

The Luna Choosing Game #Chapter 261 - Read The Luna Choosing Game Chapter 261

Chapter 261

Chapter 0261

Mark, looking at me against the closet wall and Nicholas kneeling in front of me, went very pale very quickly. "Uh... I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to... intrude."

Nicholas refastened my pants and pulled up the zipper. Slowly, he rose to his feet.

"Some other time," he whispered to me.

"Promise?" I whispered back. My face was hot with embarrassment, but I couldn't deny the idea of his

mouth on me had driven me to the brink of madness.

Nicholas winked at me. Then, he turned to face Mark.

"What is it, Mark?"

"Sir, I..."

"It's fine, Mark. Just tell me what you need."

"Your father, sir. The King wishes to see you."

Nicholas sighed. "Likely regarding what he expects from me during the next event."

"Most likely," Mark agreed. He quickly glanced between Nicholas and me. "I, uh. I'll be outside." He awkwardly turned and hurried out of the closet.

Nicholas looked back at me. "I'm sorry, Piper."

"It's not your fault."

“Still Nicholas approached me again. He reached his hand up and brushed his thumb along the side of

my cheek. “There never seems to be enough time for us.”

I smiled a bit, sadly, I didn’t have the heart to say that it would be worse if he was King. Someday, there

would be no time for us. We’d both have to move on.

Maybe it would have been better to end the dream now. To tell Nicholas that nothing like this could

ever happen again. Then, maybe, we could protect both our hearts.

But, even to protect us, I couldn’t do it. These fleeting moments we shared, even if they were always too

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would hurt to remember later. But I’d still rather have the memories at all, then to ne

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Susie and Mark sat on the grass, close but not touching. They kept stealing glances at each

Those two. I wondered if they’d kissed yet. From the soft blush to Susie’s cheeks, I was willing to bet they

had stolen a moment or two. de

Things were going well. We were talking and laughing For a moment or two I was able to for

worries about the future and simply relax around my friends.

I enjoyed our time, though it was a bit bittersweet. Someday, I would have to go back to my old Wife. And though I had some good friends back home, I would miss Susie Mark, and the wolves and the easy

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I’m sorry.” I said I didn’t want to be to her. “I guess I was just thinking about the futu

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+15 BONUS

Nicholas let his hand drop. He sighed. “I’m in for a lecture when I go see my father. He’s certain to tell

me which girl to give the most attention too.”

I ignored the jealousy growing in my stomach. “Surely it would be Lilliana?”

“I don’t know,” Nicholas said. “She’s falling out of favor. Olivia had the better showing at the gala. He

might insist that I switch. He’s been micromanaging my life for so long. I didn’t exactly mind it before but

His gaze lifted to me. He gave me a small smile. “I never fought against it after we broke up. I just went along with whatever he wanted. I figured he would know best what the kingdom needed. But now, more and more, I find myself wanting to fight against him.”

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though I had some good friends back home, I would miss Susie, Mark, and the wolves. And the easy

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What’s on your mind, Piper?” Susie asked me. “You seemed really far away just now.”

I'm sorry, I said. I didn't want to lie to her. "I guess I was just thinking about the future.

regretted the words as soon as they were out of my mouth, because Susie instantly wilted. She inched away from Mark, Mark glanced at her, a touch of hurt in his eyes

It will be difficult. Susie agreed "When all this is over and we have to go back to our regular yet."

!!

That's what you said to Susie

She smiled at me. I'll miss you too. Though when we have our cell phones back, there's no reason you

and I can't stay in touch

Your family might not like that I'm going to go back to being a nobody"

"You won't be a nobody to me." Susie said. "You'll always be my friend. I don't care what my family says"

Her kindness warmed my heart and pushed away the dreary thoughts for a while.

But then suddenly, the wolves went on alert. They moved to stand in front of Elva, blocking sight of her

For the woods. Their ears peaked, facing the trees.

Eve rushed to my side "Mommy! I'm scared!"

called her into my arms

Mark was on his feet in an instant, searching for danger.

Heckled to Susie "What are the wolves saying?"

Susie inched closer to the wolves.

Silver chuffed

say that they sense someone in the woods. They've noticed many people hovering nearby lately.

especially when Elve comes outside.”

My stomach dropped.

Susie paused listened. The wolves are doing their best to keep the strangers away. They sense that

they mean to do harm to the child.”

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Susie's eyes went wide a moment, listening to the grumble of the wolves. “They say your...” She stopped

these bele she said it, looking at Elva Jane has been in the woods sometimes tell the difference?”) asked. I had to be vague, for Elva to not understand.

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“It will be difficult,” Susie agreed. “When all this is over and we have to go back to our regular lives.”

“I'll miss you,” I said to Susie.

She smiled at me. “I'll miss you too. Though when we have our cell phones back, there's no reason you

and I can't stay in touch.”

“Your family might not like that. I'm going to go back to being a nobody.”

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Her kindness warmed my heart and pushed away the dreary thoughts for a while.

But then, suddenly, the wolves went on alert. They moved to stand in front of Elva, blocking sight of her from the woods. Their ears peaked, facing the trees.

Elva rushed to my side. "Mommy! I'm scared!"

I pulled her into my arms.

Mark was on his feet in an instant, searching for danger.

I looked to Susie. "What are the wolves saying?"

Susie inched closer to the wolves.

Silver chuffed.

"They say that they sense someone in the woods. They've noticed many people hovering nearby lately,

especially when Elva comes outside."

My stomach dropped.

Susie paused, listened. "The wolves are doing their best to keep the strangers away. They sense that

they mean to do harm to the child."

I hold Elva closer. "It's okay, honey," I whisper in her ear. "The wolves are protecting you. There's nothing

to be afraid of."

Susie's eyes went wide a moment, listening to the grumble of the wolves. "They say your..." She stopped

herself before she said it, looking at Elva. "Jane has been in the woods sometimes."

