

The Luna Choosing Game #Chapter 281 - Read The Luna Choosing Game Chapter 281

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I carried her back to her chair. Then I took the chair beside her.

Tiffany and Veronica were sitting on the other side of the table. Tiffany gave me a soft, sad-looking smile. Veronica just flatly stared.

I pulled a waffle from a stack at the center of the table onto my own plate. As I began to prepare it with butter and syrup, I realized just how quiet the rest of the table was.

Usually the girls were boisterously sharing rumors and gossip, especially the morning after an event. This morning, however, everyone was quiet, even Lilliana and Olivia.

I noticed Susie's absence. I hoped she was okay. I would have to remember to check on her later. She might have had too much socialization yesterday – the unwelcomed kind. It wasn't unusual for her to hide in her room when she was exhausted in that way.

Even Elva seemed quieter than usual, as if she was feeling the downtrodden vibe of the rest of the room.

I quietly ate my waffle.

"Are you okay?" Veronica asked suddenly, startling me. I glanced up and found her looking at me. "Last night was..." Her gaze shifted to Elva, who had lifted her head, clearly listening too. "I just want to make

sure you are okay. You disappeared."

I'd worn a long sleeve dress this morning, but even those sleeves couldn't entirely cover the ugly bruises around my wrists. Veronica undoubtedly noticed. She glanced at them again, now.

I lowered my hands down into my lap.

“I’m...” I didn’t know how to answer. I wasn’t okay, not fully. I was hurt and felt a bit broken. The very thought of Terry made me shudder in fear. “I’m getting there.”

Veronica nodded grimly.

“Nicholas and Julian bolted so fast when they realized you weren’t in the room,” Tiffany said. “Susie said Terry was taking you on a private tour... That seemed kind of odd, given that we’d already been on a tour...”

Veronica gave Tiffany a telling look. Tiffany shrank in her chair.

“Sorry,” she said.

“Don’t apologize,” I said. I understood where she was coming from. To someone who didn’t fully understand what was happening, the action would seem odd. Terry was respected. People’s first thought might not be that he was dangerous.

A notion I wanted to correct. At the very least, I could give those listening a warning.

“But...” I said. “If Terry invites you to be alone with him, don’t go. Do not be alone with him, not if you can help it.”

Tiffany nodded grimly. Veronica stared.

“So the tumor was true,” said a strong feminine voice from the dining room entryway. I looked up to see the Lama standing there, frowning at me. “You seduced my brother, and now you deign to badmouth him.”

My eyes went wide. My heart sunk down into my stomach. Exactly what had she heard? Had Terry told her this lie?

“I can assure you that wasn’t what happened,” I said.

“Spare me your false explanations. I know what kind of girl you are. The video evidence is clear enough,” the Luna said. She openly glared at me. “Everyone saw how you flirted with Terry.”

I flirted with him?! No way! He flirted with me! Not the other way around.

But I had to be careful here. I couldn't just yell at the Queen, no matter how much I wanted to defend myself. I had no power here. She could expel me from the competition for simply raising my voice.

"I hope you haven't forgotten the rules, Piper," the Luna continued. "You are not to flirt with anyone but

the princes. You are treading on dangerous ground, the kind that could have you removed from the palace."

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Her threat made me go silent. I wasn't flirting with Terry. He was flirting with me. But maybe that was still enough to be held against me.

"You seduced my brother," the Luna said, "And you will not get away with it." An angry flame burned in her eyes. Her usually demure expression was filled with disgust.

I didn't want to have this conversation with Elva listening.

"Your Majesty," I said, rising from my chair. "If we could please have this conversation in the hallway, or somewhere else more private..."

"Why?" the Queen said, narrowing her gaze. "Are you afraid of the other candidates learning you are a loose woman?"

"I'm not

"A slut who tempts men," the Queen said, voice full of malice.

I glanced at Elva. She tilted her head.

I hurried toward the Queen. "Please, your Majesty. Not in front of my daughter."

"If you wanted to protect her, you should have done more to protect your own character. The child should know the truth about her mother."

"But it's not the truth." I lowered my voice, so only she could hear. "Terry assaulted me. He tried to -"

“Lies,” she said fiercely. slandering him to protect yourself. You may have my bighearted sons fooled, but I see you clearly, Piper. You seduced Terry, just to lure him into a compromising position before playing the victim. You think this will earn you favor with my sons.”

I shook my head. “If you would hear me out – – ”

“I protect my family from vultures and snakes,” the Queen said, venom dripping from the words.

“I am neither of those things,” I said.

“Then apologize,” she said.

I blinked, surprised. “What?”

“Issue a formal apology to Terry, accept responsibility for your actions, and perhaps we can move beyond this little episode of yours.

I swallowed thickly. “And if I refuse?”

