

## **The Luna Choosing Game #Chapter 301 - Read The Luna Choosing Game Chapter 301**

Chapter 301

Chapter 0301

I was speechless.

I didn't want to believe Veronica could have been involved in such a dark thing as the underground organization but the evidence was clear on her ribs.

She lowered her sweater, hiding the tattoo again, but it was seared into my mind now.

It was exactly the same in size and placement as Terry's.

"You're the one who told Julian about the tattoos," I said.

Veronica nodded.

"True, committed members of the underground, were gifted the tattoo.

They were prized, a rite of passage.

I knew that if Terry was in the organization, as Julian had thought, then he would take pride in his tattoo, no matter how dangerous it would be for someone like him to have one."

Julian came around to the front of the couch and sat in a stand-alone chair from which he could see us and the door.

I appreciated his watchfulness.

No one would be able to sneak in or even crack the door enough to listen without his keen observational skills picking up on it.

"You didn't know he was in the organization?" I asked.

"Rarely do the members directly interact with each other.

Especially those of our level.

We have intermediaries that connect us to the will of Hawk or the other leaders."

I still struggled to understand how someone like Veronica, so young and beautiful and noble, could fall in with such a terrible organization that only wanted to do harm.

"I'd showed some magical prowess from a very young age. Since I was a toddler, really," she said.

"My parents were more proud of my abilities, than cautious that someone might want to use them against me."

She closed her eyes and went very tense for a moment.

"My pack is well-renowned, and my parents are very social.

Our house had a constant flow of people in and out.

It didn't take long for the underground to plant a few individuals into my parents' circle."

"They would do that? Attempt to get close to you, despite you being a child?" I asked.

My thoughts were with Elva, and how the underground might attempt to sneak into her life.

"They prefer recruiting children," Veronica said in her usual flat tone.

"Children are malleable. They can't yet create their own opinions, their own thoughts. They can be molded into the perfect little followers."

"Groomed," Julian said.

Veronica agreed.

"Groomed."

"How terrible," I said.

A bit of fear clutched around my heart.

"Yes," Veronica said.

"The organization made me feel like I was special in a way my outgoing +15 BONUS She sighed.

"To my parents, I was a centerpiece, a talking point.

'Oh, look how our daughter can make sparks with her hands.' The underground treated me like a person.

Like I belonged, not to be looked at but to be a part of something bigger."

She shook her head.

"For years, they helped me cultivate my magic while also convincing me that I needed to keep it a secret from everyone.

I didn't understand at first, because she said my magic would be used to help people.

Shouldn't everyone want that help?"

Julian snorted in distaste.

"They lied to you."

"They said most people didn't want my help.

That while our mission was noble, it was something that needed to be done secretly.

We had to help people, whether they agreed or not, and the best way to do that is with them none the wiser."

She slumped in on herself, curling her shoulders downward.

"I knew they were training me to steal wolves from people, but I had no idea it was used to hurt those people. The organization told me the wolves were rabid and harmful. To remove the wolf was to save the shifter."

My stomach twisted at the memory of being restrained.

The pain so hot and intense.

The misery of having a part of myself ripped away without my consent.

"That changed the minute I saw the actual wolf transfer in action,"

Veronica said.

"In that moment... When I saw..."

Her voice became very quiet.

"I knew it was wrong. I knew what she had seen. I had lived through it myself. The pain was bad, but the heartbreak was worse. The loss of the wolf was something to grieve, but there was never any closure.

The wolf still existed but always just out of reach.

Veronica's voice grew stronger again.

"I told my parents the truth after that. It was only through their powerful connections, and many threats from my father and pack leaders, that I was allowed to leave the group. But it is a disgraceful pack secret. One I was honor bound never to reveal."

"Until now," I said.

"When I realized the truth about Terry, I couldn't keep quiet. And that he was after you, Piper ... And you've always been so kind to me. To everyone. I had to help Julian protect you where I could, so I came forward and told him the truth." Veronica frowned.

"I'm sorry I didn't reveal the truth sooner. Gently, I shook my head.

"You told us now. That's what counts. I am no less grateful, I assure you."