They can tell the difference?" I asked. I had to be vague, for Elva to not understand

Yes The looks are the same, but the smell is different. The wolves are not fooled.

A bit of relief washed over me. I had been worried, that if the wolves came to help, they would not be able to tell friend from foe when dealing with me and my twin. Though it seems I needn't have worried.

The wolves, at least, could tell the difference between my sister and me, even if most people could not. I thanked the universe for small blessings.

"The strangers are leaving." Susie said.

The wolves stayed on alert. After a moment, Night darted into the woods.

"He's going to follow them," Susie said

"We should go inside," Mark said. I agreed.

I pushed myself up to my feet. Yet before I turned, I looked at Silver. I wished I had my wolf so I could communicate properly. As it was, I could only clumsily convey how much their protection meant to me.

"Thank you, Silver. From the bottom of my heart."

She chuffed at me, then trotted off into the woods.

Susie translated, "She says you're welcome."

Chapter 262

Chapter 0262

During a mental self-defense lesson, Julian tried to instruct me on the best way to evade answering

Terry's invasive questions.

"He'll goad you," Julian said. "You just have to keep your head. If all else fails, just don't say a word. He

can't twist your words if you don't give him any to twist."

As the lesson went on, I started to notice something was off with Julian. He didn't smile as much as he

had in the past. A line was often seen splitting his brow.

I stopped him near the end of the lesson. I couldn't wait any more before asking, "Are you okay?"

He opened his mouth. Closed it. Blinked a few times. "What makes you ask?"

"You seem... different. Like something's bothering you."

He laughed a little, but it sounded nervous. "Can't a guy have some nerves before a big operation? This

event could make our break our entire case against the underground organization."

I shrugged. "It's not like you to show your nerves. Usually you play it off."

"Yeah, well, I guess there's more to lose this time than usual."

I tilted my head, confused. "What do you mean?"

He sighed. "Come on, Piper. Is it so hard to believe that I'm actually worried about you and Elva?"

The words startled me. "You... are worried... about me?"

"And Elva," he said.

It was hard to believe. I never bought into the idea Julian often pushed of himself, that he cared for no one but himself. But to hear him say he was actually worried for Elva and I... And to see it in the lines of his face, and the slight tremble of his voice...

I couldn't help but be taken aback.

"Thave something for you," he said, and reached into the bag he had at his side. From it, he produced a

all velvet box, He handed it to me. "It might help us both."

open the box. Inside was a beautiful golden necklace, a pendant on a chain. The pendant was

ce of a full moon

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ok. I raced my finger along the chain. It was cool to the touch

"Beautiful and functional." Julian leaned over, plucked the necklace out of the box then held it out for me. As it dangled, I saw that the moon was something like a button that could be pushed.

"It's a GPS and a panic button. If you are in trouble, all you have to do is press the moon, and a message

with your location will be pinged to my phone. I can come rescue you, no matter where you are."

"That's wonderful." Such a thoughtful and beautiful gift. "Thank you so much, Julian. Does Nicholas also

get the message?"

Julian, whose smile has been growing since giving me the gift, hesitated. His smile wavered. For a half-second, I could have sworn I saw a flash of hurt in his eyes. But between one blink and the next, it was

gone.

"Julian, I didn't mean –"

"It's fine, Piper. I can set it up so it goes to him too. The more the better, anyway. Increase those odds of

saving you."

He was acting strangely now. Talking too fast.

He was almost acting... jealous. But that couldn't be. Even if Julian worried about me, which he must have to give me such a gift, that did not mean that he wanted me romantically.

Yet...

"Thank you, Julian. I mean it."

He nodded, and we continued on, both pretending everything was fine.

The afternoon of the event, I spent way too long in my closet trying to pick out my dress. I held up the dress that fit me like a circus tent. This was the only one Nicholas approved of. But... it was so bulky and

out of fashion, I couldn't possibly wear it.

No, instead, I reached for the modest black gown with the high collar. I draped my new necklace around

my neck. The gold glistened against the black.

Dressed, I kissed Elva goodbye.

"Be good for your Nanny and Mark," I told her.

21 will she promised, sing-song.

We had decided for Elva's sake that she shouldn't go anywhere near Terry's mansion. Mark had agreed

ay behind to guard her

+15 BONUS

"Don't worry about anything, Piper," Mark said. "We'll be secure here."

"Thank you, Mark." novelbin

I walked down to the driveway, where I met with the other candidates. A line of black sedans circled down the driveway. Each car stopped and a different candidate would enter.

When it was down to the last three of us, Nicholas exited the mansion.

He came down the stairs, likely to wait for his own car. When he saw me, he froze. Then, his brow

lowered and his lip curled up into a snarl.

I swallowed hard. He looked angry. Or horny.

Or both.

He stormed over to me before I could even think to move. He grabbed me by the arm, firmly but not

enough to hurt, and pulled me closer to the house, away from the others.

“What are you wearing?” he asked, voice low and growly. He dragged his gaze down my front. His eyes

stopped, staring openly at my breasts.

I remembered now what he had said. That this dress would show off my breasts too much. But surely

no one would notice? No one but him anyway.

I looked down, trying to see what he saw. The dress did hug my curves, but it didn't show off my breasts

any more than anything else I wore.

I decided to play coy. “A dress?”

He leaned in close. I could feel his hot breath on my cheek. It sent pleasant tingles up my spine.

Didn't we agree... that you wouldn't wear this dress?”

You agreed,” I whispered. “I wasn't going to wear that circus tent.”

Piper... You like playing with fire?”

Licked my lips. “I do if that fire is you.”

The other girls entered their cars. When the final one pulled up, the driver exited and waited for me.

have to go, I said to Nicholas.

shook his head. "You aren't going anywhere in that."