“Then you will face judgement for breaking the contest rules,” the Queen said.

I didn’t want to risk being sent home, but the thought of standing before my attempted rapist, to apologize to him, made my stomach churn.

Even to save myself, I didn’t think I’d have been able to do it. He was simply too vile and repulsive. What he had done to me was so terrible and inexcusable, that I was still struggling to process it had even happened to me for real. And now she wanted me to take the blame for it too? “I can’t do that,” I said. She frowned. “Then you better start packing your bags.” She didn’t wait for anymore arguments or excuses or pleas. She turned on her heel and left the room. I watched her go for a long moment before I returned to my chair. Elva looked at me. “The Queen seems mad, Mommy.” “She does,” I agreed. “Are we in trouble?” Elva asked. Her eyes were wide with concern. I had thought I already hated Terry with the full entirety of my being, but now, seeing how this situation had brought worry onto my daughter, I found that my hatred for him was as deep as a bottomless well.

I leaned over and kissed Elva on the top of her head. “We’ll be okay, honey. I’ll make sure of it.” “Okay,” Elva said, though she didn’t seem fully convinced. I couldn’t blame her. My promise didn’t have much backing behind it. If the

Luna wanted me gone, I didn't know how I would be able to convince everyone else that I should stay. Her word was law. Her disapproval was likely the final nail in my coffin.

I didn't know what else to say. I had no other means of comforting her. So I let her return to her breakfast, and I returned to mine.

Later, as I was walking down the hallway alone, intending to head to Susie's room to check on her, I was spotted by Nicholas at the other end of the hall. I abruptly swiveled on my heel and started heading the other direction.

I wasn't ready to face him yet after his sudden disappearance that morning. I was absolutely certain if he was seeking me out now, it was only to apologize for being uncomfortable with me staying in his

bed. He had stayed in mine before, but this felt different somehow.

I had been in his pajamas, after all, and he had held me so tenderly and close, like a lover would.

Not ready for more rejection, I started walking quickly. Unfortunately, his stride was bigger than mine, with his long legs.

"Piper!"

He caught up to me quickly and gently touched my elbow, stopping me. He came around to my front. Confusion and a dash of hurt was in his eyes.

"Didn't you see me?" he asked.

I looked away from him. "I wasn't paying attention." It was an obvious lie. We both knew it.

"Okay..." He seemed unsure. "I just wanted to make sure you are alright. When I returned to my room and you weren't there, I wasn't sure what to think"

He wasn't sure what to think? "Imagine how I felt when I woke up alone." I tried to keep the bitterness out of my tone. I had no idea how successful I was at it. My guess was not very. His face crumpled at once, concern fading into realization and inexplicitly, despair. "No, Piper. You can't think I purposefully left you there." I lifted a brow. "Isn't that what happened?"

“No.” He vehemently shook his head. “I decided to speak with my parents at once, to present them the evidence about Terry. I showed them the letter and the footage of him being inappropriate to you and Susie. I thought the sooner they knew the truth, the sooner you might be safe.”

Oh. So it hadn't been a rejection? A touch of relief spread through me. It didn't last long, however, before another realization set in.

“Did you show the footage to the Luna?” I asked.

As he nodded, his mouth formed a tight thin-lipped line. “She was not as receptive to the truth as I would have hoped.”

I sighed. “I know.”

“You do?”

“She said some words to me this morning...”

Nichola's features hardened. A touch of darkness dimmed his eyes. “What did she say?”

I explained to him what had happened, ending with, “She will only let me stay if I offer Terry a public apology.”

“No. You will not be doing that,” Nicholas said.

I was glad we agreed.

“I'll speak with her,” he said.

“Do you think you'll be able to convince her?”

“She will listen to me. I don't care what I have to do. She has no right to demand that of you. To put you in front of your attacker and... No. As far as I am concerned, that monster will never lay eyes on you again.”

His hands curled into tight fists. His body trembled with rage. The green in his and I recognized he was trying to control his wolf.

I stepped closer to him, hoping my closeness would offer him enough comfort to stay in command.

He closed his eyes and inched closer to me. Our arms brushed. He breathed deeply.

“It’s best if neither of us face Terry again,” he said.

I understood, but I still asked, “Why?”

“If I see him around you again, I will kill him.”

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The ferocity of Nicholas’s protection of me gave me more comfort that it probably should have. I certainly didn’t want Nicholas to kill anyone, but knowing that he would go to any limits in order to keep me safe helped me feel truly cared for.

Still, I decided to move beyond that topic, for fear the anger would root in him and cause him to seek out vengeance for me.

“Susie wasn’t at breakfast,” I said. “I’m worried about her, so I’m going to check on her. Would you like to join me?”

Nicholas softened somewhat at the subject change. “Susie’s okay. She probably just wants to rest.”