"You remain too kind,"

Veronica said, but I disagreed.

Veronica was the one who had lost her childhood to this retched organization.

She deserved

Maybe, someday soon she might have it.

"Julian told me that you are curious if your wolf can be returned," Veronica said.

I immediately straightened.

"Yes, please. Tell me everything you know."

"I believe it is possible," Veronica said.

"If we can find the person who has your wolf..."

"I know who has my wolf," I said.

Veronica nodded.

"The wolf is not diminished in the transfer, though the host may be.

The only risk in returning the wolf might be your own safety."

Julian immediately leaned forward.

"You didn't mention that,"

Veronica had no reaction to his sudden worry.

"I need to do some research, to see if there is a way to retrain your body to become the perfect host for your wolf once more."

"I don't care what the risk is,"

I said, "Piper,"

Julian scolded, disapproving.

"I'm sure Elva will.

And Nicholas.

And maybe even me."

"I will research,"

Veronica said again.

"I'll get you the answers."

I nodded.

"Thank you, Veronica."

"It's penance for all the bad things I've contributed to,"

Veronica said, and it sounded definitive.

She rose to her feet.

"If that is all, I would like to stretch my legs and clear my head."

"Of course,"

Julian said, Veronica nodded and left us.

Julian and I glanced at each other.

"She didn't tell me you would be at risk,"

he said.

"Why does that change anything?"

I asked.

"It just does."

He wouldn't give me any further explanation, 2 When I finally went to the dining room, Nicholas was already there.

He looked up when I entered the room.

He kept glancing at me all through dinner.

Curiosity was in his eyes, presumably about my good mood and lifted spirits, But also there, burned a fire of lust, that dropped down to my bodice on occasion.

My cheeks burned each time.

Still, I was hungry and ate my full meal.

Afterwards, I discreetly excused myself.

Nicholas did punice me into an alcove and kissed my breath away.

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Together, Nicholas and I stumbled into his room.

We had trouble moving, since we couldn't keep our hands off of one another.

As soon as the door closed behind us, Nicholas worked at the fasteners of my dress, not content until the offending garment was removed from me and forming wrinkles on the ground.

I shoved at Nicholas's jacket, pushing it down off of his shoulders.

Then I reached for his buttons and opened them one by one.

It felt like I was unwrapping a present, slowly exposing all the tone muscle underneath.

Nicholas claimed my mouth with his own, kissing me thoroughly, then breaking for breath, only to dive back in and kiss me again.

We tugged and pulled each other toward the bedroom, losing clothing as we went.

Nicholas worked open my bra next.

The instant my breasts bounced free, he closed his mouth over one of my nipples.

I clawed my fingers through his hair, desperate to keep him where he was while he licked and suckled me.

God, it felt so good.

His mouth was so damp and hot.

It was nearly electric, with the way it shocked pleasure through my nerves.

So terribly distracted, I struggled to move my legs.

At least, I couldn't move them quickly enough for Nicholas's liking.

He easily lifted me up against him until my feet dangled.

He dropped me on the bed, then attacked my other breast, lavishing it with the same attention as the first.

"Oh, Nicholas..."

He popped off my nipple, such a sinful, delightful sound.

"I'll never tire of hearing you say my name like that.

Touching and tasting... God, I can't get enough of you.

Hearing you moan my name is the icing on that cake."

He leaned down and kissed me.

At the same time, he trailed his hand down my front, and then slipped his fingers into my panties.

The moment his finger brushed against my clit, I nearly jumped off the bed.

It felt so good.

Too good.

It made me want more.

So much more.

It made me want to break all my rules and beg him to fuck me.

The thought startled me so hard, that I jolted.

Nicholas stilled, watching my face.

"Piper?"



"I... I can't..."

+15 BONUS At once, Nicholas removed his hand from my panties.

He leaned away so that none of him was touching me.

"You can't what?"

I mourned the loss of his closeness, but the distance did give me time to think.

I needed that clarity.

I was so full of lust for him that I felt like I was losing my mind.

I licked my lips.

I wanted him to f uck me.

That was a clear fact in my brain.

But he never could.

