

## The Luna Choosing Game #Chapter 161 - Read The Luna Choosing Game Chapter 161

Chapter 161

Nicholas

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Terry, my uncle and advisor to the King, and his hands on Piper as if

he intended to touch her intimately. And Piper was practically passed out beside him, unable to give

consent, unable to do anything more than cry.

Red hot fury burned through my veins. My hands clenched into fists,

I desperately wanted to beat my uncle into a bloody pulp for daring to lay a hand on Piper. Hands that

were still on her.

"Get the fuck off of her. Each word came out a growl as I strode forward into the room. I made my strides long and determined, intimidating.

Terry finally pulled his hands away, but still had the shame to look put out about it. "You continue to have the worst timing, little nephew." novelbin

With Terry out of the way, I rushed forward and pulled Piper up into the safety of my arms. When I had her in a bridal carry, clutched to my chest, I could finally make out some of what she was saying.

"Don't let him. Please... Save me... Nicholas..."

My heart seized in my chest as anger burned anew. I didn't want to just beat Terry into a pulp, I wanted to chop up and burn the pieces that were left. I wanted to destroy him.

How dare he try to touch that which doesn't belong to him? How dare he try to rape Piper?

"I want to go." Piper mumbled against my collarbone. "Please, Nick."

I couldn't deny her that, even though I wanted to. Vengeance would have to wait until Piper was safe.

I

"Try something like this again," I told Terry. My voice broke; my wolf pushing through. "And I don't care if you are family. I don't care if you are an advisor to my father. I will kill you."

Terry lifted his chin high in defiance, but I saw the way his bottom lip trembled ever so slightly.

Satisfied with his fear, I turned then and carried Piper out of the room. We were almost to the next side room in this bizarre path when Julian came running.

When he spotted Piper in my arms, he started to smile. It totally vanished when he came closer, enough to see Piper's pale face with her tear-stained cheeks.

What happened?" he asked at once. I recognized the sudden burst of flames in his eyes, as the same

I

"Terry drugged her," I said. My wolf was still in my voice, clipping my words. "He tried to assault her. I

found them in time."

"Thank God," Julian said. His lip began to curl with disgust. "Get her out of here, Nicholas. I'm going to

have a word with our dear uncle."

How much I wanted to join him. Still, even Terry would be formidable alone. "Be careful," I said.

"Don't worry," Julian said. "Brian is not far behind." He wasted no more time. He stormed away from us

and toward Terry, Brian came running soon after, hot on his heels.

Just before the door closed, I heard Julian shout, “You despicable son of a bitch!”

“Give him hell,” I grumbled in encouragement, before turning away.

In my quest to return Piper to her room, I had to go a few longer routes through connecting side rooms. Maybe it was my sense of protectiveness, but I didn’t want anyone to see her as she was now, trembling and pale.

That even Julian had seen her so vulnerable made me want to break something.

Once we finally entered her room, it was empty. She must have given Charlotte the night off.

I carried Piper to the bed and slowly lowered her down. Somewhere in our journey, she had fallen asleep.

Her eyelashes were fanning her cheeks. Her lips were still the same cherry red as they had been when I had nearly kissed her out on the balcony. She had been beautiful in her colorful mask, but without it, she stole my breath away.

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I could stare at her forever. I used to, back when we had been dating, on the rare occasions that she

stayed the night. We didn’t do anything sexual. We just liked to hold each other.

I would wake up earlier than her, just as the sun was creeping in through the windows. It would shine on

her, covering her in a soft golden glow. She’d looked like an angel. A woman out of my very dreams..

Even now, I thought the same. There was no golden sunlight here, just the dull tungsten light from the

bedside light. But she was no less beautiful.

She had made the sunlight brighter, not the other way around.

Looking at her helped dwindle some of the bonfire of anger I felt. I could feel the fury buzzing under skin, begging me to run back down there and pummel my uncle.

But I couldn't leave Piper unattended. In fact...

I pulled my phone from my hip pocket and quickly texted Mark, urging him to be careful with Elva, especially around Terry. By no means, was he to let Elva out of his sight.

my

Once Mark had confirmed, I returned my phone to my pocket and took a seat at Piper's side, leaning at the very edge of Piper's bed.

I took her hand in mine. It was cold, so I tried to warm it, closing my other hand in over top of it.

Then I waited for her to wake up.

Before she did, Julian joined us in the room. I glanced up at him and was more surprised than I should have been to find him sporting a swelling bruise around his eye.

"Brian went to get some ice," Julian said, with the same cocksure smirk he always wore. The expression practically screamed, You should see the other guy.

As he walked closer to the bed, Julian touched his bruise, having noticed Nicholas eyeing it.

"It's not that bad, is it?"

"It's an improvement," I said.

Julian laughed. "A gift from our uncle. He did not take kindly to some of the accusations I made."

"Did you lay him out flat?"

Julian shrugged. "Brian did. I didn't even have time to react. Talking, yelling. Terry hit me, Brian hit him,

I hummed, satisfied at least that someone was able to knock that fucker out, even if it wasn't what he

truly deserved by far.

With Terry temporarily handled and Piper somewhere safe, I could now let my mind wander to how this

had come to happen, and why.

Nothing was adding up.