“She won’t mind me checking on her.”

“I think you probably shouldn’t,” Nicholas said.

“Why not?”

He pressed his lips hard together and would not answer.

Odd. Was he hiding something?

“I’m worried. I’ll only stay a minute,” I said. “When I see she’s okay, then I’ll leave.”

I understood Susie liked her alone time, especially after events where she was forced to be so social. So I knew she might not want me to stay for a long

time. But surely she wouldn't mind me checking on her. After all, she often did the same for me.

Nicholas didn't argue further, so I continued walking down the hallway towards Susie's room. Nicholas fell in step beside me.

At Susie's door, I knocked lightly. I waited a moment, but there was no reply.

Did she leave? I should check.

Slowly, I turned the knob and pushed open the door.

Susie was indeed in her room, and she wasn't alone.

Mark had his arms around Susie's waist, with her pulled tightly against him. Susie's own arms were wrapped around Mark's shoulders.

Their lips were connected in a passionate, deep kiss. Both were so caught up in it, they didn't seem to notice me at the door. Not even Mark, who was usually the most observant. For a moment, I'm stunned speechless. I knew they had been flirting and that they cared progressed this far. Mark began to unzip Susie's dress. Nicholas placed a hand on my shoulder and guided me from the room. He gently shut the door behind us. I couldn't stop from blushing at what I had just seen. They were going to...! A small bit of joy filled me. Good for them, for finding happiness with each other. For stealing precious moments to bind their affection. Yet, bitterly, I also felt jealous. I hated this side of me. It wasn't fair to anyone. My

last 'intimate' encounter had been a moment stolen by Terry. "You were right," I said to Nicholas in the hallway. "Susie is fine. More than fine, actually. But indisposed."

"I imagined," Nicholas said. "Mark was... upset when he saw the footage of Terry and Susie." Fresh guilt washed through me. I shouldn't feel jealous. Susie had a terrible night too. She hadn't been chained to a bed, but she still had to endure Terry's relentless flirtations and sexual harassment. At least she had Mark to help her sort through it now. Nicholas watched me. He must have seen the change in my mood. "Are you okay?" I shook my head no. "Terry stole many things from me. It could have been worse, I know that. But... I feel like so many things are tainted now."

I wrapped my arms around myself. Nicholas stepped closer. I leaned into his warmth.

“Which things?”

“Being naked. Being tied up.” I didn’t hate the thought of surrendering control, but it could only be with a man of my own choosing, one I trusted about all others. A man like Nicholas. The last was the hardest to say. “Being kissed.”

“Piper,” Nicholas said, claiming my attention. Looking at him, I returned to the here and now, no longer chained up in that torture room in Terry’s mansion.

Nicholas lifted his hand near my cheek, hovering just over my skin. But he didn’t touch me. After everything I’d been through, he was likely waiting for consent. He didn’t have to. He was the man I implicitly trusted. I covered the back of his hand with my own, and brought his palm to my cheek. “When you are ready,” he said, voice soft, “I will replace each and every memory and desire he tainted in you with a brand new, much more pleasant one. And I will do so happily.” I turned into his hand and placed a kiss onto his palm. “Any desire?” I asked him. “Yes.” No hesitation.

My heart melted a little. My affection for this man seemed immeasurable, growing all the time.

“I wouldn’t mind a kiss?” I asked.

He smiled as he stepped closer. Keeping one hand on my cheek, he moved his free arm around my waist.

“I’m glad to help.” He leaned down and pressed his lips to mine.

The range of Nicholas’s kisses could go from soft, barely there butterfly, to an all-encompassing plunge of teeth and tongue. This was somewhere in the middle.

He moved slowly, as if giving me time to pull away, but still licked lightly at the seam of my lips as if asking for entrance. I granted it, and he dipped his tongue into my mouth. Even then, he only traced along my own with a tender caress.

Not demanding. Not insistent. More a simple I’m here, you’re here, and we’re both enjoying this.

I hummed into his mouth, and he swallowed all of my noises. His hand moved down to my jaw, coaxing my face upward more. I moved however he guided, lost in the sensation of his soft lips and tongue, or his hard chest against me, and the hand pressing against my lower back, just above my tailbone.

Time lost all its meaning. We could have kissed for a minute or an hour. I didn't know, though it would never be enough.

I wanted to stay here, like this, until the rest of the world came crashing down. Even then, I'd just continue to hold on, to give and to take with this man who wanted me to feel safe with him.

Eventually, he had to break the kiss apart to breathe. We didn't separate far. Our noses brushed and then we pressed our foreheads together.

"Nick..." I whispered. I didn't know what I wanted to say, but I had to say something, to convey to him just a hint of what I was actually feeling in that moment. I was overwhelmed, with gratitude and affection. His kiss had helped wash away some of the stain Terry had left on my soul.