Because I was saving myself for my mate, and he was not my mate.

He never could be.

Tears welled in my eyes.

I suddenly felt very cold and alone.

"Piper, what's happening?"

he asked, panic in his voice.

"I want to slow down,"

I said.

I needed to.

My heart was making too many attachments – signing too many checks that my reality couldn't cash.

If we made love like I wanted to, we would cross a line that we could never go back on.

Nicholas likely wouldn't cross that line.

He knew my boundaries.

Knew that I couldn't be trusted when I was out of my mind with lust.

It was me who couldn't be trusted.

"Just for a while,"

I amended quickly.

"Until..."

"You don't have to explain,"

he said.

He rolled away from me.

"I just need to... Is it alright if I .....?"

"Of course,"

I said, nodding aggressively.

He nodded too.

"I will be right back.

Please don't go anywhere.

I will be right back with a clear head and we can talk and hold each other."

"Okay."

He stood off the bed and retreated into the bathroom. novelbin

For a moment, I laid on the bed in total silence, regretting everything I'd ever done that led me to this choice.

I'd said I would help get him off and yet here I was, pulling away.

He seemed okay with it, but I still felt bad.

I still wanted to be able to – "...Mmm..."

I heard a muffled moan coming from the bathroom.

Oh.

Oh.

When he said he needed to... What he meant was that he wanted to masturbate.

Yes, that would help.

Then he would think clearly.

+15 BONUS I listened as hard as I could for more noises from the bathroom, but everything felt so distant.

Slowly, careful as to not make much noise and ruin his pleasure yet again, I crept to the bathroom door where I could hear more clearly.

And I could hear everything.

The slap of skin.

The strained gasps.

The bit back moans.

"Go d... Piper..."

The breathy way he said my name set me afire once more, as if I had been doused in gasoline.

I quickly stuffed my own hand into my panties and began rubbing at my clit.

Nicholas was ahead of me in chasing his pleasure, but I quickly caught up, until I was touching myself at the same brisk pace he was using.

I imagined seeing his di ck, ready for it to be pushed inside of me.

I knew he was big.

I wondered what it would feel like.

Would it hurt? The only thing I could think was that I would feel so full.

I always felt so empty.

To be filled gave me such an intense longing that I reached the crest of pleasure faster than I meant to.

"Ah.Ah.Piper.Ah.Yes.Just like that."

His sounds were driving me wild.I was so close.

If he would just – A moan broke from his throat.

"Aa-aah!"

I felt it vibrate through me all the way to my core.

I came in my panties, fingers rubbing desperately at my cl it, biting back my own cry of Nichola s's name.

Then I hobbled back to the bed before my legs gave out.

After another moment, Nicholas appeared from the bathroom.

His hair was disheveled and his cheeks slightly pink, but he seemed more coherent than he had when he went in there.

By now, my faculties had somewhat returned.

He held out his hand for me and I took it.

He kissed me softly.

I broke it to collect my clothes from the floor.

Nicholas followed along, collecting his too.

I found my bra nearby, and then my dress nearer the door.

As I pulled it on, I noticed a set of pictures hanging on the wall that I hadn't noticed the last time I had been there.

From the layer of dust, it was likely the pictures had been there for a while, and it was simply me who hadn't noticed.

+15 BONUS They were photos of Nicholas from his younger years, from even before I met him.

The center picture, the biggest, was the one that caught my eye.

In it, a girl sat between a school-aged Nicholas and Julian with her arms hooked through both of theirs.

Nicholas pushed his arms into his shirt and began refastening the buttons.

"Nick?"

I asked, and he came closer.

"Who is this girl?"

"Oh,"

he said.

A small smile stretched his lips.

"That's a childhood friend.

Bridget."

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Chapter 0303

Bridget.

The girl that Julian had said he loved who Nicholas had stolen away from him. This girl in the picture, wearing a bright smile, wedged between Julian and Nicholas, was her.

A younger version than who she was now, but at least I finally had a face to place with the name. Even as a young teenager, she was beautiful, with a head of loose blonde curls, and a big, toothy smile.

Her blue eyes were bright with life and joy.

