anonymity. Instead, all

of the candidates simply met at the top of the stair and took our turns descending one by one. novelbin

I marveled at the beautiful costumes. Beautiful colors, silks, satins, furs, and feathers wrapped around

the girls, dressing them as various animals and even a dragon.

Some were more successful at hiding their wearers than others. Olivia, for instance, had not covered her

blonde hair, revealing her as the peacock.

Lilliana, likewise, had done the bare minimum to hide her identity. She wore a simple black mask that covered her eyes. The rest of her dress was a shimmering white. She told everyone she was a swan, but I didn't see it. She hadn't even included feathers in her outfit.

The dragon, meanwhile, was a mystery, her face completely covered. Susie was also well-hidden, and I might have questioned who she was had I not known of her disguise ahead of time. I

When it was my turn, I came down the staircase. Many people turned to watch me, including two of the three princes.

The princes were easy to find among the crowd. They wore striking tuxedos in different colors. Nicholas's was a deep emerald green. Julian's was a dark

blue. Joyce's was a rich violet. Though they each wore an elaborate golden mask, they were easy to recognize and differentiate.

Chapter 158

Nicholas held my gaze the longest.

He finally glanced away when a girl tugged on his arm. The music started and she pulled him toward the

dance floor.

It seemed that anonymity made everyone feel a bit bolder than usual tonight.

Myself included.

I stopped by the drink table to grab a flute of champagne. It was easier to lose myself with a hint of

alcohol in the system. Yet before I could even take a sip. I looked out at the dance floor once more and

forgot the drink entirely.

The girl who was dancing with Nicholas had both hands on his chest and was rubbing them up to his

shoulders with an unwelcome familiarity that made my skin crawl.

I lowered my drink back to the table and then stormed across the room.

"Excuse me," I said, when I was close enough to them. "Do you mind if I cut in?"

"Yes," snapped the girl.

Nicholas searched my face. Then, he reached up, grabbed the girl's wrists and pulled her hands away

from his chest.

She huffed in annoyance but didn't argue. She glared at me as she walked away.

Nicholas held out his hand to me, and I placed mine in his.

“I feel as if I know you,” he said. His deadpan expression made it difficult to tell if he was teasing or not.

I suspected he was, however. He, of course, knew everyone here.

I

But did he know specifically who I was? That was the question.

I placed one hand on his shoulder. His free hand sat comfortably on my waist. Together, we began to move with the music. We glided over the floor as if a single body, a single heart.

Without the interference of our real-life problems, being with Nicholas was as easy as breathing. Here, where we could pretend to be other people, nothing stood in the way of indulging in this fantasy.

“You dance very well, my lady,” Nicholas said.

“It helps to have an excellent partner,” I replied.

Eventually, Nicholas led our dance out onto the balcony, where we were alone. Slowly, he stopped turning, ending the dance. He did not move away, however, keeping his hand on my hip and the other

clutching mine.

I didn’t move away either.

What happens now? My mind whispered, as my heart took flight in my chest.

A bolder woman would say something flirty, and well, I could be anyone tonight.

“You look handsome in the starlight, my prince.”

He smiled, wider than usual, and my knees felt weak.

“Thank you, my lady, but it is your beauty that has stolen me away. This is a lovely dress, but I suspect the woman underneath is even more stunning.”

Nicholas released my hand to bring his own to my face. Gently, he traced my cheek along the edge of my mask.

Then, he leaned forward.

My breath caught in my throat. He came closer and closer. I felt his hot breath on my skin.

My eyes fluttered closed. I parted my lips.

I desperately wanted him to close the distance and kiss me. The very thrill of the near possibility had me buzzing out of my skin.

Tonight was a night of magic. Anything felt possible. Even this. Maybe especially this.

His lips brushed mine and I gasped.

It was the barest press, but it made my heart clench.

Then, however, a hint of panic sneaked in. He didn't perhaps think I was someone else, did he? With mask covering most of my face, and my hair hidden, he might not have known it was actually me.

But then he said, voice breathy and soft, "Piper."

And I wanted him to kiss me aga

getting to my wolf. A piece of me was so near, and when it was, I felt so whole. I couldn't resist it even if I wanted to.

I turned and dashed into the ballroom as fast as I could in my heels. I followed the feeling, searching the room. Then I saw someone I hadn't seen before.

A woman stood there in a long, black dress with black feathers sticking out at the shoulders and in her hair. A black mask covered half of her face. Feathers shot from along the top of the mask and into her hair.

I didn't know who she was. She hadn't been with the candidates earlier, unless someone had changed. I didn't have time to look for the others and do a head count.

Her eyes locked with mine for a brief moment. She seemed familiar, but I couldn't place her. Quickly, she turned away and began walking from me. That's when I realized she was the one with my

wolf.

I gave chase, following even as she ducked into a side room, and then another side room from there. Every time I thought I had her cornered, when I entered the new room, she had vanished into the next.

Then I entered into a room that was already occupied. Terry sat relaxed on a leather sofa, his arm

thrown across the back. He was drinking from a flute of champagne when I entered. He lifted a brow at

me as I came through the door in such a rush.

"Have you seen a woman in black?" I asked, looking around. I didn't notice any other doors out of this novelbin

room, except what was clearly a bathroom.

I

could feel my wolf moving farther away. I was desperate to catch it but the trail had stopped cold here.

When Terry didn't answer me, I spoke again. "Is there another exit from this room?"

Terry placed his glass on a tray beside another flute. He lifted the bottle of champagne and poured the bubbling liquid into the second cup

"Sit, Piper," he said, motioning to the open couch beside him. "We should talk."

I narrowed my eyes. He had to have seen that woman. Was he covering for her? Did he truly know more about this whole thing than he let on?