"I don't understand why Terry would go after Piper." Other than she was overwhelmingly beautiful, of

course. But she wasn't exactly to Terry's previous tastes. He generally preferred rail-thin redheads. As

incorrect as it was, Terry would have perceived Piper as being fat.

"Did something happen? Something that would bring Piper into his radar?"

I looked at Julian for my answer. He was avoiding my gaze.

I went from very hot with anger to very cold with trepidation in a split-second.

"You know why," I accused, not a question.

Julian crossed his arms. "Come on, uncle's never needed a reason before."

That was a non-answer. "You are avoiding the question." novelbin

"Nicholas, really

"Julian. The truth."

Julian sucked in a breath. "Fine." He waved to Piper's sleeping form.

I instinctively squeezed Piper's hand.

Julian cleared his throat. He was stalling.

"Julian."

“Fine. Okay, Yeah. Piper and I have been investigating the underground organization, and it led her

straight to Terry.”

I saw red

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In sleep, I felt safe and warm, like I was rocking in a boat on gentle waves under a bright sunny sky. Here,

my troubles seemed so far away. I was at peace, distant from those who wanted to hurt me or bring my

family harm.

Once, I had thought myself to be in Nicholas’s embrace. I almost recognized it somehow, the fierce hold

of his arms and the wall of his body. His figure had shaped out since we were teens, but the way h

he

embraced was the same. So gentle. So tender, like I was the most important person in the world.

But then Nicholas’s arms went away.

This good feeling was not meant to last.

Soon, I was stirred awake to the thunderous sounds of a loud argument.

“You purposefully placed Piper into harm’s way!” That was Nicholas’s voice. I’d be able to pick it out of a crowded room, though it wasn’t so crowded now.

“She’s the only one who can feel her wolf. If we don’t follow her, then we have nothing.” That voice was Julian’s. He wasn’t quite as loud, though his words held the weight of shame.

“Then have nothing,” Nicholas growled. “But do not endanger her! You yourself might as well have put the target on her back for Terry to see!”

“She agreed to go along with it. I did not force her.”

“You likely led her on with false promises of returning her wolf to her.”

“It’s not all that false, maybe!”

“Her wolf is gone, Julian. That is that. There is no reason to put her in further danger. Whatever you were doing before, you have to stop. I don’t care what it was or how close you think you were to a breakthrough.”

“Now, Nicholas. If you would calm down just a second

“Calm down? You want me to calm down?” Nicholas sucked in an angry breath. “You say that Terry is involved. What, exactly do you think will happen when the public learns the royal family might have something to do with this?”

“Yeah, but then something might actually get done,” Julian snapped.

More likely it would lead to widespread panic!” Nicholas replied, just as sharp.

I couldn’t listen to this anymore. I would not continue to rest here while these two argued over what

concerned me and my wolf,

Weakness continued to cripple my body, but I forced my muscles to move until I pulled myself upright

on the bed.

Julian noticed me first. “Piper.”

Then Nicholas turned. His whole demeanor softened and he came closer. “Piper, how are you feeling?”

I waved off his concern. “Whether I ever find my own wolf or not, this truth needs to be exposed, Nicholas. That’s the only way this will end.”

Nicholas shook his head. He spoke softer to me than he did to Julian, but it was with the same kind of stern warning in his voice, albeit more gentle.

“The pros of revealing this information do not outweigh the cons. Especially when we may not yet have the full truth of it.”

“The full truth is Terry,” Julian said.

Nicholas looked at him. “You have a confession, then?”

“No, but-

“That’s what I thought.”

I leaned forward, reclaiming Nicholas’s attention. “Let us continue to investigate, then. When we have the proof –”

“Absolutely not. You would only be placing yourself in more danger

“I’m already in danger!” I shouted. After, suddenly, I felt lightheaded. I clutched my face with both hands and shifted heavily to one side.

I felt hot all over, too hot. Like I wanted to pull my skin off. Or, no. I wanted to remove my clothes.

Nicholas caught me by the upper arms. His hands were so big and strong, they nearly seared me with their touch. I wanted him to keep touching me. I wanted him to touch me everywhere.

Slowly, Nicholas eased me back down onto the bed. “Careful, now,” he said in a whisper that sent goosebumps across my skin. “Not too fast ”

I bit back a whimper.

“Piper? Piper, does it hurt?” He moved one arm to touch my forehead. “You are burning up.

I whimpered again, louder this time. I wanted his hand back on my arm. I wanted it on my chest, under

my clothes.

“Nicholas, please...”

“I’ll call for the doctor,” Nicholas said. When he started to move away, I reached for him with both hands, wanting to keep him right where he was, if not bring him closer. My hold was weak, my fingers were

useless claws, but he stilled all the same.



“Do you know what Terry drugged her with?” Julian said. He was closer now too. He looked down at me

with that watchful gaze that never missed anything.

Did he see the flush to my cheeks? The way I pressed my breasts forward, up into the friction of my bodice. The way my fingers trembled. The way my lips parted?

“Piper, you have to let me go, so I can call the physician,” Nicholas said.

“No... Please, no.. Don’t go...” My voice was hoarse and whiny. I was begging my heart out. My whole

body wanted him near.

God I wanted him. I wished he would rip off his clothes and mine and touch me all over. I wanted him to bury himself in me to the hilt and claim me as his own. I wanted... I wanted.....