She seemed the kind of person that lightened those around her, if Nicholas's and Julian's easy, matching smiles were anything to go by. Nicholas finished dressing and came closer.

"The three of us were thick as thieves back then. We did everything together. Julian, ever the instigator, led us straight into trouble. Bridget followed him blindly, and I followed her." He laughed.

"Once, he had her entirely convinced that he found a tunnel that led to the center of the earth. I was skeptical, but Bridget believed anything those days. Julian took us to a cave and we got lost, of course.

We were only missing an hour, but it was long enough for our parents to cause an uproar.

"We stumbled out of the cave and straight into a massive search party. Julian was grounded for three months. I knew he was bluffing the entire time about having found a path to the center of the earth. Bridget, though... She defended him until we all parted ways.

"What happened?" I asked.

"You seemed so close. What could change?" Nicholas's eyes went distant a moment.

"We grew up." I waited a moment, but he seemed to be unwilling to give more information than that.

Or he was simply lost in a memory.

Either way, the wall between me and his past seemed thicker than it had before, I wasn't sure how to sneak past it. "What happened to Bridget?"

I asked. Nicholas startled, like he had forgotten I was there.

I frowned, but tried not to let it get to me.

I knew what it was like to be lost to nostalgia.

It wasn't a personal slight against me. I just wished he hadn't been lost on a nostalgia trip thinking of another woman. "We all went our separate paths," Nicholas said.

"I haven't seen her in years. Well, except for in the movies... She's a big actress now." I didn't watch many movies.

I'd never been willing to spend the money I didn't have, when I so desperately needed it for other things like food and rent. But now that Nicholas mentioned it, I did faintly recognize her face, likely from posters or Julian, Bridget was the one that got away.

I wasn't entirely sure yet if he was telling the full truth about what happened, but I could easily believe that much. I wondered how many other hearts she'd broken along the way. Was Nicholas one of them? Looking at him now, he wasn't giving much indication.

His eyes were on me, his smile soft.

He was present again, returned from the nostalgia trip that had claimed him only a few minutes ago. This untangled some of the tight web of emotions in my chest.

Even if Julian had been right, and Bridget was a part of their past lives, they had all moved on now.

Nicholas was here with me. Though there weren't any pictures of me in this room. Okay, maybe it still stung a little. "I should go,"

I said. He hesitated, then agreed.

"Okay." The door wasn't far.

I walked there, with Nicholas close behind me. "Piper,"

he said, as I reached for the doorknob.

I glanced back. His eyes were deep wells, showing a sea of emotion.

Maybe he was still stuck in the past, or maybe he was here with me now.

I couldn't really tell.

I only knew he was about to say something, and it might be something we would both come to regret, since we were who we were. "Piper, I – I placed my fingers to his lips, stopping him before it was too late.

If he spoke of his affection for me, I didn't know if I would be able to hold myself back. "We have to slow down, Nick.

It's too dangerous otherwise." He pressed a soft kiss to my fingertips.

"Dangerous for who?" "Both of us."

I pulled my hand away. "Piper "I'm serious, Nick.

We can steal moments here and there, but we'll never be able to stay together.

If we talk about this thing between us... if we give it a name and a life, it will only hurt us later." He closed his eyes.

"It doesn't have to."

"But it will."

I was so sure of it.

"At least for me."

I licked my lips.

I didn't want to admit my own feelings, but if I did, maybe he would understand.

"Until I can properly distance my heart around you, we shouldn't fool around like we have been." "Distance your heart...?" "Don't make me explain.

Please." His mouth snapped shut, but his gaze bore into me like he could see deep down into my soul.

Whatever he saw, pained him.



I could tell by the way the corner of his mouth curved down. "I don't want to hurt you," he said.

"Then don't," I replied.

"Let me say goodnight." He swallowed hard. It made his Adam's apple bob.

"So long as it's not goodbye." I smiled, though it was sad.

"You know better than that. I'm still in the competition..."

"That's not what I mean."

He reached for my hand and placed it, palm flat, on his chest over his heart.

Under my hand, I felt the strong, steady beat of his heart. He didn't mean goodbye as in us never seeing each other, he meant it in that we might not get more quiet moments like this. He was leaving it up to me.