"Nicholas." Surely he hadn't forgotten the purpose of our little venture here. We were headed into the lion's den with intent. We had to uncover information to take down the underground organization – or at

the very least, Terry and Jane.

He growled a little, and I saw the conflict in his eyes. Oh, he knew our purpose then. But he was still struggling. His desire to keep me safe, as well as his possessive nature, wanted to keep me close and all to himself. But the logical part of his brain knew I had to go.

I'll drive you there myself," Nicholas said.

He waved to the driver, and the driver nodded. He entered his car and drove away.

"Come with me," Nicholas said. He grabbed my hands and led me around the driveway towards the

garage.

"Nick, how will we explain it? When I arrive with you?"

"What's there to explain? No one will question it." He was in one of his Alpha moods again. I didn't know

whether to be nervous or filled with lust.

My body decided that both was the correct answer.

Nicholas tugged me into the garage. Before he even turned on the light, he pulled me into his arms and

kissed me.

Chapter 263

Chapter 0263

Nicholas's mouth was hot on mine. His arms wrapped around my waist, holding me closely. I clutched at his shoulders, early accepting his kisses, until the need for air forced us apart.

He rested his forehead against mine. "You have to change."

"Nick," I said. He was being ridiculous. "This dress is not revealing."

"You look so sexy in it. I can't stand the thought of Terry seeing you like this."

I smiled a little. This dress was not flattering on me. I knew that. I looked okay, but out of fashion. I'd worn more revealing clothes before. novelbin

I imagined a big part of Nicholas's trouble was that he was attracted to me in anything. "You'd probably be jealous even if I wore a potato sack."

He didn't argue. "I don't like the way Terry looks at you." His arms squeezed me closer. "Why don't you stay here, after all. Stay with Elva. Julian and I can snoop around Terry's mansion. You don't need to endanger yourself."

I shook my head. "You know I can't do that. Even if I wanted to. I had such a poor showing in the last event, that I can't risk botching another. I need attend and do the best I can."

"Terry won't make it easy on you."

"I know that," I said. "But I don't have any other choice."

Nicholas frowned deeply but he made no further remarks. Instead, he stepped back from me and turned on the lights to the garage. Taking my hand, he led me through the various fancy cars until we

reached a black sedan with tinted windows.

He opened the passenger door and helped me inside. Then he went around to the driver's side. The seats were soft leather, the console black and impeccably clean. When Nicholas turned the key, the car started with a confident purr.

He put the car into drive and carefully navigated out of the garage and driveway.

When we pulled out onto the street, my nerves began to prickle again. I worried my hands together.

Nicholas continuously glanced over at me, likely seeing my tense posture and the way I couldn't sit still.

No one else was on the road at all. The other cars were long gone and no one else seemed to use this road this time of night. The sun had set, and the road was dark. Nicholas clicked on the high beams. The light sliced through the darkness, illuminating the road.

I focused on the double yellow line, trying to collect my thoughts. Yes, I was a lamb headed into the lion's den. But Nicholas and Julian would be there. And Susie and the other girls. If Terry wanted to isolate me, he'd have to do so with a lot of witnesses.

That didn't make me feel all that better. Terry was bold. He didn't seem like the type that would be all that bothered what others thought of him or his actions. He had the ear of the Luna and the King. Why should the opinions of the lowly commoners matter to him? Even the nobles were beneath him.

We were reaching the mansion. I could tell from the way Nicholas's hands choked the steering wheel, his knuckles white.

Woods lined the road on either side of us. Nicholas lifted his foot off the gas. Slowly, he pulled onto the side of the road, where a dirt road seemed to lead to nowhere. He put the car into park.

"Nicholas?"

He turned to look at me and I saw a bit of desperation in his gaze. I knew what it was because I felt it too, all the way down into the deepest parts of me.

"Come here," he said, and I complied at once, leaning toward him. He leaned too, and caught me halfway.

Our hug was a bit awkward, with the center console jutting unwelcomed into the space between us. But our need to hold each other overcame any

obstacle. Nicholas buried his fingers into my hair. I clawed at his back, trying and failing to pull him closer.

I wanted him so close that I wouldn't be able to tell where he ended and I began. That way, maybe I

could finally feel safe again.

Terry would find a way to separate us tonight. I knew that to be true. Somehow, I would have to be strong, depend on my physical training from Nicholas, and my mental lessons from Julian. I didn't feel ready.

I was frightened. I held Nicholas tighter.

His face turned toward mine, and our mouths found each other's. He licked his way past the seam of my lips. I opened willingly for his greedy tongue, and held on while he stole my breath away.

Like this, with our lips pressed together and our hands holding each other closer, I could almost forget about what was going to happen tonight. I could find solace in this man, in his closeness, in his strength and his desire for me. My desire for him.

Whatever Terry threw at me tonight would not be about to surmount this stolen moment of closeness with this man I was so soft-hearted for. Nicholas and I couldn't be together long term, but for now, like this, nothing mattered but he and I and the pursuit of the pleasure only attainable from our kiss.

"Piper," Nicholas breathed against my lips, my name twisted in worry.

I didn't want him to say my name like that, like he was frightened too, or concerned, or jealous, or all three. So I pressed my lips back to his and worked on muddling his thoughts for a while instead.

He hummed against my mouth, pleased. I moaned but he swallowed it.

When we broke again, he whispered, "It's not too late to change your mind. Until the moment you cross the threshold, I can take you back to your room."

I smiled, small and pitiful, and shook my head. "You know I can't."

"I want you safe more than I care about catching Terry."

“I can only be safe when Terry is caught.”

Nicholas’s face went grim. “I hate that you have to do this.”

To reassure him, I ran my hands across his shoulders and down his arms. His worry for me brought out something in me, a hidden courage I didn’t know I possessed.

“I’m frightened,” I admitted, “But I know that you will help keep me safe.”