Perhaps, I reasoned, I could get more information out of him if I talked to him. Julian had been very tight-lipped about the full extent of Terry's possible

involvement. If I couldn't get more information from Julian, then perhaps it was smart to go straight for the source.

Terry clearly liked me. If I played into that, even just to be nice, maybe I could bring out some revelations.

Chapter 159

Tonight at the Second Ball felt like a night where anything could happen.

As Nicholas pulled back from our kiss, I immediately wanted him to return for another. I had butterflies in my stomach, remembering the way he said my name.

He said it again now.

"Piper.

"How did you know it was me?" I asked.

"I told you I would." He lowered both hands down to my waist and squeezed me tighter to him. "I would

know you anywhere."

He leaned in again. I wanted him to kiss me so badly.

But then I felt a familiar pull, almost as if someone or something was tugging me at the heartstrings. I

knew that feeling.

It was my wolf.

But how could it be here? Now? I hadn't gone anywhere. Had the mysterious person from the car outside

of Terry's mansion come to the Second Ball? Why?

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"I'm sorry, I..." I stepped back from Nicholas, out of his hold.

His eyes behind his mask hardened at once. His smile slipped away. "Piper? What's wrong?"

Feeling woozy, I pressed my hand to my forehead. "I...I have to go...."

It wasn't a good enough explanation by far, but in the moment, all I could think about was

"Honestly, Nicholas, much of your kingdom looks like this. Over the past few years, there's been such an

economic downturn that many people are homeless. I've had to work two or three jobs sometimes to

keep a roof over Elva's head."

"Two or three jobs?" Nicholas repeated like he didn't quite believe it.

I

"Yes, and we'd be much worse off if I didn't find such a good person to room with. Anna has helped me

with Elva more than I could ever thank her for. I'll be indebted to her the rest of my life already, for these

past couple of years."

Nicholas's knuckles turned white on the steering wheel. "Things have been that dire." It wasn't a

question, not the way he said it, but I still treated it like one.

"Some points have definitely been better than others. Though the jobs that usually paid well didn't last

long before they went out of business. It's tough all over. During some of the low points, I'd have to skip

meals to make sure Elva always got hers."

I looked out the window, at the burned out streetlights and the tired people trekking down the sidewalks.

Not many had their own cars anymore. Walking and buses were the only way to get anywhere.

That was if the buses ran on time, or showed up at all.

“Living at the palace has felt like a dream. I’ve never eaten so well.”

“You were too skinny when you arrived,” Nicholas said. He sounded distant, like he was talking to me

from somewhere else, and not from the seat beside mine.

I turned my attention to him. “Nicholas?”

His mouth was a hard line.

He said, “I have let my people suffer for too long.”

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Chapter 160

Terry waited through the length of my indecision. When he motioned a second time for me to sit, this time I joined him on the couch, sliding down onto the spot he indicated.

"Tell me about the girl in the black dress," I said.

"Uh, uh. Demanding is not very becoming, Piper. Here, have some champagne and calm down for a

moment."

He passed me the second flute of champagne and I took sip. Then I drank a second sip for some liquid

courage.

He smiled. "Good. Now, tell me why you are looking for a girl in a black dress."

"I followed her," I said. "She came in here and then disappeared."

Terry glanced around the room. "There's no one in here now. You are free to check."

I knew she wasn't still here, because my wolf continued to move further and further away. If she was still here, I would have been able to feel it.

I sipped at the champagne again, trying to get my thoughts together.

"Did you know that girl?" I asked him.

He tilted his head. His piercing gaze bore into me as he asked, "Did you?"

That... was a very odd question. "I don't know."

I rubbed at my forehead. I was having trouble now keeping my thoughts together. My body felt much heavier than it had even a moment before.

"I don't... feel so well..."

"Drink a little more," Terry said. He lifted my glass for me and tipped some more champagne into my mouth. "It will help you feel better."

Wait. Was this champagne drugged? I tried to push the glass away from me but my strength was entirely depleted. I couldn't even spit it out, although some spilled and dribbled down my chin.

"There's a good girl," he said.

When the drink was empty, he returned it to the table. But then he brought his hand to my face and stroked my cheek. It was a gross mockery of the soft way Nicholas had touched me only a few moments

My stomach twisted but I didn't even have the strength to throw up.

He pried his thumbs under the corner of my mask. "Why don't we take this off of your beautiful face?"

I weakly lifted my hands, but he simply batted them away.

"None of that now. I want to see you." With meticulous attention, he untied the ribbons holding the mask.

in place and then pulled it down, away from my skin.

A few of the flowers from my hair fell down onto the soft and onto my dress. A red pedal landed on his

jacket. He plucked it off with an annoyed expression, and flicked it away to the floor.

“Don’t fight me now, dearest.” His hands came to my shoulders. “I’ve been looking forward to adding you to my collection for quite some time. With you, I will have the full set.”

The full set? What did he mean by that? I didn’t want to be part of any collection! novelbin

“No.” I flopped my hands against his chest.

“You are a stubborn one, aren’t you? But go on.” His smile shifted into something sinister, something dangerous. He wasn’t even really smiling at me anymore, more leering and showing his teeth.

He looked more like an animal than anyone else at the ball tonight. He was the only one I had felt afraid of.

His hands inched down my front, slowly coming to rest just above the swells of my breasts. I sucked in a sharp breath. I didn’t want him to touch me.

My limbs were so tired... useless. I wanted to scream, but nothing more than a low whimper escaped me.

Without a wolf, I had already been weak, but drugged like I was, I was absolutely helpless.

Suddenly, the door burst open, and Nicholas was there.

He glared at his uncle, fire in his eyes.

“What the hell is going on here?”