Whatever I wanted, I was sure he would go along with.

Even the hold he had on my wrist was light, so that I could pull away at any moment I wished. I didn't want to be distant from him.

Truly, I wanted to tug him back into his bedroom, lay with him, and never leave his side for the rest of my life.

If he was just another man, maybe we could have made that fantasy a reality. Unfortunately, he was not just another man, he was a prince.

And I was a commoner who would never be able to be his wife. I leaned into him, brought my lips up to his and placed a gentle kiss against his mouth. He closed his eyes.

One of his arms snaked around my waist and held me to him.. I sighed in his arms.

He was so perfect, my heart ached.

If only we were any two different people than who we were. But... Slowly, I pulled back from him.

His eyes remained closed for a few seconds longer before blinking open to gaze down at me.

The green flickered in their golden depths.

"After I distance my heart,"

I said, "Then we can continue..." He nodded, even as some of the emotion shut off behind his eyes.

"I understand," he said, I went to the door, stepped out into the hallway, and didn't look back.

Chapter 304

Chapter 0304

Nicholas

Piper wanted to distance her heart. She felt she was too close to me. She needed space before she could kiss me again, or touch me, or let me please her the way I wanted to.

I understood her feelings. I knew as well as she did that we could never be together. But... to be apart from her like this... I hated it.

I didn't want her to distance herself. I didn't want her to put her heart on ice, and withdraw her feelings. It was only because we felt so strongly for one another that our stolen moments together had been so thrilling and so satisfying.

My love for Piper had never dimmed in these years apart. Yes, hurt had festered into something dark when I had thought she left me for another man. But now that I knew the truth, I could admit to myself that the anger and betrayal I had felt stemmed from love.

In fact, my affections for her had only grown since our reunion for this competition.

She wanted to find a way to put her feelings for me on hold. Meanwhile, I didn't know if such a thing were possible for me. Three years apart hadn't chilled my heart. I doubted a lifetime away from her would make me care for her less.

I didn't care that we couldn't be together. I wanted her as much as I could have her now, so that in my future moments of loneliness, I could look back and remember.

But if she felt differently... I would never push her.

Instead, I would swallow down the loss I felt, grief in my own way, and wait until she would let me bask in the glow of her pleasure once again. Even if it would hurt me, knowing she had tucked her heart away, out of my reach.

Sighing, I pushed a hand through my hair and tried to organize my priorities.

Regardless of Piper's feelings for me now, or in the future, the time would eventually come when we would be forced to part, and I needed to be ready for that.

I needed to make certain she and Elva would be protected.

I checked the time, then went back into my room for my jacket.

Half an hour later, I met with Julian near the foyer. He had his arms crossed and was leaning against one of the columns near the entryway. He looked up when I came closer but didn't otherwise move.

"You're late," Julian said.

"Only by a few minutes," I said, though felt guilty. If Piper hadn't left me, I would have been brother who hated me,

Julian smirked a little, but there was no joy in it. "Piper okay?"

"She's fine," I said.

Julian rolled his eyes. "Sure."

The tension between Julian and I felt palpable, like something that could so easily take physical form. I knew it was my fault. Over the years, I'd blamed Julian for many things much of which he was responsible for. But perhaps my usual assumption of his guilt was... misguided this time.

"I'm sorry," I said, though the words were uncomfortable in my mouth. "I should have taken you with me when I spoke to our father about Terry."

“Damn right you should have.”

I swallowed down my annoyance. I was apologizing. It would do no use to get angry again now.

“If it wasn’t for your help, we would not have been able to take down Terry,” I said.

“And don’t you forget it,” Julian snapped, irking my nerves.

“I am trying to apologize,” I said. “I deserve credit for it.”

“You want credit for everything. I’m allowed to be pissed at you.”

“You can be pissed without causing a scene.

“A scene for who? It’s just us. Who cares if we argue or not?” Julian kicked off the wall. “You are so stuffy, brother. That infallible nature of yours will be your undoing if you aren’t careful.”

Chapter 305

Chapter 0305

“It’s not a fault to be dependable,” I said.