He nodded. “I will never leave your side.”

We both knew that was impossible. We were supposed to go our separate ways when we sneaked through the mansion. Three people individually searching would cover more ground, quicker, than an individual and a couple would.

“Even if we aren’t, I know all I have to do is press my panic button and you and Julian would come running.” I brushed my hair back from my shoulders, showing off the golden necklace around my neck.

Nicholas looked at it, then up at me. His brow pulled together. “What panic button?”

I clutched the pendant of my necklace and held it up for him to see. “This? I have it if I get into any real trouble. It’s a relief, knowing you and Julian are only a push of a button away from me.”

Nicholas’s frown fell impossibly deeper. “Piper. I have no idea what you are talking about.”

Wait. Julian had promised he would tell Nicholas about the panic button and get him in the loop? Hadn’t he?

Chapter 264

Chapter 0264

“Didn’t Julian mention the pendant to you?” I asked.

“No,” Nicholas said curtly.

“He gave me this.” I lifted the pendant higher, for Nicholas to see. “He said that all I have to do is press down on the moon, and my location would be sent to him. I asked him to include you in on it...”

“Conveniently he failed to mention it to me.” Jealousy dripped like venom from his voice.

“He must have forgotten.”

“Doubtful.” Nicholas accepted the pendant and examined it closely. He flipped it over to look at the back of it. “I would have felt better if he had told me about this, but... I can’t deny it gives me some measure of comfort to know you have it.”

“It does?”

Nicholas nodded. “I want you protected, even if I’m not the one doing it. Julian is many things but he is not on Terry’s side. If he gave you this to protect you from him, that offer was genuine. As is the threat. If even Julian is worried about you...”

Nicholas and Julian seemed to have skewed ideas of the other. I had seen Julian’s concern before, in albeit fleeting moments. But Julian was not so rambunctious and carefree as Nicholas assumed him to be.

I doubted that defense of Julian would be welcome right at this moment, with Nicholas barely containing his envy, so I withheld it. Julian would probably prefer the misconception anyway, since he so often sought to cultivate it.

“I will be speaking to Julian about this, however,” Nicholas said, his voice lowering with dark promise.

I laughed a little, nervously, hoping I didn’t get Julian in too much trouble. Though, knowing him, he could handle himself just fine against his brother.

Nicholas leaned forward and pulled me into his arms again. For a few more blissful moments, I closed my eyes and enjoyed his warmth and closeness. But then, too soon, he pulled away again.

“Unfortunately, if we continue to delay, we risk being so late that it will affect your standing,” he said with regret.

I couldn't afford to lose even one more rank, so I leaned back as well.

Nicholas put the car into reverse and returned us to the street. Then he moved the gear into drive and we continued on.

Terry's mansion wasn't too far from where we had been, a mile or two at most. We were the last car to pull into the driveway, though several servants were still outside as if expecting us. When Nicholas stopped, one of the servants opened my car door.

"Thank you very much," I said as I exited.

The servant kept his eyes down and did not engage me at all, not even to respond.

Odd, I thought at once, though perhaps this particular gentleman took his position as a servant very seriously. I wouldn't hold it against him. I simply stepped away and waited for Nicholas to come around the car.

Nicholas held his arm out for me, and I laced mine around his.

At the doorway, a pair of servants opened the door for us. "Thank you very much," I said to them both. Both ignored me, eyes low, as if they had been instructed not to look at me. No, it wasn't just me. They deferred their gazes from Nicholas as well.

I glanced at Nicholas in confusion.

Nicholas huffed. "They say Terry treats his staff kindly and pays well. Neither of those things are true. His cruelty knows no bounds, and I suspect, though I have no proof, that many of his staff aren't here by choice. I suspect blackmail.

"Surely your family would have done something about it by now," I said.

Nicholas shook his head. "Everyone has turned a blind eye. I've broached the topic with my parents before, but they will not hear me. His cruelty breeds loyalty, unfortunately. The servants won't speak to me, let alone come forward about their treatment."

I hated that notion. I wanted to save the servants here. But when I looked at them, their gazes were on the floor, their bodies still as statues. I doubted they

would speak to me either. Perhaps the only way to help them now, was the same way to help myself.

We had to bring Terry down.

Nicholas led me further into the bulk of the mansion, into a greeting room at the base of a grand staircase. Gold adorned nearly every surface from the banisters of the staircase to the molding across the room.

Oil paintings and tapestries hung on every wall, under lights and sometimes cases. I had little doubt that over them, let alone I dirty them with the bottom of my shoes.

The candidates and a few other guests were scattered throughout the room, with Terry standing in the center of the room. Servants, their downcast gazes in place, walked around the room carrying trays of champagne and hors d'oeuvres. Camera crews catch every potential moment of action.

Terry, when he spots us, waves Nicholas and me closer. Nicholas holds tightly to my hand as we approach.

Terry's gaze drifts down to my lips, and his eyes narrowed. "Why, Piper. It seems you have smeared your

lipstick."

He procures a handkerchief from his pocket and passes it over to me. I hesitate a moment before accepting it and dab at the corners of my lips.

"Why look absolutely debauched, like some cad had his way with you." Terry slices his sharp gaze toward Nicholas. "Interesting how Nicholas has chosen to wear the same shade."

I hand the handkerchief out to Nicholas, but he ignores it to wipe at his mouth with his sleeve. I hadn't noticed any of the lipstick had smeared before, but under this light, I could see the touch of red that had tinted parts of Nicholas's lips,

My cheeks burned in embarrassment. What must we have looked like?

"I would have thought Piper might have better taste in men," Terry said.

“If the competition looks like you, dear uncle, then I believe her taste in men is more than fine.”

“You may be of age, but you are nothing but a boy comparatively. A true man would be able to keep her satisfied.”

I cleared my throat. “Do I get a say in the matter? I feel as though I should, since this directly concerns me.”

