

The Luna Choosing Game #Chapter 211 - Read The Luna Choosing Game Chapter 211

Chapter 211

At once, Nicholas and I scrambled to our feet. Nicholas blocked Julian's view as I readjusted myself, fixing my bra. When I was put together enough, Nicholas checked me over once before standing aside. Our lips were red from kissing. Our clothes were wrinkled, and our hair disheveled. But there was nothing to be done for that now. Julian looked between us, a devilish look in his eyes. "Did you find anything of interest in the closet?" I blushed fiercely. Even my neck and chest burned. I'm also curious why your lips are so red," Julian continued. His teasing, it seemed, would be relentless. Yet under those joking questions, his voice held the tiniest bit of edge. My initial thought was that it could be jealousy. With Julian, however, there was no way.

Disapproval, then? That seemed unlikely too. 4 Either way, I needed to redirect his focus before I died of embarrassment. I searched for some way to change the subject. I found it when I noticed the rolled up papers Julian was carrying under his arm. "What's that?" I asked. Julian glanced down at the papers as if he had forgotten he was holding them. "Should we return to your room? I'll explain there." Nodding, we all walked back to my room. Nicholas stayed at my side, but a foot or so of distance separated us now. It felt like he was miles away, Back in my room, Julian began speaking again. "I heard about the appearance of your twin," Julian said. "Jane," I said. "Jane," he repeated. "How did you find out that Charlotte saw her?" Nicholas asked. He looked at Mark. "Did you tell him?" "No, Sir," Mark said at once. Julian rolled his eyes. "I have ears everywhere." He paused. "Also, Brian saw her too."

"What?" We all straightened in alarm. "Where did he see her?" Nicholas asked. "On the south stairwell," Julian replied. "He suspected her at once and subtly followed her. But when he seemed to have her cornered, she suddenly disappeared."

"That's the same as what happened to me," Charlotte said. Julian considered her. "I thought as much." To me, he added, "I worried for you, Piper, of course. But when I happened to glance Nicholas storming away from jilted Lilliana, I knew he had heard of a sighting, as well. So while I left Nicholas to... protect you, I searched for something we could use." My face burned again. Julian enunciated protect in such a way that he clearly meant something different. I cleared my throat. "What did you find?" He lifted the rolls of paper from under his arm. "Blueprints." Mark and Charlotte cleared away the swatches of fabrics

that still covered the tables we'd arranged in the center of the room to sew. Then Julian placed down one of the papers and unrolled it. It was large and meticulously drawn with a fine pen. It all looked like lines and boxes to me. "What are we looking at?" I asked. "This," Julian waved his hand across it, "is the first floor of the palace. And if you'll notice." He tapped at one small box that was to indicate a room. "This blueprint includes some of the locations of the more secret passageways." Nicholas quickly leaned over the blueprints to look. "They aren't all indicated here," Julian said. "But there are enough that maybe we can figure out where Jane is hiding. At the very least, if we know her escape routes, we can more effectively chase her." Nicholas leaned back. He crossed his arms. "Aren't these blueprints locked away in the vault? How did you access them?" Julian cast him a sharp glance, his smile mocking. "You sure you want to know that, brother? You never

seem to fully appreciate my more daring adventures." "Was it something illegal?" I guessed. It generally was, with Julian. He liked to see how far he could push the rules. Julian looked at me and his eyes sparkled. That was answer enough. "It's illegal for these to be out of the vault," Nicholas said. Julian's attention returned to his brother. He sighed. "I'll take them back when we're done, but while we have them, we might as well look. Unless, perhaps, you don't actually wish to catch Jane and help Piper?" Nicholas frowned hard but stayed silent. "That's what I thought." Together, we peered over the blueprints. Julian would point out a secret passage way, and then trace the line of where it connected to another room. "So the passage in the corner here, where Brian lost sight of Jane, leads down into the kitchens," Julian said. "That's where I saw her," Charlotte added. "Then I chased her down into the cellars, and she disappeared." We looked to where the kitchens were and found the stairs leading down to the cellars. The basement was on a separate roll of paper. "Just a moment," Julian said as he peeked into the rolls, trying to find the correct one. "Third floor, no. Second floor. The ballroom has its own? Oh, here it is." He unrolled the map for the sublevel, and immediately we noticed a secret passage leading out of the cellar. "Where does it go?" I asked. Unlike the other passages, that had lines leading to where they connected, this passageway lead straight off the page. "Huh," Julian said, sounding puzzled.. Nicholas kneeled down to read the fine print. "Nothing says where it goes."