“It is if it makes you immovable. You have to be more willing to be wrong.”

I closed my mouth and glared at him. As usual, my sharp looks seemed to bounce right off of him without taking hold.

“Come on,” Julian began walking. He didn’t look back, expecting me to fall in line behind him. Damn him, I needed to, for Piper’s sake, so I did. “We can’t keep our dear uncle waiting.” novelbin

Together, Julian and I walked out of the palace and toward the guard barracks. In the basement beneath their facility was a type of prison. Julian jokingly called it, ‘the dungeon,’ though that title wasn’t far from the truth.

It had been built long ago and though lighting and plumbing had been added later, it still maintained a certain level of castle dungeon aesthetic: thick stone walls, iron bars, chains on the walls. The interrogation rooms were once torture rooms, though no torture took place now.

At least, none that I was privy to know about. I had suspicions though.

Terry was kept in a special cell at the end of the long, narrow hall. His cell was dimly lit, with only a bulb light on the ceiling in the middle of the stone room. Terry's hands were bound in shackles. His hair was messed, his beard overgrown.

I blinked, seeing him like this. I'd never seen the man in such a state of disarray.

"How delightful it is that my nephews came to visit me," Terry said, distain dripping from his voice like poison. "What the hell more could you possibly want from me?"

The shock wore off Julian much faster than me.

"Call off Jane," Julian said. "Before Piper gets hurt."

Terry, who was sitting on the floor, dropped his head back against the wall. "Jane went for her head, did she? I imagined she would. It was only my lust for the girl that kept her safe from Jane's wrath."

"Call. Her. Off," I said now, adding an Alpha threat into my voice.

Terry glanced at me incredulously, and then laughed – loud and hard and mocking.

"What the hell is so funny?" Julian asked sharply. He was losing his patience too, it seemed.

"The both of you are, thinking I have any say over what Jane does." Terry's laugh ebbed, though the mockery remained in the patronizing lilt of his tone. "She is higher up in the underground organization than I am, you blubbering fools. She was only ever with my by

I freeze, the words slicing through me. Jane is...? How could that be?

But, looking back, I supposed it made sense. Per the letter welcoming Terry to the underground, his admittance had been rather recent. More recent than Jane, from what Piper had previously indicated.

Jane had fallen in with a wayward crowd at a young age. She'd had more time to rise in their ranks.

“Piper is graver danger than she ever was with me running free,” Terry said with a smile. My distress clearly amused him. His eyes stayed on my face, as a smirk curled his lips. “Jane can be quite the little hellspawn when she wants to be. Fantastic in bed, too. Probably like her sister.”

Julian groaned. “Please, stop.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, ignoring his comments that were only meant to further upset me. “It doesn’t matter. We will chase Jane from the palace, and without your help, she won’t be able to return.”

Terry laughs again. “You are so sure about that!”

“Why the hell wouldn’t we be?” Julian growled.

Terry stifled himself, but only so long to say, “You think I’m the only connection Jane has in the palace?”

Then he laughed and laughed.

As my stomach sunk lower and lower.

Chapter 306

Chapter 0306

The next morning, as Elva played with her toys, I sat and drank tea with Charlotte and Mark.

Per the competition rules, I wasn’t allowed to watch television to keep up to date with current events, but Charlotte and Mark were, and oftentimes, we would sit, just like this, and go over the thoughts and rumors of the public about me or the competition.

Today was a special kind of exception.

“Every channel is still discussing Terry’s arrest,” Charlotte said. “Arresting him so publically has caused something of an uproar.”

“It was necessary,” Mark said. “Only with the public’s support, will we be able to take down the underground. Everyone has to help.”

"I get it," Charlotte replied, "But that's not how the public sees it. They see a royal family with corrupt connections. If Terry was this deep in the organization, then maybe the others are too." At Mark's growing frown, she quickly held up her hands. "That's what they think, not me!"

Mark frowned deeper, but at least looked away this time.

"You know I'm right," Charlotte said. "You've seen the demonstrations out front same as me."