Terry rolled his eyes at me. “Women don’t know what they want. They need a firm hand to guide them.”

My entire b*dy recoiled from him and his vile words. I inched closer to Nicholas. Nicholas started to turn his b*dy so that I was a step or two behind him.

“I’ve broken stronger women than you, Piper, and now they live to serve me.”

“Servitude is not how relationships work,” Nicholas snapped, and I was proud of him for it. “A relationship is a partnership, on equal footing. Somehow I doubt you have consent for what you do.”

“Their complaints end abruptly enough, when they see what I can do,” Terry said, undeterred. He leered

Nicholas flat-out pulled me behind him now. He directly stepped between Terry and me. “You will keep your distance from Piper,” he snarled.

Terry shrugged, undisturbed. “You can’t be around every minute, nephew. And the minute your back is turned...” He snapped his fingers. “Your little favorite is mine.”

Chapter 265

Chapter 0265

While the princes were giving interviews with the camera crews, Terry and a few of his servants escorted the candidates, including myself, on a tour of his mansion.

When the plan had been suggested, I had seen the worry in both Nicholas’s and Julian’s gazes, but their concern was merely blinding them to the benefits

of such a move. If I could take the tour, perhaps Terry would show us to some of his more private offices. And if I could sl* p away...

I tried to convey as such with my eyes, unable to privately speak with Nicholas and Julian, but my efforts only seemed to double their worry. I wouldn't be waylaid from my plan, however. This was the reason we had even pushed to have this event.

We needed the dirt on Terry, and this was the perfect way to find it.

Terry led the way, with the candidates behind, and the servants following. I had hoped there would be enough of us that I would have a chance to sl* p away. As it was, Terry kept me in his shadow. He touched my wrist when I dared stray too far from his side.

The gleam in his eyes made me nervous to openly disobey, almost like that was what he wanted me to do, so that he could put into practice his promise of... breaking me.

I shuddered at the thought. I could only imagine the horrors of what that would entail. From what it sounded like, my consent was not a part of the equation.

Finally, after several long minutes of waiting for Terry's guard to drop, Jessica stopped him and asked about one of the artworks.

"Is this real? These brushstrokes look fake," she said.

Terry's entire face went red with outrage. "I can assure you this is legitimate, young lady."

He walked closer to her and the artwork in question. He reached out, tracing the lines of the brushstrokes without actually touching the painting.

"This is his early work. If you look/closer here..."

Step by step, I backed up until I was even with the servants. None of them looked at me. None seemed to notice or care when I stepped behind them.

My heart hammered all the way up into my throat as I continued to move backwards until I was near a corner of a hallway. Then, just as I reached it, I turned and darted down the hall.

Terry hadn't shown us down this hallway. I had no idea where I was going. But this was the only good

People tended not to ask too many questions when hit with that excuse.

I ducked my head into every open door. I found many bedrooms, some closets or storage rooms, a few sitting rooms, and then finally an office.

After sweeping my gaze across the office to make sure it was empty, I ducked inside.

The desk was immaculately clean, with every pen in its place and no stray papers in sight.

I opened the drawers, found one filled with manila folders, and began flipping through them. They all seemed innocuous: copies of electric and water bills, a statement from an internet provider, an estimate for next year's insurance information.

The paperwork was mostly signed by Terry's accountant, which made me wonder if this was even Terry's office at all. The walls were trimmed in gold, but I was learning from the tour that Terry trimmed most things in gold, even rooms he rarely visited.

Terry's pride seemed to be directly connected to his decadence. So this room could easily be his accountant's office, or just an office used to store paperwork.

The other drawers turned up similar results. One drawer held a fancy paperweight with no papers underneath. The drawer nearest the desktop was filled with meticulously arranged pens and notepads.

Nothing was written on the notepads. The pens were all symmetrical and identical. They gave nothing away.

With a sigh, I realized this room was likely a bust. Nothing here seemed to be incriminating in the slightest. Or, if it was, I would need an accounting degree to be able to tell. I was good with numbers, but not that good.

I made my way to the door. Maybe I still had time to check another room before my absence would be noticed enough for me to be actively looked for.

My bathroom excuse would only carry me so far. After an hour, people might stop believing.

When I came close to the door, suddenly, it slammed shut. A lock turned. I heard footsteps walk away.

I froze and held my breath, scared even the sound of breathing too loudly would bring back whoever it was that closed the door.

I waited for a long moment for all sounds to cease, and then I waited a minute more to be safe. novelbin

Then I went to the door. When I had heard the lock, I hadn't panicked, expecting there to be a knob to turn on the inside. There was no lock on the inside. The only thing on the door handle was a keyhole. No other locks were on the door.

I tried the handle anyway. Maybe I had been hearing things. Yet when I turned the doorknob, it clattered and would not open. The door was locked.

I was trapped.

What was I going to do?

The panic started to set in now. No one would believe I had wandered in here looking for the bathroom and then said nothing as I was locked inside. There was no innocent explanation for my presence here.

An even worse thought: perhaps I had been locked in here on purpose.

Terry had made his intentions for me well known. The only way he would be able to break me like he wanted was if he could get me away from Nicholas, Julian, the cameras, and the other candidates.

I didn't want to be paranoid. Being locked in here could have been an accident. But this house was too full of dangers for me to be making any assumptions.

I paced the length of the small room, considering. I didn't know how to pick a lock, and without a wolf, I wasn't strong enough to force it. My options therefore were limited. Mainly, I had to wait to be rescued. Nicholas and Julian would come looking for me if the tour returned without me..

But this mansion was giant. Would they even be able to find me?

It would take them a long time... unless they had GPS.

My pendant!

I grasped it in my hands at once and pressed down on the full moon gemstone. It made a soft clicking sound. I released it and the gemstone lifted again to its original position.