I needed to stop. This was Nicholas, the prince. Not a man I could be with, no matter how much I

desired him.

We had our separate roles to play, and I would never be his. He would never be mine.

My body fought against my will. My heart was torn between the two.

But it was only because I cared so much for Nicholas that I couldn’t do this to him now.

“You have to... go...” I said through grit teeth. I shoved away from him as best I could and clutched onto

my blankets instead.

“But, Piper –

“Nicholas, wait,” Julian said.

It was too late. Nicholas's hand found a bare bit of skin at my collar. The skin on skin contact was too

much and I moaned – loudly.

Everyone froze.

own desire shining back at me.

Julian tugged at Nicholas's shoulder, and after blinking, Nicholas returned to himself. His face went red. in the cheeks as he pulled away. He covered his mouth with his hand and placed several feet of distance between the bed and himself.

"I'm sorry," I said, mortified by my own body's reaction. The fact that I wanted him still, just as much if not more than before. I'm so sorry."

"It's okay, Piper," Nicholas said, but he still wouldn't look at m

"It's not your fault, Julian said. He continued to drag Nicholas closer to the door. "She needs to rest."

Once they reached the door, Julian told Nicholas softly, "Terry's drug must have contained an aphrodisiac."

"He–2 Nicholas's reply was stilted. But his fist was not.

He punched the wall, creating a large round dent.

"Nicholas," Julian said with something that sounded like sympathy. novelbin

"I'll kill him," Nicholas growled.

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By the next morning, the drug had worked its way through my system and I felt like my old self again. I

went down to breakfast, where I was reunited with Elva, who had stayed with Susie the night before by

order of Nicholas.

I was grateful for his foresight. Mortified as I was by my actions and sounds, I was at least spared the

embarrassment of explaining any of this to Mark or the nanny myself. Or worse still, to Elva..

A thought so stomach-churning, I dared not even think of it.

So when I did finally greet her, it was with a tight hug and big smile, the same as always.

Susie and I didn't always sit together, but we chose to that morning. There were still many empty chairs with the previous elimination, and I was feeling vulnerable from what had happened the night before. I needed my friends.

Around us the girls were chattering about the curiousness of the evening's events. Terry was to be one of the main judges of the night, but he never came to ballroom.

Also as curious, both Nicholas and Julian disappeared sometime in the night, only to reappear this morning, one with a black eye and the other with an injured hand.

"You don't suppose the princes got into a fight with each other?" one of the girls asked.

"No," Lilliana said flatly. "He is too mature to take part in such childish antics."

"Julian does love to tease," said someone else.

"Not enough to tempt a prince away from his decorum," Olivia added. "Prince Nicholas been around Prince Julian for years. He's surely built up a tolerance."

"Well, then what happened with Sir Terry?"

"Maybe he started the fight," someone said, and another laughed. A third shushed them.

"Don't be ridiculous," Olivia said, rolling her eyes.

As they continued to argue, Susie turned in her seat to face me. I had Elva in my lap, but she was busy stuffing her face with all the delicious pastries.

“Are you okay, Piper? I heard some truly terrible rumors.”

I shook my head, pushing away her concern. I felt hungover some, with a cloudy head and tired eyes, but otherwise okay Except for my continued embarrassment over my body’s reaction to Nicholas the

I swallowed down the bile rising in my throat, and left my half of the breakfast uneaten on the plate for

Elva to pick at.

“Has Terry left the grounds?” I asked. It took great strength to keep my voice from shaking.

Susie nodded. “Word is, Terry left at some point last night and returned to his own mansion.”

Her words filled me with a sense of relief and for the first time that day, I took in and exhaled a deep

breath. For now, at least, I was safe.

Yet thoughts of last night continued to linger in my mind, even as we broke from eating to amuse

ourselves for the day. I couldn’t help but feel Terry’s cold hands on me or smell his terrible alcohol– laden

breath.

Then there were thoughts about that girl in the black dress who seemed to have my wolf. Who was she? Where had she come from? How had she gotten it? And why was she teasing me with it now??

I had so many unanswered questions. It felt worse now, somehow, because I would never be able to find the answers. Not since Nicholas had forbid Julian and me from continuing our investigation. 1

I knew in his heart he was only worried for me and for the kingdom, but it frustrated me that he could not see the importance of discovering the truth.

If the underground organization was exposed, it would protect people like me from ever being manipulated into giving away their wolves and their abilities. It was the only true way to keep Elva safe. novelbin

No. I wouldn't be cowed by Terry, or by Nicholas. I had my own heart and my own beliefs.

No matter what Nicholas condemned, I wouldn't let him stop me from protecting my daughter or any of those innumerable other souls out there who just wanted to do the right thing, and lost their wolves for it.

So, after seeing Elva safely into the care of her nanny and Mark, I set off on my own to find Julian.

I searched through most of the palace before I thought to check the empty ballroom. I found him sitting alone on the bottom stair, deep in thought.

It wasn't like him to be so isolated or so reflective.

When he heard the click of my heels on the tile steps, he turned back to look at me. "Piper.

"Did you want to be alone?" I asked him. I had questions and demands, but he seemed almost... lost sitting there.