I had seen them too. Crowds of protesters were appearing just outside the gate. They held signs with slogans disparaging the royal family. Someone had a bullhorn.

"They've lost faith in the royal family," Charlotte said. "They need to build it back."

"There may be some difficulty with that," Mark said. He glanced at me. "There is some talk among the royal family and the producers that the competition be placed on hold."

"What?" I gasped.

Since Terry's arrest, the previous event had been called into question. Terry's inappropriate behavior had not gone unnoticed by the public, and people were calling any standing gained or lost in that event to be thrown out.

The royal family and the producers would need time to determine their next move.

Still, I was surprised that the royal family would actually take that time, considering the tensions growing just outside their front gate.

"Placing the competition on hold is the worst thing they could do," Charlotte said. "The only way to turn around the public perception is to continue to build goodwill through the competition. Cutting it short only hurts them."

"The royal family can't make any decision rashly," Mark said. "They would risk doing more harm than good."

I nodded along with both. I could see both sides. If I allowed myself to consider fully, I would likely agree with Charlotte. The competition could

generate the goodwill necessary to bring the public away from Terry's corruption.

However, I was tired. Lately the events had brought only danger down on me. A break to relax and regather myself sounded awfully nice.

"What do you think, Piper?" Charlotte asked me. Mark looked at me too.

I slouched down in my chair a little. "I really don't know."

That opinion wasn't very Luna of me. Luna's were to be decisive and strong-willed.

But I was exhausted. From my sister nearly killing me to having to push away the man I desired more than any other, I didn't want to do much other than crawl back under my covers and forget the world for a while.

I only wished I could be that selfish.

Later, as I walked through the hallways, I caught sight through the window of the driveway, and the growing crowd beyond. The number of protesters had doubled since I had last seen it, and it was no small amount before.

The sheer number was startling. They stood strong, taking up all of the street, nearly as far as I could see in both directions.

They seemed angry too, chanting and jeering. Even through the walls, I heard their angry voices, cheering as one. "Liars! Cheaters! Thieves!"

Someone screamed at the top of their lungs, "Death to Tyrants!"

Chapter 307

Chapter 0307

Things were direr than even Charlotte had made it seem.

My stomach twisted into knots. The people's accusations weren't limited to singular nouns. They weren't just talking about Terry and no one else.

The use of plural told me they meant the entire royal family, including Nicholas. This meant he was in grave danger. If the people turned on the



royal family, if they thought to overthrow them, they would not stop with just the King.

Flashes of Nicholas trapped in a prison cell came through my mind. Or worse. Maybe they would kill him.

The dark thoughts took hold of my heart so strongly that I couldn't remember where I had been headed. I only knew where I wanted to go now: to see Nicholas, to place my eyes on him. and know that he was safe.

I darted in the direction of his personal rooms. Along the way, I noticed the increased number of guards around the palace. At first, I chalked it up to the increase in the number of protestors. It made sense to increase the protection of the royal family when they were being threatened. novelbin

But then, as I came around the corner, I heard a set of voices, and recognized that these. guards were here for a more specific purpose.

To personally guard their princes, Nicholas and Julian. As well as to...

"We've thoroughly checked this passageway, Sir," said one of the guards. "It was clear."

"Good," Nicholas said. "Keep a guard posted there. This one leads to the kitchens, which is a pivotal location. We cannot allow any intruders there."

"Yes, Sir," said the guard.

I stepped into the room from which I heard the voices, and found Nicholas and Julian peering over a familiar set of maps and blueprints. We'd used those blueprints to find the secret passageway that had led from the cellar to Terry's mansion.

Several sets of guards were scattered through the room. Some were disappearing into an opening in the middle of the wall. A bookcase had been shoved out of the way. A painting had been knocked to the ground. No one had bothered lifting it.

Julian spotted me first. "Ah, Piper. There you are. We were hoping you would stop by."

"You were?" I asked.

Nicholas looked up too, then. His eyes met mine, held them for a moment, and then dropped

Julian smiled wider, as if to compensate for Nicholas's coldness. He didn't have to do that. I knew I was the one to blame for the wall between Nicholas and myself now.

Julian waved me closer, so I walked to his side. He traced his finger over a secret passageway in the map.