A sinking feeling opened up in my stomach. Could this be the answer to how Jane had gotten in and out of the palace so easily? If we weren't sure where the passage led, though, we couldn't be fully sure. If the blueprints didn't tell us, there was really only one thing to do. "We have to get into that tunnel,

follow it, and see where it goes," I said. "Hell, yes," Julian said. "Absolutely not," Nicholas said, almost at the same time. (1) Julian ignored him. "We should go in the night, when everyone is asleep, so that our absence goes unnoticed." Julian tended to disappear a lot, so I wasn't sure his absence would be all that noticeable. Although, with the King likely angry at him for his previous disappearance, maybe he was actually under a more watchful eye. "Midnight, then," I suggested. He nodded. "Now wait a minute," Nicholas said. "I don't approve of any of this." "So you are fine with Piper's sister walking around, impersonating her," Julian asked him. "You don't care at all how that could possibly reflect on her, or on Elva, or on any of us, once word gets out we let the underground organization do whatever they want right under our noses." "Of course not," Nicholas said, his voice low with disapproval. "But we have no idea where this tunnel leads. I cannot allow Piper to take that kind of risk-" "Me? You two are actual princes. I am just a commoner," I said. "Maybe I should go alone -" "No," Nicholas said at once. He looked at me, his eyes hard and his mouth in a hard firm line. "Okay, great." Julian clapped his hands. "So it's agreed. Nicholas, Piper, and I will go through the tunnels at midnight, and see where our little doppelganger has been disappearing to." My nervousness brewed, but I was also pleased to finally have a plan. I was finally ready to learn the truth about Jane.

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The wait for midnight was nearly unbearable, but when it finally arrived, I left Elva sleeping in the bed,

and sneaked out into the hallway.

Mark was standing there with two other guards. He typically wore a serious expression, but today he

seemed especially grim. He must have shared Nicholas's frustration with the plan.

"Be careful tonight. If anything happened to you..." He let the words hang.

I was confused. Surely the safety of his prince was more important than me. But he didn't say anything

more. Instead, he just stared at me expectantly.

"I'll be careful," I said.

He nodded.

Turning from him, I started down the hallway. Nicholas met me halfway. He didn't say anything, just offered his arm. I slid my arms in his and together we walked down toward the kitchens and into the

cellar.

Brian was guarding the door to one of the rooms there, the one containing the passage. He stepped

aside when we came close.

Inside, Julian had already discovered the trigger for the passageway, and an eerie dark opening loomed in the middle of a wall, hiding behind an empty bookcase that had been shifted aside.

In his hand, Julian carried a large, industrial-style flashlight. He clicked it on.

Even with the light of the flashlight, seeing the end of the tunnel was impossible. The stretch of the tunnel was long, and the darkness eventually swallowed the light.

"We stay close together," Nicholas said. "Whatever happens, no one gets left behind."

"Yes, yes, we all know the rules," Julian said. He stepped into the tunnel.

Nicholas and I looked at each other, and then we followed him.

The walls were made of brick, rounded along the top. Our footsteps on the stone floor echoed down the long, empty corridor. The air was stale.

I wasn't easily frightened by places, but this tunnel felt so old that it had become alive.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on head.

"Stay close," Julian said.

We moved carefully through the tunnel. The light of the room we'd come from seemed very far away

behind us.

The flashlight flickered. We all stilled.

“Julian,” Nicholas said, a warning in his voice. A warning that would come far too late.

The light flickered again, and then went out.

My breath caught in my throat.

Plunged into darkness, I reached out for both Nicholas and Julian and touched Nicholas’s chest with one hand and Julian’s shoulder with the other. Nicholas caught my hand in his and held it. Julian

placed novelbin

his over mine and squeezed my fingers.

My fear spiked in such a dark, creepy place in the dark, but having them so close, each offering comfort

in their own ways, helped me feel safe again.

Then, Julian lowered his hand again and smacked the flashlight. The light flickered again, blinding, but it

didn’t last.

“Piece of junk,” Julian snapped.

“You forgot to change to new batteries,” Nicholas said.

“You don’t know that,” Julian said.

Silence fell around us. The accusation hung heavy in the air.

“Fine,” Julian said. “I didn’t change the new batteries.”

“Here.” Nicholas shuffled with something in his pocket, then seemed to pass something to Julian. (1)

“You could have given me these new batteries before we walked into the creepy tunnel,” Julian said.

“I was giving you the benefit of the doubt.”

“An unwise decision,” Julian said.

“Yes,” Nicholas replied. “I see that now.”

Julian replaced the batteries, the flashlight sparked back to life, and we continued walkthrough through the tunnel.

At one point, Nicholas checked the compass on his phone. This deep underground, he didn’t receive any signal, but he could tell we were heading northwest.

“Julian.” He showed Julian the phone. In the dim light of the screen, Julian frowned.

“We should be extra careful,” Julian said. It was unusual for him to say such a thing.

“Why?” I asked. “What does the direction matter?”

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“Maybe we should turn back,” Nicholas said.

“Too late now,” Julian said. “We’ve got to be sure.”

“I see light up there, Julian,” Nicholas said. “Dim the flashlight.”

Julian turned to the flashlight to the dimmest setting, and aimed it down at the ground. We had to move

slower than before, so as not to trip. She walked lightly to keep our footsteps from generating noise.