He blinked and his look of vulnerability faded. In its place was the same sort of cocky expression I'd

"I don't mind company if it's you," he said.

I rolled my eyes at his flirtatious charms and took a seat on the same step he was sitting on.

I hadn't forgotten that Julian was also there last night. He had borne witness to the full extent of my

embarrassment, though he had the decency both to tell me it wasn't my fault, as well as to make sure

Nicholas moved away.

Not that Nicholas would have taken advantage. He wouldn't have. But Julian's being present helped him.

realize the circumstances of my desire much quicker.

I was still

still so angry about it. I did have desire for Nicholas. I had wanted him to kiss me on the balcony. In time, I might have wanted to have him do more.

To have that choice ripped from my hands was horrible kind of violation. Terry had taken my pure feelings of want for Nicholas and mutilated them into something ugly.

I hated him for both for what he tried to do to me and for what he did do. I could only hope, in time, I

could reclaim my own passions once again.

And see Terry punished.

“How are you feeling?” Julian asked.

“Better,” I said. “Worse, too, in some ways.”

Julian touched the ring of his black eye and winced, “I know what you mean. Though I don’t regret mine.

I kind of wished we could have done worse to that bastard.”

I nodded. I didn’t know the full specifics of what had occurred. But I could fill in the blanks fairly well, I thought. Enough to know Terry had given Jullan his shiner.

“Maybe we can,” I said.

Julian glanced at me. He had to tilt extra far to look at me with his good eye. “What are you thinking. Piper?”

I straightened, hoping Julian would be able to see all the conviction I carried. I wanted him to know that

I had no intention of backing down.

He looked at me with curiosity, one brow lifting.

He had to know that I was serious about this. And that I would continue to pursue this whether he

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decided to help me or not. I hoped he would make the choice to help me. Going alone felt

No, I couldn't be gripped with the fear of defeat. If he didn't immediately agree, I could convince him.

That was that.

My confidence was my strength. My love for my daughter was my drive.

'So I met Julian's gaze with my own and told him,

"We should continue our investigation."

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When I asked Julian if he wanted to continue the investigation, I had thought he might be a hard sell. novelbin

What I hadn't expected was for him to put me down flat.

"No."

"No?" I said, startled.

"No, Piper. Nicholas is right. It was wrong of me to try to include you. I knowingly placed you in danger."

"I'm old enough to make my own choices," I argued. "I could have said no at any time."

"Could you? Really? At the mere mention of your wolf, you were ready to do anything. And when you felt it, and you chased after that car, you were practically out of your mind. I should have stopped you then. I should have ended the investigation right at that moment."

“Ending it wouldn’t solve anything,” I said. “I wasn’t lying last night. Whether I find my wolf or not, it doesn’t matter. What matters is we put a stop to the people that are doing this. I don’t care how high up the conspiracy goes.”

“Face it, Piper. We flew too close to the sun. We could have lost everything.” He looked at me with meaning, in a way I hadn’t seen before from him, or could discern. “We nearly lost you.”

The words were said with so much genuine emotion that I had to sit back for a moment, surprised. Since when did Julian worry about me? And he wasn’t taking it back. He was just leaving it out there in the open, for me to see and evaluate however I wanted.

Except that I didn’t know how to evaluate. I was so used to Julian’s teasing that I didn’t know what to do when he was being genuine.

He must have known that, or at least, been able to figure it out, because he dropped his head. When he lifted it again, he wore a charming smile. “You should see your face right now. Priceless.”

For a line of teasing it was weak, but it gave us both the opening we needed to move past an impossible moment. So I grasped onto it and gave him a smile of my own.

“Bet it’s still better than your face,” I said, teasing.

Julian placed his hand to his heart. “You wound me.”

I knew he wasn’t serious this time. Not even a black eye could detract from the handsome factor of the three princes.

As the moment stretched and silence began once more, I knew I had to make a push. That he cared

about me was flattering, certainly, and I didn’t want to devalue such a rare emotion from him. But I

couldn’t just forget my plight because of it.

I

“When we were at the ball, the reason I found Terry at all was because I was led there,” I said.



A hint of something sparked in Julian's good eye, and I hoped that meant I snagged his curiosity.

"By whom?"

"A mysterious woman in a black dress," I said. "Not one of the candidates."

"Did you recognize her?"

"Did you recor

still wasn't sure. "She did seem... familiar somehow, but I don't know. I couldn't place her. Plus, she was wearing a mask."

"Tell me more about the dress," Julian asked, so I did so, describing the unusual black feathers. When I finished, he asked, "But you didn't see her in the room with Terry."

I shook my head. "It's like she just disappeared."

Julian rubbed a hand along his jaw. "Could have been a secret passage. Those are added all the time and my dear uncle would have access, as well as ability to keep it a secret."

I could feel him coming around, so I encouraged him excitedly, "So they could be connected."

"Yes, probably, especially since she is likely the person we saw leaving Terry's house." He glanced at me, and then straightened, as if remembering himself. "This is a bad idea, Piper."

I

"Bad ideas are the best kind," I said, and I could see, with the mischievous quirk of his lips, that I had finally convinced him.

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"We will have to tread very carefully here. Terry is the Luna's beloved brother and has sway over the

entire royal family."