He seemed to understand and squeezed me around the waist just a bit tighter. His thumb brushed gentle streaks back and forth across my cheek.

Someone cleared their throat behind us, and we both jumped apart like we had been burned. How could I forget that we were right in the middle of the hallway! Anyone could have walked by!

Fortunately, this time, the person who had caught us was Julian, who had already previously found us in a compromising position. At that time, he had teased us relentlessly. novelbin

This time, he seemed much less enthused. His usual smirk was entirely missing.

He frowned deeply in Nichola's direction.

"Why would you confront our parents without me?"

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Julian was angry, that much was clear, though I couldn't exactly fathom why. Yes, it would be irritating to be excluded from Nicholas's confrontation of the King and Queen, but Julian usually handled irritation with cutting humor and sarcasm, not outright anger.

"Your presence wouldn't have made any difference," Nicholas said.

"Oh? You don't think the person who has been investigating the underground organization wouldn't have had evidence and knowledge to help your case?" Julian scoffed.

Nicholas sighed. He ran a hand over the back of his neck. "It wasn't personal, Julian."

"Like hell, it wasn't. I was the one who helped find the evidence, and I even have some of my own. You should have looped me into your plans. Aren't we a trio in this? When did you decide that you'd rather do everything alone?"

Nicholas shook his head.

I didn't necessarily want to take a side here. I could see the situation from both angles. But the fact was Nicholas hadn't told me his plans either. He simply left me before I had woken up. He'd apologized, I was no longer hurt. But I could understand Julian's upset.

Still, I decided to stay out of their conversation, mostly because it felt deeper than this one. singular argument. This issue may have been the one that finally brought them into an open. conflict, but underneath the surface, this resentment had likely been festering for a long time.

"Admit it," Julian said, a sharp edge in his voice. "You purposefully excluded me. You genuinely do not believe that I am capable."

Nicholas crossed his arms. He didn't deny it.

"Nicholas..." I whispered, feeling pity for them both.

"You're such an asshole," Julian said.

"You may be capable, Julian, when you want to be, but you aren't reliable. You have been a foolhardy play boy since our youth," Nicholas said. "You

may be doing the right thing right now, but I can't trust you to always make the best choices."

"You think I would have, what, stood in front of our father and then sided with Terry?"

"I don't know what you would have done," Nicholas said. "You are unpredictable. Your whims are fleeting. You do whatever you want without worry of the consequence." Julian huffed out a laugh too short and loud to be genuine. "That you honestly believe that tells me you don't know me at all, brother. You think I'm some kind of monster. You think I would throw Piper to the wolves." "He doesn't mean it like that," I said. "Doesn't he? Because that's what he's saying," Julian said. I looked at Nicholas, expecting him to take back some of the harsher things he'd said, or at least clarify them so they weren't so hurtful. Surely he couldn't believe that Julian would actually want to see me harmed? But stubborn Nicholas kept his mouth firmly closed. I wondered what the stories were that I wasn't privileged to. These two had a lifetime of history, memories upon memories where their capability and reliability were

displayed and practiced with each other. For Nicholas to so firmly believe that Julian was such a cad, something terrible must have happened to implant that conception of him.

"Forget it, Piper," Julian said, snorting. "He'll never see me as anything but a nuisance, and honestly, I'm tired of trying." Julian dipped his head to me in goodbye, then turned and left. "Nicholas," I said when Julian had gone. "There's no need to be so cruel." "I'm being honest, Piper," Nicholas said, voice flat, void of emotion. "He can't be trusted."

I sighed, unsure how to resolve this rift between the two brothers, or if resolution was even possible at this point. novelbin

"You don't agree," he said.

I didn't. "It's unhealthy for two brothers to fight like this." Nicholas shook his head. "What would be unhealthy is to pretend everything is fine between him and me. My expectations of him are all the way down on the floor and he still finds ways to go beneath him."

Nicholas set his jaw. There seemed to be no peaceful end of this conflict, so for now, I simply let it go. Maybe, someday, if I could discover more of the

things that went wrong between them, I could make another, better effort to help push them to resolution. But for now, perhaps the best course of action, was simply to keep the two brothers apart. After lunch, I was walking back toward the room when I was stopped by Nathan. "The King wishes to speak with you." He did not wait for a response. He just turned and began walking. The expectation, I was sure, I was led into a sitting room and ushered inside. After I walked through, Nathan stepped outside the room and closed the door, leaving me alone with the King.

The King stood behind a small couch. His back was turned toward the room as he gazed out a window.

Uncertain where to stand, I moved into the center of the room.

"You must be curious why I wanted to speak with you, Piper," the King said.