At the end of the tunnel, the walls abruptly stretched open into a room.

A room full of cages. A single tungsten bulb hung down from the ceiling, the only light in the room full of

shadows.

“What the —?” I began to say. Nicholas abruptly covered my mouth. He yanked me back into the

darkness of the tunnel. Julian followed at once, clicking off the flashlight.

A door on the far side of the room cracked open, and in walked Terry beside a man I had never seen

before a man dressed entirely in black with sallow cheeks and dark eyes.

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“As you can see this room should offer the organization needs for their purposes,” Terry said to his

associate. “I have used this area for my own personal enjoyment in the past. These cages are quite

effective at breaking a person’s spirit.”

“And what of this opening here?” the associate said. With silent steps, he came closer to the tunnel.

Nicholas tugged me closer to him, until my back was flat against his chest. He still held his hand over

my mouth, but now I held my breath as well.

My heart thundered, however, so loudly I worried the strange, dangerous man could hear it.

“A personal project,” Terry said, walking closer. “Though one that has been bearing fruit. Soon, I will have much to offer the underground organization. Perhaps even something like a crown.”

“We don’t need the crown,” the man said. He peered into the darkness. I swear he looked right at me, but he looked away just as quickly. “What we need are more abilities, and the room for expansion.”

“I offer much,” Terry said. His eyes narrowed. “You would do well not to disrespect my contributions.”

The man looked back at Terry. "You may hold sway in the royal palace, Terry, but in the underground

organization, you must still prove yourself."

"Ridiculous," Terry snapped.

1/2

The man turned to face him. In an instant, there was a knife in his hand. "Your birthright means nothing,

and you will learn your place one way or another."

Terry puffed out his chest. "You dare threaten me in my own home."

"It's not a threat." The man tilted his knife, catching it under the orange light. "It's a reminder. You have

the ear of the King, but the underground controls all. This is your home because we allow it. Your King is

king because we allow it."

Terry closed his mouth so tightly a muscle ticked in his jaw.

The man in black returned his knife into his sleeve.

For a while, no one said anything, then Terry cleared his throat.

"Shall we continue on with the tour?" Terry asked..

The man nodded.

Terry led him from the room. In the quiet, the light bulb buzzed.

My heart continued to beat out of control.

Slowly, Nicholas lowered his hand from my mouth.

Julian looked back at us both. "Let's get the hell out of here."

We all agreed.

The return trip was much quicker, though quieter. We couldn't run in the dark, but we moved with a careful quickness we hadn't shown before.

Only when we were back in the cellar room with the secret door closed behind us, did I dare to breathe deeply again.

"What the hell?" Nicholas cursed.

I understood that sentiment.

Terry was undoubtedly involved in the underground organization, and the secret tunnel led straight to his mansion.

Just how deep did this organization go?

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My adrenaline was spiked, but had nowhere to go. I felt like I was buzzing out of my skin. I was shaking, but didn't know how to calm down. At once, Julian and Nicholas moved toward me. They each took one of my hands. Nicholas placed my hand over his heart. "Breathe with me," he said, and guided me. "Inhale." He waited. "Exhale." Julian covered my hands with both of his. He rubbed his thumbs in small circles on the back of my palm. They both anchored me to the here and now, rather than letting me float off among my fears and worries, and I was grateful for each of them. "You alright?" Nicholas asked, after a few more breathing exercises. I wasn't shaking anymore. "I'm getting there." Nicholas nodded, but he kept my hand on his chest. Julian didn't let go of my hands either.

Though the two of them did begin to look at each other. "We should brick this tunnel up," Nicholas said. "Now." "We can't do that," Julian argued. "If we do, Terry will know we found the tunnel, and he'll change whatever plan he's concocting." "We want him to stop what he's doing." "Ideally, yes. But he likely won't stop, he'll just make alterations. If he changes his plans, we'll be back at square one without a clue or a lead. We want to keep him in the dark about what we know so he'll be more careless." "We can't just let him do whatever he wants." "We won't. We'll be watching every move he makes. We'll have spies stationed, like Brian, who will trail every person that comes through that door. Then we can figure out just what they're up to." Julian dipped his head toward me. "And we can discover Jane's level of involvement." "Jane wandering around the palace could endanger Piper," Nicholas said. "That's why we'll be watching," Julian said. novelbin

As I listened to their back and forth, I could see both sides. The frightened side of myself wanted to brick up this passageway and never think of it again. But the part of me that was braver, the one that wanted to see justice done to the organization, knew we could never win by burying our heads in the sand. "What do you think, Piper?" Julian asked. On the spot, I had no time for fear. To protect Elva, to save my sister, I had to be strong. I swallowed hard, gathered my courage, and said, "You can't put out a fire if you don't stand near the flames. We have to keep the passageway open." Julian nodded. Nicholas glowered. I thought he might argue, but when he opened his mouth, he surprised me. "I will personally assign guards to watch this room and this door. "They have to be inconspicuous," Julian said. "I can handle it." Nicholas stepped back from my touch, letting my hand fall. Then he pulled out his phone. Julian glanced at me, then spoke to Nicholas, "I'll walk Piper back to her room." Nicholas glared at him, yet before he could say a word, someone picked up on the other end of his call. He had to turn from us to deal with them. Julian winked at me. "Ready, Piper?" I didn't know if I was. If I went back to my room, I would likely be unable to sleep. But I didn't want to stay in this small room with that terrible tunnel any longer than I had to. A tunnel that led straight to some type of torture basement in Terry's mansion. In my room, I could pretend everything was fine, that I hadn't overheard the underground organization reached so far that they weren't even intimidated or tempted by the crown.