“it doesn’t matter how well connected he is,” I said. “We can’t let him get away with it. Or anyone else.

who could be involved.”

Julian watched me a moment. “This isn’t just about your wolf.” That wasn’t a question. He already knew,

he just wanted me to confirm it for him.

So I did.

“Not just, no, Elva has abilities. She’s showing them already. I worry everyday about her safety. Those monsters could find her and hurt her, or manipulate her like they did me. And maybe she’s safe now with Mark, but he won’t always be around.”

I pressed my hand to my chest in attempt to ease the growing discomfort there. Worry for Elva lived forever inside of me. I wasn’t sure solving this mystery would totally fix that, but it might ease the

constant hurt.

“The only way to truly protect Elva long term is to bring down this organization before they can come for her.” I spoke soundly, and from deep within. I hoped it would be enough to convince him.

He smiled. “Let’s go preserve Elva’s happy future, then,”

With an overwhelming feeling of victory, I pulled him into a sitting hug.

To n

my surprise, his hand came around my waist, returning it.

Later, as I was searching for Elva, Susie, and Mark out in the gardens, I came upon Nicholas on a walk. He immediately stopped, spotting me at once. Slowly he approached me, as one would a startled animal.

I felt equally on eggshells around him, remembering the way my body had reacted to his last night.

“How are you feeling?” he asked me, when he was close enough,

“Much better, thank you.”

I tried not to cringe at how formal I sounded. This was Nicholas, not some stranger. We were friends. Friends did embarrassing things in front of each other all the time. Granted, it wasn't usually wanton moans when the other friend touched them, but still. novelbin

motioned toward his hand, which had been wrapped in bandage.

“Does it hurt?”

He shrugged. “Nothing broken.” His jaw set into a hard line. “I just wish I could have used it to bust

Terry's face rather than your wall. At least Brian got a solid hit in, from what Julian says.”

I nodded. I didn't usually wish violence on anyone, but if anyone needed their face punched, it was Terry.

“If he ever comes near you again, Piper, tell me at once. And if I'm not there, tell Mark, or Brian, or even Julian, if he is present and I am not. He's no great hero but our hatred for our uncle will help him see the

light.”

“Trust me,” I assured him. “I have no intention of being near him ever again. This time was a mistake that I will not repeat.”

“Good.” Nicholas looked at me a moment, then away.

I hated this awkwardness between us.

“Nicholas, about what happened last night...”

“It's forgotten, Piper.”

“It does not seem so forgotten.” I worried my bottom lip.

He looked at me again, then sighed this time. “I apologize, but I think about what Terry almost did to your and I... I become very angry.” He stepped an inch closer. “I want to keep you safe, Piper. You must know that.”

“I do.” Though I didn’t totally understand why. Nostalgia, perhaps. Or for a sake of honor since we were

in his home. Or maybe to help keep Elva safe as well, since he was so fond of her.

Whatever his reasoning, I was grateful. “Thank you,” I said. “I do know that.”

He nodded. Then he opened his mouth like he meant to say more.

Lilliana spoke first. “Piper, there you are.” She rounded Nicholas’s side, standing very close to him. ” was hoping to speak with you.”

I blinked.

Lilliana wanted to speak with me?

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I followed Lilliana further into the gardens to a small rod-iron table with two chairs. Lilliana motioned for

me to sit and then sat in the opposite chair.

“I’m glad we could finally have a chance to talk like this,” Lilliana said. She rested both hands on top of

the table.

I mirrored her for a moment, but it felt unnatural having my hands lifted so high. I lowered them into my

lap instead.

“What was it you wanted to

talk to

me about?” Nervousness prickled at my skin. While it wasn’t unusual for the candidates to talk to each other, this still felt like a special event. Lilliana had called me out in front of Nicholas himself. She very nearly broke character to do it.

She gave me a sour kind of look. The way a disappointed principal would make to a rowdy student in their charge. "Prince Nicholas. I want to ask you to please leave him alone. You are a distraction to him."

we are friends."

"I'm not doing anything to bother him, or at least, not trying to. But we

Nicholas had come to my rescue more than once now. And somehow when I needed things or support, Nicholas was always around to help. But that's what friends did.

Lilliana narrowed her eyes. It was unusual for her to show any emotion. Tiny alarm bells started sounding in my head.

"What is your problem, Piper?" she snapped, voice suddenly much sharper than it had been before. Her narrowed gaze had become a fully blown glare.

I was shocked silent for a moment. I opened and closed my mouth like a fish.

Lilliana did not wait for my reply. "You can't have both brothers! If you are after Julian, you should stick with him and leave Nicholas alone. It doesn't even make sense to chase both!"

"I'm not chasing anyone." I lifted my hands now, palms forward in defense. "I'm not after any of the brothers."

"Oh, sure, like anyone is supposed to believe that." She crossed her arms.

"It's true!"

She rolled her eyes. "You are constantly all over both of them. They won't both pick you in the next elimination, Piper. Focus your efforts on Julian, who I shouldn't need to remind you that you have been dating, and leave Nicholas to me."

She saw me as a threat. That much was clear. What she failed to understand was that I wasn't a threat to her so much as she was a threat to herself. Nicholas might say now that he will marry whoever the King wants, but I refused he would be able to follow through.

Nicholas deserved a partner. Not a pawn.