I had a few guesses. I wasn't in the meeting with Nicholas and the King. I had no idea what exactly Nicholas had told the King regarding the previous event. But I imagined whatever he wanted to speak about with me now had to do with Terry.

Yet I didn't want to say his name, not even to guess. I half worried to say his name allowed might make him magically appear.

The King, fortunately, seemed entirely unaware of my inner conundrum, and proceeded without any reply from me.

"I have heard Nicholas's side of the story. My Queen has told me Terry's. This leaves only one side left for me to hear and to know: yours." Slowly, he turned away from the window to face me. "Tell me everything you know about Terry's involvement in the underground organization."

My breath caught and my blood ran cold.

I had been mentally preparing myself for questions about Terry's assault on me. I didn't want to talk about it, but I had been willing to, for the sake of justice.

But this? How could I tell the King everything I knew without mentioning my sister Jane? Jane was my main connection to any knowledge I had accrued on Terry. She was the catalyst. Without that piece of the puzzle, the King might become suspicious of me.

Though to tell him about Jane felt dangerous as well. If he knew I had a twin, and that she was involved so deeply in the underground... What would his reaction be? Would he assume I was also involved?

Or were things deeper even than that?

Julian had told me not to speak about my sister to anyone, not even the King. He had made it seem like no one in the royal family could be trusted but him and Nicholas.

This could be some kind of trap. The King could be testing me to see how much I knew, or how much I was willing to reveal.

My head was starting to hurt from all the possibilities of this moment. Every possible answer I could give felt like a wrong one. I was frozen with indecision. And with fear.

The King narrowed his eyes. "Are you keeping secrets, Piper?"

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"It's simply difficult to talk about," I said as an excuse. It wasn't a lie. Answering the King's demand about Terry was difficult, though not entirely for the reasons he might have thought.

His mouth pressed into a hard line. I couldn't tell if he believed me or not. "Do the best you can.'

I took one last moment in a lengthy inhale, gathering my thoughts. Then I started speaking.

I mentioned everything that had happened with Terry and me, all while talking around the existence of my sister. I even included the time Terry had slipped something into my champagne and tried to take advantage of me, though I needed a breather after that one.

The King listened quietly as I explained Julian's suspicions that Terry had been working for the underground organization, which led to our exploration of the tunnels. And the confirmation of Terry's involvement, by reaching the room with the cages.

“This tunnel is still there?” the King said, suddenly on alert.

“Nicholas demanded it be sealed, Your Majesty. To my knowledge, it is still so.”

The King relaxed marginally. “I will ask him about it. Continue.”

I continued on, talking about the latest event and Terry’s unwelcome flirtations. I told him about the novel in

letter we found, and ended with my near assault and timely rescue.

The King listened quietly until I finished. Then, he crossed his arms. “That is all?”

“As of now, Your Majesty.”

The King paused a moment, as if collecting his thoughts. Then he said, “You are withholding the full truth.”

My breath caught in my throat, but I didn’t dare argue with the King – especially when that argument would be based on a lie..

In truth, I was keeping things from him. Big things. Like everything to do with my sister.

“Terry is a flirtatious sort,” the King said. “He always has, but this feels like something more. He’s practically obsessed with you. The King shook his head. “Terry’s tastes are fleeting. A woman rarely holds his interest for more than a single event, and even then I would question it. But you are saying he continues to hunt you down.” I swallowed down the rising lump in my throat. Did he not believe me that his brother-in-law could be so terrible? “I assure you, he has done these things, Sir.” The King lifted his hand and waved away my concerns. “I did not mean to imply otherwise,” he said. “What I don’t understand is why he would feel this attraction towards you. You are a pretty enough girl, but no striking beauty. And your blood makes you common, with no rare breeding.”

I grit my teeth. While I wanted to explain to the King that Terry’s behavior did not need a reason, I dared not speak against the King. Not if I wanted to stay in the competition. So I pushed down my growing outrage and let him continue uninterrupted.

“You are not wealthy. You have no great influence. You don’t even have a wolf. No, as far as anyone can tell, you are utterly insignificant.” Tilting his head, the King looked at me like I was a puzzle with missing pieces. “So why would my brother-in-law take such a relentless fascination with you?”

The truth, I knew, was his obsession with wanting to possess me as he had his sister.

I couldn’t say that, so I didn’t say anything.

The King rounded the couch and came closer to me. “I don’t like when secrets are kept from me, Piper. I am King. I should know all.”

“Yet you are ignorant to the ways of your own brother-in-law,” said Julian, suddenly in the doorway.

Nathan scurried past him. “I tried to stop him, Your Majesty. I’m terribly sorry.”

The King sighed, some of his aggression slipping away into weariness. “It’s fine. Speak your mind, Julian. I know you will regardless. You might as well have my permission.”