I hoped with all my heart that it worked. I wished I had tested it first somehow. But Julian must have, before he gave it to me, right?

I wished I felt more confident that he had.

There was nothing for it now. I simply had to wait. I continued to pace the room.

I was only waiting for five minutes before the door knob began to jostle.

My breath caught. Five minutes was not enough time for Julian to sneak away and find me. This had to be someone else!

Chapter 266

Chapter 0266

Where could I hide? Behind the desk? But wouldn't that be the first place someone would go to if they came to this room? There weren't many other spots to hide. A couple of high-back chairs were dotted around, but they wouldn't provide much cover.

"Piper?"

My thoughts came to a screeching halt.

That was Nicholas's voice.

I rushed back to the door. "Nicholas?"

"Oh, thank God," came Nicholas's voice, muffled with the barrier between us.

"How did you know I was in here?"

“I was snooping around. When I didn’t see you with the tour group, I came looking for you.”

“Did they move on without me?” I asked. If they had, Terry likely immediately noticed my absence.

“The servants were taking them back, from what I could tell,” Nicholas said. “Terry wasn’t with them.”

A pit opened in my stomach. Did that mean he was looking for me too?

“I want to get out of here,” I said, fear apparent in my voice, even to me.

“Step back, Piper.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to get you out of there.”

Oh, God, he was going to break down the door! I rushed away at once, moving behind the desk. “Okay!” I called. “I’m clear!”

“Three...” Nicholas said.

“Two...”

“Wait!” Julian hissed. “What the hell do you think you are doing?”

“Piper’s in there. I’m getting her out.”

“And making it clear we’ve snooped through the room. Stop. Just stop. Let a professional handle this.”

Metal jingled in the lock.

I came close to the door again. “What are you doing?”

“Picking the lock like a civilized person,” Julian said back. “Just one moment...”

The lock clicked.

“Ah!” Julian said with pride. “There we go. No brute force needed.”

“Whatever,” Nicholas grumbled. novelbin

The door knob turned and the door pushed open. Suddenly, Nicholas and Julian were both spilling into the room.

Nicholas looked me over up and down, his face serious. Julian smirked.

“I got your message, Piper. The GPS works.”

I moved between them both, and pulled them both into a hug at the same time. My relief was palpable. I had been even more scared than I had wanted to admit. My hands were still trembling.

If Terry had found me first...

Both Nicholas and Julian held me back, even longer than they needed to. For a long, special moment we stood together, united in our relief and happy with our reunion. Then, too soon, we began to separate.

Julian stepped back first. In his absence, Nicholas wrapped both arms around me, holding me closer.

“We should get going,” I said.

“This looks like my uncle’s office,” Julian said, looking around.

“I didn’t find anything in here.”

“Yeah.” Julian held up a finger. “But did you look in the right places?”

Reluctantly, Nicholas and I stepped away from each other. I followed Julian toward the desk.

“I searched the drawers,” I said. “Everything seemed normal.”

“Watch.” Julian opened the drawer with the paper weight. He pressed his hand up along the underside of the drawer above it. There was a popping sound, and then a secret drawer dropped open.

My eyes went wide. Of course someone like Terry would have secret drawers.

“Check the other drawers,” Julian said. In the secret compartment he opened was a signet ring. Julian slid it into his pocket.

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“ep trying,” Julian sand. held the way drawers on my ween, I found another secret pity

Nodding, I moved to the red drawer.

Nicholas moved closer, watching us from the opposite side of the desk. He crossed his arms over his chest.

“I imagine Piper pressed on the pendant, and that’s how you knew where she was, Julian?”

Nicholas asked.

Julian’s hand slipped off the drawer handle. He cleared his throat and quickly grabbed it again. *1 guess Piper told you about my gift,” Julian said.

Following his instruction, I checked the other drawers. On my own, I found another secret compartment. This one was empty.

“Keep trying,” Julian said.

Nodding, I moved to the next drawer.

Nicholas moved closer, watching us from the opposite side of the desk. He crossed his arms over his chest.

“I imagine Piper pressed on the pendant, and that’s how you knew where she was, Julian?”

Nicholas asked.

Julian’s hand slipped off the drawer handle. He cleared his throat and quickly grabbed it again. “I guess Piper told you about my gift,” Julian said.

Chapter 267

Chapter 0267

“You said you would tell him,” I said.

“”

“I was getting around to it.” Julian shrugged. “The right moment just hadn’t come up yet.”

“You gave her that necklace to help her out specifically in this place,” Nicholas said. “I highly doubt that you couldn’t find a moment to tell me about it.”

“That’s the truth,” Julian said. “Besides, so long as one of us gets the message to help her out, does it matter which one?”

“Then switch it to me,” Nicholas said.

—

an argument they

I gave Nicholas a flat look. He wasn’t helping deescalate this argument shouldn’t even be having in the middle of Terry’s office while searching for secret compartments in his desk.

Nicholas deflated a little, under my look, though he didn’t uncross his arms. The moment his eyes returned to Julian, they hardened again.

“I wanted both,” I said.

“And I will set it to both,” Julian said. “The very next free moment I have.”

“Now, Julian. I imagine it will take you two minutes on your phone,” Nicholas said.

“And you don’t think we’re doing something vastly more important at the moment?”

“No,” Nicholas was firm.

Julian sighed. “Keep searching, Piper.” He retrieved his phone from his pocket.

The current drawer I looked through didn’t have a compartment along the top, but when I traced my hand along the side, I felt a small catch. I pressed down and a lid sprung open, revealing a letter tucked away underneath.

“What’s this?” I pulled the letter from the secret compartment and unfolded it.

“Find something?” Julian’s eyes were on his phone.

Nicholas rounded the desk to come to my side. I opened the letter then nearly dropped it. Nicholas caught it and me, steadying both.