I lowered my hands and lifted my chin. "I am friends with Nicholas. That is all. But because I am friends

with him, I want him to be with someone he actually likes and not someone who just agrees with him all

the time." novelbin

Lilliana looked at me for a moment, then threw her head back and laughed. "Piper, you are so naïve! That

is not how royalty works. What did you think he was going to marry for love? Cute."

I knew she was making fun of me but she didn't have to be so blasé about it.

"No one marries for love." She didn't even look sad about it. She had simply just accepted it as fact.

"Well, I think that should change, and not just for the sake of the princes, but for the girls too."

Lilliana laughed again, harder than before. "You want to save us all, huh? Oh, Piper. You need to just accept this is how things are. This is how they've always been, and it's how they always will be."

"I refuse to accept that, and you should too."

"You are a riot," Lilliana said, chuckling again.

But then suddenly, she totally stifled herself. In the blink of an eye, she shifted from the haughty laughing princess to a wilting flower.

I didn't even need to look to know that Nicholas had approached us from behind me.

"Piper must have told quite the joke," Nicholas said. "I've never heard you laugh so... boisterously before, Lilliana

Lilliana placed her hand over her mouth and cleared her throat. "She can be quite funny when she wants

to be."

I frowned. Nothing I had said was a joke.

I'm pleased to hear it." He walked to our table, a small smile on his lips. Yet one look at me, and that smile dimmed into an expression of confusion. "I know it was probably a fool's hope, but I always wanted more of the nobility to get along."

Nicholas was kind, to include me in that statement, when everyone in the whole kingdom knew that!

was common.

Lilliana's smile pulled tight. Her desire to put me down seemed at war with her will to want to agree with everything Nicholas said. I wondered which would win.

"You are so kind, Nicholas," she said after a beat. "To want us all to get along. Humans really should get along with one another better, shouldn't they?"

'Nicholas's face fell. "Yes. Thank you, Lillians

I felt bad for Lilliana in that moment, for the show she felt she had to perform. I knew she hated me enough to mock me, but my feelings for her were merely that of pity. She couldn't truly be happy with the

way things were.

Maybe she wanted to be Luna. But I wondered if she even liked Nicholas at all.

Did she find him attractive? Did she marvel at the green flecks in his eyes? The strong width of his

shoulders?

Or did she look at him and see nothing but a crown?

Lilliana smiled dully at me, then turned that same smile on Nicholas. "Prince Nicholas, with the elimination coming up, you will save me, won't you? I know the princes will get to decide. I just can't help but worry, even though I am your favorite."

Nicholas looked down at the ground. “Of course, Lilliana. You can rest assured. Your spot is safe in the next elimination.”

“Thank you, Prince Nicholas.”

When Lilliana shifted her gaze back to me, it added a subtle edge. She was daring me to ask him for my own sake, but I wouldn't. I couldn't. Even though I hated it, Nicholas had an obligation to his kingdom. He had to choose each of his selections carefully.

I wanted him to promise to save me, but that was entirely selfish. We all knew I wouldn't be Luna. To select me was to throw away a crucial vote.

Besides, as I was acting as Julian's favorite, it would be improper to seek solace with a different prince. If I was going to be saved, it was up to Julian to save me..

But deep in my heart, I did wish it could be Nicholas who saved me.

The way he had pressed his lips to mine during the ball had sent tingles down my spine. I could still feel the gentle press of his lips to mine if I closed my eyes and imagined.

I didn't want him to have to pick other girls. I wanted him to pick only me.

Chapter 168

I found Elva, Susie, and Mark at the edge of the gardens, where the fields of short grass began.

Elva was playing with Silver and Night. She crawled over Night, while Silver nosed at her stomach or

licked her face. Elva's laughs were loud and happy, and easily pushed away any lingering sadness I held

inside of me.

At least, it did – until I noticed that Elva seemed to be talking with the wolves.

She'd done so before. It wasn't some big revelation that she could. But she was getting better at it. Watching her, it was like she was having deeper



conversations with the wolves than she was even able to out loud with me or other humans.

I moved toward where Susie and Mark were sitting together in the grass. They were leaning toward each other but not otherwise touching. I cleared my throat to signal my approach, and they both looked up at me in surprise.

Mark relaxed when he saw it was me. Susie dipped her head, a blush on her cheeks.

I didn't call her on it. Instead I simply lowered myself into the grass beside her.

"Has Elva been playing with the wolves for a while?" I asked. It was a softball question, to lead Susie away from her embarrassment. I already knew Susie and Mark were crushing on each other, and it didn't matter to me.

"A little while," Susie said. "Elva is truly gifted. When I was her age, I could barely get wolves to trust me. These two..." Susie waved toward Silver and Night. They've already accepted her as one of their own. It's amazing."

"It's remarkable," Mark added. "She is truly a talent. Someday she will be a very powerful werewolf."

"Thank you," I said, even though his words gave me no comfort or joy. Elva was wonderful, and I was proud of her growing skill. But it also worried me so much that I felt sick in my stomach.

I had been powerful too, when the underground organization came for my wolf. Elva was already bounds ahead of where I had been. How long would it be until the underground organization came for her

next?

I had to protect her. No matter what I had to do, I would do it. Elva would never experience the same heartache that I had endured. I would tear the whole world apart first.