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They wanted abilities. They wanted people. They had Terry involved, and my sister, and who knew how many others. How could we ever hope to stand up to something so large and powerful? But I knew we had to try. To not even try to fight them was how they would win. Even if it seemed hopeless. Even if I wanted to run and hide or forget I saw or heard anything. I had to be strong. I had to fight. But first, I had to try to get some sleep. I was exhausted and scared. I wanted to watch Elva, as she imagined the world around her was peaceful, and remember why it was I wanted to fight so hard. So I nodded and turned from the room without being asked. Julian followed on my heels. I felt a little better when I was out of the stifling sublevel of the cellar. I nearly stopped, just to catch my novelbin

breath, but Julian's hand on the small of my back kept me walking. When we were out of the kitchens, we were into familiar hallways. But everything looked differently now, knowing the danger that loomed so closely. I worried what could be around every corner. What monsters might be listening from the shadows. Julian fell in step with me. He gave me a long sideways look. "You'll

be safe, Piper,” Julian said. “Nicholas won’t let anything bad happen to you or Elva. I can guarantee it.” Deep in my bones, I knew Nicholas would try to protect me and Elva as long as he could, but, even with our near-constant guard, there were still moments when we would be alone. I shook away the thoughts. That’s what my self-defense lessons were for. I simply had to be more diligent. Train harder. Work harder, Fight harder. And more fully appreciate those who were willing to help me. “Thank you, Julian. For what you’ve done. I don’t feel great about any of this... I’m scared by what we’ve

heard. But, we are closer to the underground organization now than I’d ever imagined we would be.” “We won’t back down,” Julian said. I glanced at him. He was unusually serious, his eyes hard with determination. “We’ll get to the truth about your sister and your wolf, and then we’ll shut the whole thing I gave him a small smile. “Thank you.” He nodded and rubbed his hand up and down the length of my spine. When we were on the stairwell, he stopped. I stopped on the next step up and turned to face him. Like this, I stood over him by just an inch, but he still had to look up at me. “My actions are not entirely selfless, Piper,” Julian said. He smiled now, but unlike his typical hard-edged smirk, this was soft. “I have my own motives, and my own desires.”³ He couldn’t mean to include me on his list of desires, but his eyes seared me as he trailed his gaze down the length of my front. I wasn’t wearing anything revealing. I’d imagined we’d be crawling through dirt tonight, so I wore jeans and a black, long-sleeved turtleneck. Yet Julian looked at me like I was a multi-course meal that he wanted to savor. “But if you really want to thank me,” he said, “you should give me a reward.” I licked my lips. Had it gotten hotter in here? “What could I possibly have that you would want?” “Easy,” Julian said. He started to lean. I was higher than him. He wasn’t touching me. I could have backed away. I could have run. Yet all I did was stand very still and let him close the distance. His lips found my cheek, where he placed a gentle kiss.

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“I’ve told the guards everything I know,” Lilliana said. “They’ll be watching you. Joseph himself just assured me of it.” I shook my head. I had no idea what she was up to this time, but I was tired of the schemes and lies. How many manipulative games would I have to endure during this competition? Every day, it felt like a new threat was emerging, oftentimes trivial, and I grew tired of dealing with it. Especially when more pressing, life-threatening issues were just around the corner. I had no patience for whatever new game Lilliana had concocted. Plus, when I looked at her, my anger spiked. I recognized the shade of lipstick she wore as the same that had marked Nicholas’s lips.

Nicholas had said it hadn't meant anything. I wondered if the same was true for Lilliana. "I don't know what you are talking about," I said. "You can play dumb all you want," Lilliana said. "We'll let Joseph sort out all the truth. But no one is buying your bullshit anymore, Piper." I blinked, surprised by her break of character. Since when did Lilliana swear? As I watched her, open mouthed, she swiveled on her heel and stormed away. She pushed straight past Susie, who had just started to emerge into the hallway. "What was that about?" Susie asked me. I didn't exactly know how to answer, because truthfully I had no idea, "Same old drama," I said, because that at least, seemed to be the nature of it. Yet even so, I felt a chill run up my spine. I felt like someone was watching me. I glanced behind me quickly, but no one was there. After last night, I had felt more on edge than ever before. Was this feeling just my imagination? That afternoon I met Nicholas in the gym for more self-defense exercises. We utilized the mats this time, and took turns throwing each other down to the ground. I was thrown much more than I threw, but I felt like I was starting to get the hang of it a little at least.