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“Thank you, father,” Julian said with a flourishing bow. He smirked at Nathan as he entered the room.

Nathan glared at him, but said nothing. He stepped outside the room and closed the door behind him.

Julian sauntered over to my side, stepping between the King and me.

“May I present, an item we found inside the desk alongside the letter.” Julian reached into his inside jacket pocket and produced the signet ring. He then held it out for his father.

The King’s eyes went comically wide. He snatched it out of Julian’s hands, then turned to hold it under the light.

“This is genuine,” he said.

“It is,” Julian replied.

“You found this in Terry’s desk?”

“Yes. In a secret compartment.”

The King’s expression darkened.

Julian glanced at me and spotted the confused expression on my face.

“You see, Piper, the signet on that ring is the King’s official seal,” Julian said. “It had gone missing from his private chambers many months back. I bet if we looked more closely at our records, they should show that Terry had recently visited.”

The King turned the ring round and around in his fingers, like he couldn’t believe he was holding such a thing. “Leave,” the King said then, frowning deeply. “I have much to think about and need to do so alone.” Julian bowed, despite the King no longer looking at him. I did too, for propriety’s sake. Julian held out his arm for me. When I accepted it, he led me through the door and out into the hallway. “Thank you,” I said to Nathan, though he ignored me to glare openly at Julian.

Julian waved at him. “See you later, Nathan.”

Nathan huffed a sharp breath, then disappeared into the sitting room with the King.

Julian led me down a few other hallways, until we were far from where the King was holed up.

I still hadn’t fully understood what the King had hoped to gain from his interrogation of me. He had clearly come into the meeting with his own ideas of what had gone on.

“See? This is exactly why Nicholas should have included me in his earlier confrontation with our parents,” Julian said. “If I had presented that ring sooner, father might have been decent enough to leave you out of it, and not force you to relive your trauma.

I looked down, embarrassed.

“Nicholas never thinks I’m good enough to actually contribute,” Julian said. “He resented that I was assigned with the task of tracking down the underground. He likely thought I’d blow it off.”

He was clearly still angry about the brothers’ earlier fight.

Trying to make peace, I said, “Don’t forget, Julian, that you cultivated that image. novelbin

“A brother should know the truth about his own brother. For him to have bought into my façade is an insult to our shared childhood.”

I frowned a little. “Surely there is some reason for this animosity between you?” I didn’t want to pry, but I cared about them both. Caring about them meant that I wanted to help. ” What happened that drove you to such hatred.”

“You should ask him that,” Julian said. “He’s the one who has been unwilling to let go all these years.

I had serious doubts that Nicholas was the only one who was holding onto a grudge. I gave Julian a flat look, letting him know my disbelief.

“I’m serious,” he said, doubling down. “You only see the good parts of him. The sides he wants you to see. What you can’t or won’t see, Piper, is just how selfish my brother is.”

“Nicholas?”

Julian nodded. “Nothing is more important to Nicholas than his own self-image.”

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I couldn’t believe that. Nothing from the time I had been with Nicholas to what I had experienced knowing him now indicated to me that he only cared about himself.

He helped out regularly at an orphanage. He turned the other way to Mark and Susie’s romance. He spent time with Elva. He was so protective of me, always looking out for me.

None of these were indicative of a selfish man.

Julian seemed absolutely convinced however. "I can tell from your face that you don't believe me. But doesn't this action prove it to you? Nicholas was trying to steal the glory here. That's why he went behind my back."

"That's not true," I said. "He only wanted to tell the King as soon as he could, to bring down Terry as quickly as possible."

Julian huffed. "He has you fooled, then."

"Julian. Don't you think you are being too hard on Nicholas?" I could sympathize with Julian. I knew being excluded had hurt him, and it was exceedingly shortsighted of Nicholas, if nothing else, as Julian held some of the evidence that the King needed to help make his decision.

Nicholas was stubborn and a man of action, but he was also forthright. He plunged ahead, sometimes

without the many calculations that Julian would make. But he did so with the best intentions at heart. Of that, I was absolutely certain.

"He's always done this in the past as well," Nicholas said. "He'll undercut my accomplishments in order to prop himself up."

"Julian..."

"Every exam, every sport, every concert... Every moment where I could have shone, could have made something of myself, he stole the spotlight and kept it from me.

He smirked as he spoke, but it was a mask, one he was used to wearing. I was starting to be able to see through it, to the more vulnerable man underneath.

I didn't doubt that Julian had been denied glory. I also didn't doubt that Nicholas had claimed it, though I'm sure it was unintentional to cast such a dark shadow over Julian.

Was this why Julian always acted out? He was just a lost boy who never had enough attention. growing up? No. That was likely unfair. This hurt felt too raw, too deep. There was something deeper going on.