Together, Susie, Mark, and I sat in companionable silence watching my little girl and her wolf friends. We chatted about this and that, nothing heavy. But inside, I was plotting my next move.

Later that afternoon, before we were supposed to meet for a banquet dinner, I left Elva with the nanny and sneaked away down to the ballroom. I moved slowly and carefully, not wishing to run into anyone,

even the servants

I wanted no one to know what I was doing, so that no one could tell anyone else. The last thing I needed was for information to get back to Terry before I was ready for him to know it. He knew far too much more than me already

Like, who was that woman in the black dress? Why had she seemed so familiar? How did she have my

I had to know. From there, maybe I could work outward and unravel the entire organization.

A starting point was important, and this was mine

I followed a familiar path through side room to side room until I eventually ended up in the sitting room where Terry had drugged me. At the time, I had thought I could trick him into telling me a secret or two. How foolish I had been then.

No more

Terry had chosen this room out of all of them for a reason. I needed to find out why.

I started at the couch, checking between the cushions in case something had fallen from Terry's pockets, but when I reached the section where I had been sitting, my stomach twisted uncomfortably. Maybe I could search there last.

Leaving the couch, I slowly walked the perimeter of the room. The lady in black had not been in my imagination. She had been real. I was sure. But she had vanished as soon as she entered this room.

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Chapter 169

People didn't just vanish

Bookcase after bookcase lined the walls I gently dragged my fingers over the spines. Some of the books seemed ancient, others newer. They sat side by side on the shelves, a balance of new and old.

When I reached the wall behind the couch, I noticed, there on the ground, a tiny bit of black sticking out from under the bottom former of one of the bookcases. I knelt down and pried it away from the furniture.

I

It was a small black feather, just like the ones that had graced the shoulders of the mysterious woman's

So she was here.

I knew she was real, but to have the extra validation did wonders for my tired mind.

The fact that the feather was under the bookcase Could that mean there was a secret passage here? novelbin

I

Tucking the feather into my pocket, I searched closer. No books were jutting out further than the rest. The sconces didn't budge when I tugged them. If this was a secret door, the trigger to open it wasn't as obvious as something that would be in the movies. Still, there had to be something.

I continued searching, running my hands along the wooden dividers of the shelves.

Piper?

I nearly jumped out of my skin.

Behind me, Nicholas walked into the room. He was handsome in a three-piece suit, and his piercing gaze stole my breath a moment.

In another life, this could have been the perfect spot for a secret tryst. As it was, he had caught me somewhere I had no place or permission to be.

"The servants told me they saw you come down this way," he said. Inwardly, I cursed myself. I hadn't been careful enough! "What are you doing here?"

Hooked at him closely. He didn't seem particularly annoyed that I was here. His face wasn't that neutral. Instead, one of his brows curled slightly in the middle, like he was worried.

Women?

Chi supposed that could make sense. The last time we had been in this room together, he had saved me from a horrible man-shaped monster.

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+15 BONUS

I didn't want to lie to him about what I was doing here. But as things were, I knew he wouldn't approve.

“I was just thinking about that night,” I said. That wasn't a lie. Nor was it incorrect to assume that thinking of that night led me to think about Terry's assault on me.

I had been singularly focused on finding evidence of the woman in black's existence, but now that I had that, my thoughts were free to wander. And they did, back to that couch, to how powerless I felt, to that man's vile touch on my skin.

Nicholas came further into the room. He rounded the couch to draw nearer to me. He didn't touch me, but his closeness was a comfort all on its own.

"I wish I would have found you sooner." He looked down at the floor. "You never should have been in that position."

"Surely you don't blame yourself," I said.

He didn't say anything, making it clear that he did.

"Nicholas..."

He looked up at me and the intensity in his gaze kept me from saying more.

"While you are here, it is my responsibility to keep you safe. I failed that night. But I won't fail again."

My heart leapt in my chest. The way he said it, so earnest and strong, made me believe it. His confidence chased away some of the demons that remained clawing at my chest.

"Thank you," I said.

He nodded.

I wished I could tell him about the feather, or ask him the location of the secret door.

I wished we weren't on opposite sides of the investigation into the underground organization. How much I would have loved to have his help!

But, unfortunately, he wanted me to stop my search. So, for Elva's sake, I had to keep Nicholas in the dark

So I kept the feather that I found, and my questions, firmly locked away.

Chapter 170

During the banquet, Julian leaned over to me and said, "I have a lead. Be ready tomorrow morning."

I tried to pry for more information for the rest of the night, but he just smiled vaguely at me or said, "You

will have to wait patiently.”

By the end of the evening, I was ready to shake him until the answers fell out.

“Walk me to my room,” I insisted, but even then, even when we were alone, he was tight-lipped.

Outside my door, he squeezed my hand and told me, “See you bright and early, Piper.”

Infuriating man.

the man

Even so, true to his word, Julian arrived at 8 o'clock next. Fortunately, I was already awake, with the nanny arriving just a few minutes before.

Mark glanced between us. “Prince Julian. I didn't realize you and Piper had a date planned for today.”

Julian winked at him. “Piper loves my spontaneity.”

I rolled my eyes. “Let's just go, please.”