Until thoughts of Joseph and Lilliana began to pop up in my head. Joseph, as a traditionalist, already hated my presence in the palace. I knew he was always looking for ways to get me kicked out of the It wasn't out of the realm of possibility to think they might conspire some type of false charge against me, to have me eliminated from the competition. What if it actually worked this time, and I was asked to leave?

Nicholas and I had been meant to be grappling, but in that moment, Nicholas easily toppled me onto the mat. My back hit the cushioned ground and a puff of breath punched out of me. Standing over me, looking down, Nicholas crossed his arms. "You are distracted." "I have a lot on my mind," I said. "You have to keep your head in the moment, Piper. You can't lose focus." "Sorry, I mumbled. He sighed and unhooked his arms. Then he reached down and offered me his hand. When I accepted it, he helped me to my feet. "Since you don't have a wolf, you will never have a natural advantage in a fight," he said. Upright, I realized my bra had gotten a bit twisted. Through my shirt, I grabbed my cups and attempted to adjust. "You have to be constantly looking... for opportunities to... to..." As his words trailed off, I glanced up at him. He was staring at my chest, specifically where I had pushed up my breasts to readjust the strap underneath. I had straightened it. I could let go now. But I liked the way he was looking at me. With my u-neck tank-top, pushing up my breasts placed much of my cleavage on more obvious display: the upper swells of my breasts, the deep valley between them. He might have even seen a slip of a

nipple from where it escaped above the cup of my bra. He was openly gaping, with his mouth ajar slightly.

Opportunities, he said. Perhaps this was a perfect one. I purposefully and unnecessarily pushed my breasts higher still, causing not one, but two nipples to pop free over the top of my bra and the u-neck of my shirt. Nicholas's mouth snapped shut. He swallowed hard. I moved at once, grabbing him as he had shown me, and throwing him down hard onto the mat. Unfortunately, the force of it also sent me off balance and I fell directly on top of him. I straddled his waist, my thighs on either side of his hips. My hands hit the mat on either side of his head. My hair had come undone from the tie, and created a screen to hide our faces from the rest of the world. He glanced up at me with wide-eyes, like he couldn't believe what he was doing on the ground all the sudden. Had the sight of my nipples addled his thoughts? Then I felt some movement in his pants, pressing up against my core. This position aroused him. It aroused me too. My panties felt damp, all of the sudden. Nicholas blinked a few times and slowly recovered. "Piper..." I wanted to kiss him. I wanted to grind my hips and make him wild. But slowly I returned to my senses too. This wasn't the time or the place for that. Quickly, I rolled away from him and bounced up onto my feet. "Some opportunities can be created with a solid distraction," I said, parroting something he had earlier said to me. Thinking of the training helped cool some of the fire in my veins. "Maybe we should forget that lesson." Nicholas's voice was low and rough. "I thought I was here to learn." He pushed himself upward, sitting. "Don't do that particular move with anyone else, got it?" His jealousy sent tingles through me. He had seen my breasts and didn't want to share. His use of anyone else made it seem like he himself wouldn't mind seeing it again, however. I opened my mouth to tease him when a new voice cut me off. "Oh, now I'm desperate to see the move myself," Julian said. He'd appeared at the door and was

walking toward us. "You'll show me, Piper, right?" My cheeks began to burn. "Absolutely not," Nicholas said. "That hardly seems fair," Julian continued. "I'm sure I could help offer some pointers." He smirked. "Or Nicholas immediately lowered his hands, covering his crotch. "You are a bastard, Nicholas." 2 "You wish I was," Julian laughed. "Then you'd have no competition for the crown." "I can help you stand, Nicholas," I said, and reached my hand out, as he had done for me. He looked at my hand, then my face. His eyes dropped to my breasts again for a half-second before his whole head dropped as if in shame. "I need to stay as I am for a few moments longer," he said. Julian laughed. "I didn't hurt you?" I asked, suddenly concerned. "No," Nicholas said quickly.

“Nothing like that.” “Come on, Piper, it’s time for me to steal you away,” Julian said. “For what?” Lasked. “Did you forget already? It’s time for your me ntal self-defense classes.”

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I stood very still, confused and surprised both by the very presence of Julian’s lips on my cheek as well

as the tenderness of the affection he was showing me.

Julian had always struck me as something of a pl ayboy, and while I understood that much of how he

acted was an act, he never seemed to connect with any woman, in any relationship, beyond a fleeting fancy.

In our school days, he strung along many hearts, leaving a trail of broken ones behind him. He never

seemed to care about the mess he made of girls’ emotions.

Even Nicholas had warned me that Julian was a love them and leave them kind of guy.

So the gentle way he kissed my cheek, and the way his hands hovered over my shoulders, close but not

touching, was so bizarre to me, I was stunned speechless.