“You can’t believe that Nicholas would purposefully steal -” novelbin

I still hadn’t fully understood what the King had hoped to gain from his interrogation of me. He had clearly come into the meeting with his own ideas of what had gone on. “See? This is exactly why Nicholas should have included me in his earlier confrontation with our parents,” Julian said. “If I had presented that ring sooner, father might have been decent enough to leave you out of it, and not force you to relive your trauma.” I looked down, embarrassed. “Nicholas never thinks I’m good enough to

actually contribute,” Julian said. “He resented that I was assigned with the task of tracking down the underground. He likely thought I’d blow it off.”

He was clearly still angry about the brothers’ earlier fight.

Trying to make peace, I said, “Don’t forget, Julian, that you cultivated that image.”

“A brother should know the truth about his own brother. For him to have bought into my façade is an insult to our shared childhood.”

I frowned a little. “Surely there is some reason for this animosity between you?” I didn’t want to pry, but I cared about them both. Caring about them meant that I wanted to help. What happened that drove you to such hatred.”

“You should ask him that,” Julian said. “He’s the one who has been unwilling to let go all these years.”

I had serious doubts that Nicholas was the only one who was holding onto a grudge. I gave Julian a flat look, letting him know my disbelief.

“I’m serious,” he said, doubling down. “You only see the good parts of him. The sides he wants you to see. What you can’t or won’t see, Piper, is just how selfish my brother is.”

“Nicholas?”

Julian nodded. “Nothing is more important to Nicholas than his own self-image.”

Chapter 288

Chapter 0288

Even imagining Julian in love felt like a stretch, though I felt like a jerk for thinking so.

Why shouldn't he fall in love?

She would have had to be a special woman to keep his attention.

I wondered what kind of woman Bridget really was. It was possible Julian had rose colored glasses, remembering her and the past. But I just didn't know.

"I can't see it," I said. "Nicholas does not have one vindictive bone in his body. He's not selfish. He wouldn't actively try to hurt you."

Julian sighed as he slowly shook his head. "I'm not upset with you, Piper. You've only seen him at his best side. But just wait. Someday he'll show you his true colors."

"We'll have to agree to disagree," I said.

Julian added, "For now."

That afternoon, I sat out in the grasses near the woods with Susie, watching Elva play with Silver and Night.

Across the gardens, Nicholas was standing beside Olivia. They were deep in a lively conversation. One leaning in to hear the other speak and then vice versa.

I didn't want to be jealous. They were just talking. But jealousy still sat, cutting, behind my ribcage. Susie, bless her, was trying to distract me. "Elva is doing quite well with the wolves," Susie said, smiling softly. "They speak to each other now like dear friends. They would probably accept her into their pack if she wasn't already welcomed in another." A sense of pride settled deep within me. I always knew Elva was talented, but to have it acknowledged by others gave me no shortage of happiness. If only such strength of talent did not also place Elva in danger. No, I couldn't think like that. We were on our way to bringing down Terry. The rest of the underground organization would soon follow. "Thank you," I said to Susie. She nodded.

After a moment, I noticed she was distracted too, though when I followed the length of her gaze, I found that it ended with Mark, standing also on the other side of the gardens near his prince.

I very nearly turned to tease her about him, when my gaze snagged on where Olivia had placed her hand on Nicholas's wrist, so very near his hand. She wouldn't try to hold it, would she?

I couldn't tear my gaze away.

"Rumors say that Olivia might be the new favorite for Nicholas," Susie said.

"What about Lilliana?" I asked.

"Too many bad showings," Susie said. "Olivia, meanwhile, has been steady in every event since the start. She's from a prominent pack, too. And from what I hear, she does well on camera too..."

Susie's voice trailed off. Susie herself wasn't so great at the social matters. I gave her a small smile to help lift her spirits. She gave me one in return, but it didn't last. novelbin

"Olivia is on top of the standings," Susie said. "I'm next to last."

"You are doing fine," I said. "Prince Joyce seems to think so." I cleared my throat. "Mark sure agrees."

A light blush dusted her cheeks. She dipped her head to hide it.

I was pleased by her happiness, for her and Mark stealing what rays of sunshine they could. for themselves.

It gave me the courage to ask, "If you are next to last, then who is lowest in the standings?"

It couldn't be Jessica, as she was Joyce's first choice. And though Lilliana had dropped in the rankings, I couldn't imagine her as last, simply from the high respectability of her pack.

Susie hesitated, worrying her bottom lip with her teeth.

"Susie?" I prompted. A growing feeling of dread rooted in my stomach.

"It's you, Piper," she replied. "You are the lowest in the current standings."

Chapter 289

Chapter 0289

“Don’t worry,” Mark told me. “I will not leave this room. Elva will not leave my sight.”