Julian lifted his arm, and I hooked mine with his. He led me down the hallway to the stairwell. When we were far enough away from Mark, I hissed at Julian.

“Now can you tell me what the lead is?”

“They're not a what. They are a who.”

My heart jumped into my throat. He couldn't mean the woman in black? No, no that wouldn't make sense, despite how much I wished it to be so. Plus, I didn't feel the presence of my wolf anywhere. If that woman was here, I'd be able to feel her.

“Then, who is the lead?” I was tired of speculating. Julian enjoyed his games, but I was at wit's end.

Julian guided me through the mansion and out the back door where a pair of guards stood at attention.



“Williams, Julian said, addressing the guard on the right. The man, Williams, stood straighter, having been named. “With me.”

The two guards looked at each other a moment. Then they nodded, and Williams stepped forward.

Julian continued to lead me further into the gardens, with Williams following behind. When we were out of earshot of anyone else, Julian stopped and guided me to face Wallema

+15 BONUS

“Sir,” Williams said stiffly. “Ma’am.”

Julian cleared his throat. “Williams, I’ve been told you were working the night of the Ball, and you remember allowing an unusual woman in through the back door. The woman was wearing a black dress with feathery sleeves?”

“Yes, sir.” Williams glanced at me and then quickly away.

Julian noticed too. “Did you think this woman was Piper?”

Williams nodded. “Initially, I did. Yes, sir. With everyone in costume, she looked similar...” He cleared his throat. “But then when I tried to greet her, she did not treat me as Miss Piper would.”

“How did she treat you?” Julian asked.

“Like I upset her by speaking with her. She told me to mind my own business, though all I asked was how she was enjoying her evening Williams gave me a small smile. “Miss Piper usually is very kind.”

I returned Williams’ smile, even as my heart ached. This lead of Julian’s didn’t seem to be panning out. I had a very average appearance – average height, average appearance. For her to look like me wasn’t unusual. Lots of people looked like me.

“Chin up. Piper. This is all good information,” Julian said.

“I have a common face,” I said, revealing only part of my concern.

“Nonsense.” Julian patted my arm. To Williams, he said, “Thank you, you may return to your post.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

“Thank you for your help,” I told him.

He stopped to nod at me, and then continued walking.

When he was gone, I looked to Julian. “This lead doesn’t feel very strong.”

“Where’s your sense of discovery, Piper? Think on it. For Williams to mistake someone else for you. means that she did not look like any of the other candidates.”

I’m still not sure how that helps us,” I said.

Julian tapped a finger to his chin. “We need a guest list.”

Twenty minutes later, Julian and I sat in a sitting room off the parlor, a printed out guest list split between us. I held some pages, Julian held the rest. I didn’t really know what I was looking for, but Julian

+15 BONUS

“I know everyone on this list, and none of them could be so easily mistaken for you,” he said.

“Could she have been a guest with someone else?” I asked.

Julian hummed. “Most guests must be declared beforehand for security reasons. I suppose Terry could have sneaked someone in on his own, with his status. I’ll have to ask-

“Mommy!” Elva rushed into the room. She came straight over to me, arms outstretched. I placed my papers aside to pull her into a hug.

Mark came in soon after. “She wanted to see you,” he said as he approached us. “The servants saw you enter here. I hope we aren’t disturbing you.”

“It’s fine.” Holding Elva in my arms, I was able to keep most of my disappointment at bay.

When Mark reached the side of the couch, his gaze caught on the papers. “Is that the guest list from the Second Ball? Is something amiss?”

I looked at Julian. Julian shrugged. “We were simply looking for someone.”

“Did you find them?” Mark asked.

“You are being very curious, Mark. And though I usually applaud such things, I’m not sure that I have to answer to you. In fact, I’m certain that I do not.”  
novelbin

Mark closed his mouth – until he looked at me.

“Prince Nicholas told me that you were no longer investigating. He seemed adamant that you should not involve yourself with such things.”

“He can say whatever he wants. He may be a prince but he is not in charge of me,” I said. Truly, I did not like upsetting Nicholas, but for this, I had to. To protect Elva, I would face a hundred angry Nicholas’s

“I will have to tell Prince Nicholas about what I’ve seen here today,” Mark said. He seemed apologetic about it.

“Do what you must.” I wasn’t angry at Mark. He had his duties that he needed to attend to. Likely Prince Nicholas specifically told him to keep an eye on me, to keep me away from anything to do with the underground organization and our investigation of it.

I continued, “Tell him whatever you have to. But know that I will never give up. I will never back down.”

Elva was in danger. Nothing else matter, not Nicholas’s wishes, not even my own well-being.

+15 BONUS

Mark frowned. “I will stand just outside the door.”

“Thank you, Mark,” I said, softer.

Elva shifted so that she could sit on my lap. I wrapped my arms around her waist from behind and she

giggled.

“You know, I’m impressed by you, Piper,” Julian said. “Your tenacity for our investigation is formidable, to be able to stand up to our dear Nicholas.”

“You know why I can’t back down,” I said. I kissed the top of Elva’s head.

I do.”

His smile softened a moment, before sharpening into a dagger’s edge. A teasing remark was coming. I knew that as well as I knew to expect my next breath.

“Though I advise caution, Piper. The only person more stubborn than you might just be my brother.”