Then he pulled away, walked around me, and continued up the stairs. After a few steps, he stopped to

look back at me. “You coming?”

I nodded, still too surprised to formulate words, and hurried along behind him.

We walked in silence the rest of the way to my door. He was smirking like always. His hands in his

pockets, he had a familiar saunter to his walk.

He always looked smug, so I couldn’t correlate that with the strange kiss.

To the best of my observation, he was acting like the kiss hadn't happened at all. Or, it hadn't meant novelbin

anything, which seemed more likely.

That fell more in line with what Nicholas had warned me of

Outside my door, the guards greeted us both. When Mark saw me, he let out a heavy, relieved breath.

He had his phone in his hand. I imagined he was texting with Nicholas. Maybe he still wanted to see us in

the flesh, just to be sure.

"This is where I'll leave you then," Julian said. He barely gave me a glance as he turned to go back the

way we came from. "Goodnight, Piper."

"Goodnight, Julian," I said, but he was already walking away. He waved his hand up, but did not look

back. I watched him until he was gone.

Then I turned to Mark. "How is Elva?"

"I've been checking on her every fifteen minutes," Mark said. "She's been sleeping soundly all night."

"Thank you, Mark."

"Just doing my job, miss," he said, but that wasn't entirely true. His job as Beta was to attend his prince, not protect his prince's ex-girlfriend and her small adopted child.

"Thank you anyway," I said, desperate to give my gratitude.

He didn't argue again. He lowered his head instead, but not before I saw the small smile tugging at his lips.

"Goodnight then, Mark. Gentlemen."

Mark and the guards said goodnight in return, and I slipped into the room.

Elva was sleeping in the bed, her face even in her peace-filled slumber. I walked into the closet and changed into my pajamas. Then I walked to the bed.

Curling in beside Elva, I tried to convince my body to relax. Elva was here and safe. Mark and the guards were at the door. Nicholas was working tirelessly to arrange guards around the tunnel. And Julian – well, he was likely plotting something too.

At the moment, I could do nothing more than try to gather my own strength for the fights yet to come.

The future promised many dangers, and I would need to be at my best to keep Elva safe from Terry and whoever else.

And I would need to keep my wits sharp so I could discern more of my sister's involvement. If she needed saving, and the opportunity arose, I wanted to be ready.

I would do whatever I would have to, to protect my family.

The next morning came very early. A servant announced that all the candidates were to join in the parlor to receive more announcements.

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I was exhausted but I complied, changing into a simple dress and then heading downstairs. When I saw

Susie standing in the back of the room, I immediately went to her side.

Most of the girls assumed Nathan was soon to announce the next event for the competition, and so

there was much speculation about what that event could be.

“Maybe it will be a beauty contest,” Olivia said, flipping her gorgeous hair.

“It could be trivia,” said Jessica. She looked excited by the prospect. “We could have teams, and -”

“What about a horse race,” Tiffany said. “Some kind of show of our horse-riding capability.”

Nathan headed to the stage in the room. He didn’t have a microphone this time. With only eight of us in

the room now, he could be clearly heard just by his speaking up.

“The next event will be...” he said.

The room took a breath:

“A fundraising gala.”

Tiffany and Jessica’s shoulders slumped. Olivia seemed indifferent.

Nathan continued, “Each candidate will have her chance to pitch her own cause to a ballroom full of

potential benefactors. The princes who chose you may offer you help as you work the room.”

Olivia and Lilliana looked sharply at each other, before slicing their hard gazes to me.

“As Luna, you would be required to know how to subtly win others to your side through careful words,

and the perfect dance. We will expect to see your abilities in action on this night.”

Some of the girls nodded. I did too/It made sense. The Luna was a bastion of diplomacy – and raising money for her causes. The person set to take her place should share in the same skills.

“At the end of the evening,” Nathan said, “the benefactors themselves will decide who to support. The

candidate who has earned the most support will be declared the winner of the event. All of the benefactors will be donating real funds, so you will be working both for yourself and for the benefit of your

cause.” novelbin

I knew at once who I would support: the orphanage. I had returned with Elva a few times since my last being there with Nicholas. The caretakers did their best, but those kids could only stand to gain from

more financial support.

I looked to Susie. “What cause were you thinking?”

She said at once, “There’s an animal shelter back home that I want to support.”

I was not shocked in the slightest by her response. Susie seemed to prefer the company of animals

most times.

“I think it’s a great cause,” I told her, smiling.

When the announcements were over and I turned to leave the parlor, I noticed Lilliana near the door, speaking with the head of the guard, Joseph. They seemed to be in a deep conversation, Lilliana talking,

while Joseph nodded severely.

I wanted to avoid them, but they were standing along the hallway I needed to walk through. I wouldn’t

be intimidated from simply walking back to my room.

Keeping my head up, tall and proud, I walked down the hallway. I avoided looking at them for a while, but when I noticed their sudden silence, I couldn’t help but glance at them.