“Why didn’t he destroy this?” Nicholas asked, more to himself than anyone else. “It even says to burn it?”

“Why does uncle do anything?” Julian put his phone away. He scooched closer to me to peer at the letter over my shoulder.

“Hubris,” I said.

“Even so... This...” Nicholas was at a loss for words.

Julian whistled. “It’s damn incriminating.”

In my hands, I held a letter addressed to Terry, welcoming him to the underground organization.

The letter was dated back a few years, long enough that he very well could have been the man

to tempt Jane over to the darkness.

Disgust and hatred swirled in my gut.

“Do you recognize that signature?” Nicholas asked.

“I can’t make it out...” I said. I only saw swirls. There was no printed name underneath.

“It’s Hawk,” Julian said. We both looked at him. “The unofficial underground organization’s leader? If you can call him that. Their leadership is more like a council. But Hawk is the one keeping them all in line.”

Julian would know. He’d been investigating into the underground organization for who knew how long.

“Hawk.” I tried the word out in my mouth. I felt bad for the bird that had to share its name with such an undoubtedly vicious person. “Who is he really?”

“No one knows,” Julian said. “I doubt even Terry does, something that probably irks him to no end.”

“Receiving this letter would be an honor, then,” Nicholas said. “Something Terry would want to remember.”

“He’s probably mad he can’t hang it up,” Julian said with a laugh. “But, lucky for us, he’s vein enough to hold onto it regardless. Tuck it into your pocket, Nicholas, and let’s get the hell out of here. That should be proof enough.”

Nicholas folded the letter and put it into his inside jacket pocket.

It felt like a victory, securing something like that.

But we still had to survive the rest of the night to get it to safety.

“Let’s go,” Nicholas said, and held out his hand for me.

I took it.

Chapter 268

Chapter 0268

Together, Julian, Nicholas, and I walked out into the hallway. We made it down to the main hallway before Terry himself saw us and stepped into our path.

Julian, Nicholas, and I stopped in our tracks.

“There you are, Piper. And I see you’ve run into my errant nephews.”

“Don’t worry, uncle, lost.”

Julian said smoothly. “We found Piper before she became hopelessly

Terry tilted his head. He was smiling, but its edges were sharp and dangerous. “And why would Piper need to be found? Last I saw her, she was with the tour group. I turn my back for one moment to correct an ignorant girl, and in that single moment, Piper vanished.”

“I went looking for a bathroom and got lost,” I said, falling back on my initial planned excuse.

“You were gone for an hour.” Terry’s eyes narrowed.

“I got very lost.”

“She’s lucky we found her,” Julian said. “Who knows how long she would have been wandering. Sometimes I think you forget how big your mansion is.”

“I have not forgotten,” Terry said. His gaze never left me.

Nicholas was still holding my hand. He squeezed it, as if saying, I am here. I’m not going anywhere. The notion gave me comfort.

“I’m sorry to have worried you,” I said, hoping to end the discussion. “I’m back now so everything should be fine.”

Terry watched me for several long seconds, too long to feel like a natural pause. He wanted me to squirm, to feel uncomfortable, or maybe even apologize? I tried my best not to have any outward reaction other than to vaguely smile.

Inside, I wanted to scream.

Eventually, he relented. “Very well. I’m glad you have been returned to us. Now, we should novelbin

make haste. Dinner is about to be served.”

I nodded. Without another word, he turned away from us. We fell into step behind him. I traded looks with both Nicholas and Julian. Nicholas’s face was stern and rigid. Julian winked at me.

Neither helped me settle the growing unease in my gut.

As we entered the dining room, the other guests and candidates were already finding the table.

“You are beside me, Piper,” Terry said, as he found his seat at the center of the table. I was to sit on his right.

Nicholas seemed reluctant to let go of my hand. In my ear, he whispered, “I’ll trade seats with whoever is beside me.”

Neither of us seemed to have any misconceptions that Terry would place Julian or Nicholas beside me. Their right as princes would let them have the right to claim any seat they wanted.

Except when we moved to my seat, we saw the name on the placard belonging to the post next to me.

It read Joyce.

A prince could had the right to claim any seat they wanted at the table- unless it was already occupied by another member of the royal family. With Joyce sitting here, there was little Nicholas could do.

“I’ll speak with him,” Nicholas said. He released my hand and walked away.

Julian, meanwhile, switched seats with the person directly across from me. They were forced to move down to the other end of the table. I imagined Terry had intentionally placed Julian and Nicholas as far from me as possible.

Terry glared at Julian now. Julian just smiled at him, all faux innocence.

When most of the group had found their places at the table, we began to sit down. I reluctantly sat beside Terry, with Julian across the table from me.

Oddly, Susie had been placed on the other side of Terry. I would have thought we would want someone with more standing nearer to him, like Olivia. Susie seemed nervous as she accepted her seat.

I waited for Nicholas, but was surprised when Joyce arrived to claim his seat. Nicholas, it seemed, had been unsuccessful at convincing Joyce to move. That seemed strange to me. I couldn’t have imagined that Joyce would care so much. Perhaps it was because Jessica was seated on his other side?

Instead, Nicholas claimed the seat beside Julian and directly across from Terry. His frown was deep with displeasure. Whatever the conversation had been between him and Joyce, Nicholas seemed rather irritated about it.

Chapter 269

Chapter 0269

No sooner had we all sat down, then Terry stretched his arm across the back of my chair. He leaned into me enough to whisper, “Should we make those

two brothers jealous, Piper?" He reached up, snatched a loose strand of my hair, and tucked it behind my ear. His fingers lingered on my cheek.

I wanted to turn my entire body inside out to get away from that touch. "I think we should just focus on dinner."

"Is that any way to treat the man who controls your entire future?" Terry asked.