I nodded. That did make me feel marginally better.

We’d received word earlier in the day that Terry himself was coming to the palace to personally deliver the results of his event. Since then, we’d mostly barricaded ourselves inside of the bedroom.

However, I was required to attend this meeting, which was to be treated as an official event, broadcasted live across the kingdom.

I wasn’t looking forward to seeing Terry again, by any stretch. But at least, with Mark’s promise to protect Elva, I didn’t have to worry about her.

I hugged Elva goodbye.

“Good luck, Mommy!” she said brightly. Thank God I had protected her from the worst of the trauma I had experienced from Terry’s hands. I would rip the whole world apart before I ever let Terry enter within a hundred feet of my daughter.

“Be good, Elva. Listen to Mark and the nanny.”

“I will.”

After one last squeeze, I released Elva and stood. Then I walked to the door, where Nicholas was

waiting for me. novelbin

“Ready?” he asked, as I stepped into the hallway.

“Not really.” I didn’t think I’d ever be ready to see Terry again.

“I won’t let anything happen to you,” Nicholas said, determination making his voice strong. “I will be your shadow tonight.”

“I’m sure you have other duties./”

“They can wait. Your safety takes precedence.”

With relief, I laced my arm with his and together, we walked down to the ballroom.

In the ballroom, the other candidates were already waiting around, while Nathan spoke with a camera crew on a makeshift stage. Terry wasn't there yet. Neither was the rest of the royal family.

Susie approached Nicholas and me when we entered. “Have you seen him yet?” she asked.

I shook my head.

It was strange. Maybe it was the anticipation of seeing Terry, or the knowledge that he was in the same building, but my nerves prickled since coming here. Even with Nicholas's closeness, I could not release the tension of my shoulders.

All too soon, Nathan cleared his throat and the event began. It felt more informal, compared to the rest. The candidates were in our nice gowns, with our hair and makeup done in the modern fashion. But there were no other guests, and no fanfare.

The royal family came in them, Terry among them, with Julian sauntering along behind.

When I saw Terry, my stomach clenched uncomfortably.

The royal family all moved onto the stage, sans Nicholas who stayed beside me as promised.

On the stage, the Queen was standing between the King and Terry, though she was physically much closer to her brother than her husband, almost as if an invisible barrier has separated her and the King.

The King did not look at her once while he stood there, nor did he so much as glance at Terry, even, after his introduction, Terry began speaking.

“I will now reveal the distribution of points for the evening event at my mansion. The points were accrued through the candidate's decency as a dinner guest, including politeness, demeanor, and general likeability.”

A skewed scoring criteria for sure. Terry would just arbitrarily assign points to whoever he felt like, to hell with the rest. I could only imagine the type of mind games he wanted to play with me. Would he assign me many points or only a few?

The points would go toward our standing. Those with more points would do better in the overall competition.

I wasn't ready for this. I wished I could escape back to my room.

Terry cleared his throat. "Only one candidate received full points. This woman is not only a delight to converse with, but a beauty to watch. Congratulations, Olivia."

The candidates and royal family politely clapped.

Olivia smiled graciously, though she didn't seem all that surprised.

Chapter 290

Chapter 0290 novelbin

Terry continued, listing each girl as well as the points they earned.

Toward the end, he said, "Susie. Two points." He offered no explanation. Susie looked relieved.

"As for our final candidate," Terry began. I held my breath because by now, I was the only one who had yet to be mentioned. "I recommend the royal family dismiss her from the competition entirely."

My breath caught. Some of the other girls turned to look at me. I wanted to crawl out of my skin.

Terry looked straight at the camera, as if speaking directly to the viewers at home. "This woman attempted to seduce me in my own home. She flirted relentlessly. When I attempted to refute her, she grew violent."

He turned toward the royal family. "Please. I implore you. For the sake of the competition... For the good of the kingdom... remove this girl that has been nothing but a blight among us."

The Luna nodded, clearly agreeing.

The King frowned, seemingly less sure.

Beside me Nicholas started growling.

I felt numb, like I was trapped inside of a nightmare. This couldn't be reality. He couldn't have just stood up there on that stage and insisted to the entire world that he was the one who was wronged. That I was the one who attempted to assault him, and not the other way around.

In the King's hesitation, the Queen stepped forward. "Bring Piper to the stage," she demanded.

Guards began to weave through the crowd.

Nicholas tugged me behind him. As the guards came close, he snarled, "Fucking try it, and I'll tear your throat out."

The guards seemed unsure, their brows crumpling.

"I said, bring her to the stage," the Queen said again, more forcefully.

The guards began to inch forward again. The hierarchy was clear. In the royal family and beyond, the Queen's word weighed more than the prince's.

Nicholas's growl became louder. His body tensed. His hands curled like they might become claws.

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