I immediately wished I hadn’t.

They were both glaring at me.

“Don’t worry,” Joseph said to Lilliana. “I’ll take care of this.” He cast me one last hate-filled look and then stormed away.

Lilliana, meanwhile, walked closer to me.

“Hello, Lilliana,” I said, hoping to bridge a truce before she could finish stirring whatever drama she had planned for this time.

I was too late, it seemed.

Lilliana’s demure façade cracked. She openly frowned at me as she snapped, “I know what you are doing, and you won’t get away with it.”

Chapter 219

Chapter 0219

“I’ve told the guards everything I know,” Lilliana said. “They’ll be watching you. Joseph himself just assured me of it.”

I shook my head. I had no idea what she was up to this time, but I was tired of the schemes and lies. How many manipulative games would I have to endure during this competition? Every day, it felt like a new threat was emerging, oftentimes trivial, and I grew tired of dealing with it.

Especially when more pressing, life-threatening issues were just around the corner.

I had no patience for whatever new game Lilliana had concocted. Plus, when I looked at her, my anger spiked. I recognized the shade of lipstick she wore as the same that had marked Nicholas’s lips.

Nicholas had said it hadn’t meant anything. I wondered if the same was true for Lilliana...

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” I said.

“You can play dumb all you want,” Lilliana said. “We’ll let Joseph sort out all the truth. But no one is

buying your bullshit anymore, Piper.”

I blinked, surprised by her break of character. Since when did Lilliana swear?

As I watched her, open mouthed, she swiveled on her heel and stormed away. She pushed straight past

Susie, who had just started to emerge into the hallway.

“What was that about?” Susie asked me.

I didn’t exactly know how to answer, because truthfully I had no idea. “Same old drama,” I said, because

that at least, seemed to be the nature of it.

Yet even so, I felt a chill run up my spine. I felt like someone was watching me.

I glanced behind me quickly, but no one was there.

After last night, I had felt more on edge than ever before.

Was this feeling just my imagination?

That afternoon I met Nicholas in the gym for more self–defense exercises. We utilized the mats this

time, and took turns throwing each other down to the ground. I was thrown much more than I threw, but I felt like I was starting to get the hang of it a little at least.

Until thoughts of Joseph and Lilliana began to pop up in my head. Joseph, as a traditionalist, already hated my presence in the palace. I knew he was always looking for ways to get me kicked out of the

It wasn’t out of the realm of possibility to think they might conspire some type of false charge against me, to have me eliminated from the competition.

What if it actually worked this time, and I was asked to leave?

Nicholas and I had been meant to be grappling, but in that moment, Nicholas easily toppled me onto the

mat.

My back hit the cushioned ground and a puff of breath punched out of me.

Standing over me, looking down, Nicholas crossed his arms. “You are distracted.”

“I have a lot on my mind,” I said.

“You have to keep your head in the moment, Piper. You can’t lose focus.”

“Sorry,” I mumbled.

He sighed and unhooked his arms. Then he reached down and offered me his hand. When I accepted it,

he helped me to my feet.

“Since you don’t have a wolf, you will never have a natural advantage in a fight,” he said.

Upright, I realized my bra had gotten a bit twisted. Through my shirt, I grabbed my cups and attempted to

adjust.

“You have to be constantly looking... for opportunities to... to...”

As his words trailed off, I glanced up at him. He was staring at my chest, specifically where I had pushed

up my breasts to readjust the strap underneath.

I had straightened it. I could let go now. But I liked the way he was looking at me.

With my u-neck tank-top, pushing up my breasts placed much of my cleavage on more obvious display: the upper swells of my breasts, the deep valley between them. He might have even seen a slip of a nipple

from where it escaped above the cup of my bra.

He was openly gaping, with his mouth ajar slightly.

Opportunities, he said.

Perhaps this was a perfect one.

purposefully and unnecessarily pushed my breasts higher still, causing not one, but two nipples to pop free over the top of my bra and the u-neck of my shirt. novelbin

Nicholas's mouth snapped shut. He swallowed hard.

I moved at once, grabbing him as he had shown me, and throwing him down hard onto the mat. Unfortunately, the force of it also sent me off balance and I fell directly on top of him. I straddled his waist, my thighs on either side of his hips. My hands hit the mat on either side of his head.

My hair had come undone from the tie, and created a screen to hide our faces from the rest of the world.

He glanced up at me with wide-eyes, like he couldn't believe what he was doing on the ground all the

sudden. Had the sight of my nipples addled his thoughts?

Then I felt some movement in his pants, pressing up against my core. This position aroused him. It

aroused me too. My panties felt damp, all of the sudden.

Nicholas blinked a few times and slowly recovered. "Piper.

I wanted to kiss him. I wanted to grind my hips and make him wild.

But slowly I returned to my senses too. This wasn't the time or the place for that.

Quickly, I rolled away from him and bounced up onto my feet.