I gave him a confused look. novelbin

His smile added teeth. "You had a poor showing at your last event, didn't you? I know how important this one is to you and your standing. To dear little Elva, who is always so sickly. You want to stay in the contest, yes? To keep her healthy and happy?"

My stomach churned in disgust. I hated that he was right. I wanted to pull away, but I couldn't. Not yet.

"Uncle," Julian said sharply. "The cameras are waiting for your introductory speech. Unless you want me to cover for you..."

Terry's smile twitched. Julian hit him where it hurt. Terry would never miss an opportunity to steal the limelight. His arm retracted from my cheek. His other moved away from my chair as he rose to address the table.

He waited for the cameras to zoom in on him. "Thank you to all my honored guests, for joining me this evening. I have followed the competition with the upmost interest. I am thrilled to now be a more formal part of it."

He reached down onto the table and picked up his flute of champagne. "Though tonight is an event to be judged, I hope you will each find the time to enjoy yourself while you are here. There's no reason a contest can't be fun."

He looked down at me. I did my best to avoid his gaze without making it obvious.

Terry lifted his glass. "Cheers!"

The others and me lifted our glasses as well, then took a sip. The taste of champagne wasn't as good as I remembered, reminding me too much of when Terry drugged me. I covertly spit my drink back into my glass.

I was not going to drink any alcohol tonight.

The first and second courses arrived with minimal issue. Terry engaged several of his nearby guests without paying me much attention. It was only as the entre arrived, after Terry bit in,

“Piper, this steak is to die for.” He speared a piece of the meat and held his fork out for me to taste.

I froze. It eat something off of his fork felt overly intimate. It had even garnered the attention of several nearby candidates and the cameras. The candidates gave me pitying looks. The cameramen moved in closer.

If I accepted, it was akin to accepting his advances. If I rejected, it would be like a slap in the face. I might as well show myself out now for how much standing I would lose, being rude to the host.

I clenched my stomach, ignoring the way disgust swirled within it, violent and angry.

I leaned forward, closed my eyes, and accepted the bite of meat from Terry’s fork.

“There’s a good girl,” Terry said, and I wanted to spit the food in his face.

Instead, a glass shattered.

My eyes shot opened.

Nicholas had clutched his water glass so tightly it shattered. Blood dripped down from his fist.

“Why, nephew. Don’t know your own strength perhaps?” Terry was absolutely delighted by the display and made no attempts to hide it. “You should go clean yourself up before you stain the tablecloth.”

Nicholas frowned harder, but, after casting a glance at Julian, who nodded in return, Nicholas excused himself from the table.

Servants immediately cleared away the glass shards and replaced the broken cup with a fresh one.

Terry looked at me. He leaned in and whispered, “Now that we’re alone...”

He placed a hand on my upper knee.

Chapter 270

Terry slowly trailed his hand up the length of my thigh. He stopped at the meatiest point, just beneath my hip and squeezed.

I wanted to bolt from the table. I wanted to elbow him in the ribs or kick at his shins.

All I could actually do was sit very still and try not to draw attention from the cameras or the guests, while simultaneously trying to only get Julian to notice.

However, every time Julian glanced at me, his attention was immediately claimed again by Joyce sitting beside me. It was strange to hear him talk so much, especially when the topics seemed to be entirely superfluous.

“Did you watch that television show the other night?” Joyce asked.

“I don’t watch a lot of TV,” Julian replied.

“It was such a good episode.”

Julian nodded, and glanced back at me.

I widened my eyes.

“Did you hear what happened to Aunt Ruby?” Joyce said.

Julian’s eyes went to Joyce again. “No, what?”

“She bought another dog.”

Julian huffed a laugh. “Don’t word it like that, then, Joyce. You made it sound like it was something serious.”

“A new dog is a serious commitment,” Joyce said.

“Yeah, but...”

Their argument progressed, Julian totally focused on proving Joyce wrong, that he did not look at me again for a long moment. When he did, it was only

for a second, before returning his gaze to Joyce, as he brought up yet another point of contention.

Meanwhile Terry was rubbing his hand on my thigh, back and forth. His fingers were moving gradually toward the inside.

I tried to shift away from him, but he simply moved his hand right along with me, keeping it affixed to my leg like he had glued it there.

Before long, he had coaxed his hand between my thighs, undoubtedly wrinkling my dress. Though my dress was the very last of my worries at the moment, because ever so slowly, he

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I tried pushing him away by his wrist, but that only made him grab me tighter. His fingers bit into my skin, likely leaving bruises.

I felt trapped, a cornered animal with nowhere to go. No one was coming for the rescue.

Julian continued to argue with Joyce. Nicholas hadn't returned from the bathroom. The other candidates occasionally gave me pitying glances, like they knew what was happening under the table, but none made a move against it.

I didn't blame them. Terry held all the power here. To speak against him would very well cost them their spots in the competition. Just like if I spoke up, I too might lose my spot.

I turned toward him. "Please stop," I whispered so no one but Terry could hear me.

"Request denied," he replied, smirking.

I wanted to scream.

When his bold pinky finger pressed against my core, I jumped from the chair as if it had been lit on fire. His hand subtly fell away. He looked up at me with fake innocence and surprise.

"Is something the matter, Piper?" he asked. He knew very well what he had done and that I hadn't liked it. And that didn't seem to matter to him in the slightest.

I wanted to throw my drink in his face, or to cuss him out like he deserved. Everyone should

know what a cad he is.

But then I thought of Elva, of her sickness, of what being cast into the street would mean for her.

I huffed a breath, trying to control my anger and fear.

“Someone should check on Nicholas. He’s been gone a while,” I said.

“The servants can,” Terry said.

“I’m worried about him,” I admitted. I didn’t think there was any harm in it.

The cameras moved closer, catching this moment on film.

Julian finally came to my rescue. “Better to let her check, uncle. It won’t do any harm, but if you keep her here, worried, she might not eat at all.”