"Some opportunities can be created with a solid distraction," I said, parroting something he had earlier

said to me. Thinking of the training helped cool some of the fire in my veins.

"Maybe we should forget that lesson." Nicholas's voice was low and rough.

"I thought I was here to learn."

He pushed himself upward, sitting. “Don’t do that particular move with anyone else, got it?”

His jealousy sent tingles through me. He had seen my breasts and didn’t want to share.

His use of anyone else made it seem like he himself wouldn’t mind seeing it again, however.

I opened my mouth to tease him when a new voice cut me off.

“Oh, now I’m desperate to see the move myself,” Julian said. He’d appeared at the door and was walking.

toward us. “You’ll show me, Piper, right?”

My cheeks began to burn.

“Absolutely not,” Nicholas said.

“That hardly seems fair,” Julian continued. “I’m sure I could help offer some pointers.” He smirked. “Or

perhaps too much point is the problem, eh, Nicholas?”

Nicholas immediately lowered his hands, covering his crotch. “You are a bastard, Nicholas.”

“You wish I was,” Julian laughed. “Then you’d have no competition for the crown.”

“I can help you stand, Nicholas,” I said, and reached my hand out, as he had done for me.

He looked at my hand, then my face. His eyes dropped to my breasts again for a half-second before his

whole head dropped as if in shame.

“I need to stay as I am for a few moments longer,” he said.

Julian laughed.

“I didn’t hurt you?” I asked, suddenly concerned.

“No,” Nicholas said quickly. “Nothing like that.

“Come on, Piper, it’s time for me to steal you away,” Julian said.

“For what?” I asked.

“Did you forget already? It’s time for your mental self-defense classes.”

Chapter 220

Chapter 0220

Julian and I were on a couch in a sitting room, looking at each other. Julian had made himself

comfortable, bringing on knee up onto the cushion so he could more easily face me. I was sitting very still

with my hands in my lap..

I was still embarrassed about what had earlier happened with Nicholas. Both our bodies had responded

to the position we’d been in, with me on top of him. I could only thank my luck that Julian had no walked

in a minute or two earlier, or the teasing would have been relentless.

It was bad enough now, with the knowing smirk Julian kept flashing me.

“So,” I said, trying to get things back on track. “Mental self–defense.”

“Exactly. I’ve been thinking of the best way to help train you, and I’ve decided on role–play.”

I raised a brow. “Role–play?”

“I’ll pretend to be Terry and say all the terrible bullshit Terry would say, and you try to counter it. I’ll

correct you when you do or say something that I know would only encourage the asshole. This way, we

can help prepare you for your inevitable next meeting with him.”

That sounded reasonable enough, though I shivered unpleasantly at the thought of dealing with Terry

again. I knew I would have to face him eventually. She’d seemed very interested in me, and as the Luna’s

brother he’d likely be at more events. Still, I wished I didn’t have to. 2

Especially after what happened before, when he’d tried to drug and assault me.

I worried my hands together in my lap.

“Hey.” Julian didn’t touch me, but he leaned closer. I trusted him, mostly, so I drew comfort from his

closeness. “You’re safe, okay? This is just a game, and you can tap out at any time.”

I shook my head. “I want to learn. I want to hold my own against him.”

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“I know you do, but neither Nicholas nor I am ever going to let him corner you like he did before.”

His words were a kindness, but held doubt. The princes had their own responsibilities and couldn’t be

around me every minute.

I had to be responsible for my own safety. And that meant learning how to beat Terry at his own game.

“Ready?” Julian asked.

I nodded.

Julian's whole demeanor shifted in an instant. His brow lowered while his smirk sharpened. It was as if

he was channeling Terry himself.

It was... unnerving.

Julian stretched his arm around behind me on the back of the couch. Then he leaned in close enough to

breathe on my shoulder.

"I've been watching you tonight, Piper," Julian said. "You've been strutting around like you're putting on a

show just for me."

My face went pale. This was too much, too real, too soon. I couldn't move. I was locked in that moment with Terry, after he had given me the champagne laced with drugs. novelbin

Julian dropped the act in an instant. Every rigid line of his body softened, and I could breathe again.

"I'm sorry," he said. "That was too much for the first time."

"I—I have to learn." I was rattled. My voice shook.

"Not yet," Julian said. "Not that. We'll start somewhere else."

"Like where?"

came He hummed. "My uncle may lust after you, but he's also known for his pettiness. So, let's say you in wearing a gown that was more in line with what was popular last season."

"Okay." That sounded safer. I was used to dealing with that level of pettiness from some of the other

candidates.

Julian switched into Terry-mode again, though this time, he kept some humor in his gaze. Terry wasn't playful, so I could see Julian clearly behind the façade. He was holding back for my benefit, I knew, and I

was grateful.

"What a charming dress you've chosen for this evening, Piper," Julian said. He glanced down at my

imaginary gown. "You must have an interesting reason for not choosing something more modern. I would

love to hear it."