"See this here?" he asked. "We're checking this one next. One by one, we'll get through them all."

"We're also searching for the ones that aren't on this map," Nicholas said.

Julian nodded, grim. "Terry made alterations on his own. We've had soldiers dig through his private documents, searching for his own personal maps, but so far we've come up empty."

"He kept everything," Nicholas said.

Terry shrugged. "There are many damning pieces of evidence against Terry in his mansion. Unfortunately, none of the ones we've found so far are the ones we need."

"Why the search?" I asked. "What could be found in these passages?"

Nicholas lifted his gaze to mine again. "You know why."

Jane. "Surely she left the palace while she had the chance. Without Terry..."

"It's worse than you think, Piper," Julian said. He glanced at his brother. "Worse than we thought too."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Julian sighed.

Nicholas spoke, "Jane has more influence than any of us have given her credit for."

I blinked. I still didn't understand.

Nicholas paused a moment, then spoke again, "We believe she might be Hawk's right hand."

Chapter 308

Chapter 0308

I thought of my twin sister, a child trailing along in my shadow in her pigtails and plaid dress the same as mine, skipping away from me and down a dark alleyway. At the far end, a shadowy figure held out their hand. Jane, willing and happy, accepted that hand and welcomed the shadow around her too.

How could it be that a girl so near me in looks and personality, could have taken such a veering path to mine? For her to be so high ranking in the organization meant she had to have pursued it for a very long time longer than these past 3 years.

I shouldn't have been surprised anymore. Jane had cut into my heart so many times. She

wanted me dead.

But it still hurt anew, to know the woman Jane was now was so far removed from the girl I knew, that the girl I knew might not have existed at all.

Nicholas came around the table and stood at my side. He didn't touch me, but his closeness alone was a comfort I was incredibly grateful for.

"I'm assigning more guards to your room," Nicholas said. "You shouldn't go anywhere without a personal guard following beside you. Do you understand?"

I didn't. Not really. The protestors outside were not there to call me a tyrant. Nicholas was the one in actual danger. Julian too.

Nicholas must have been able to discern my confusion. I was never very good at keeping my feelings from my face..

"We're looking for Jane," Nicholas said. "With her being such a high ranking member of the underground, it's possible she has... others helping her."

"Others, who?" I asked.

“If we knew that, we wouldn’t be in this mess,” Julian chimed in. “Maybe we should have everyone strip. See who has the tattoo.’

Nicholas considered it. “Our loyal guards would acquiesce, but it will be much more difficult to convince those that are actually guilty of going along with it.”

Julian snorted. “Dear old dad likely won’t lift his shirt.”

“You don’t think...” The King?

“No,” Nicholas said quickly. “The King is not likely to be involved, and I will remind you, Julian, that suggesting otherwise is treason.”

Julian shrugged. “I’m only saying that if he did it, everyone else would do it too. But we

“Regardless,” Nicholas said, speaking to me again. “We have reason to believe that someone is

helping her. And until we find her, you cannot be left unprotected.”

I understood that now. Jane wanted me dead. If someone was letting her into the palace, she would have no shortage of opportunities to come for my head.

A dash of fear zipped through me and I shuddered.

Nicholas inched closer to me. His arm brushed alongside mine. For a moment, I closed my

eyes and soaked up the flashing warmth of that touch.

Then, a voice, turned us both away.

“Your Royal Highness,” said a new guard who had rushed into the room. He was out of breath, his cheeks red from exertion. “We’ve discovered a new passage, one not on any of the maps.”

Nicholas and Julian glanced at each other.

“Let’s go,” Julian said. He scooped the maps up into his arms.

“I’m coming too!” I announced.

Nicholas looked at me, a stern look in his eyes. Yet just as I thought he was going to say no, and I was going to have to argue, he nodded. novelbin

“Stay close.”

The secret passage was inside one of the smaller libraries in the palace, far from the beaten path the candidates and royal family regularly frequented.

“Most of the books here are over a hundred years old,” Nicholas said.

I inspected the beautiful old spines of the books. Most seemed good as new, dated only by the elaborate decoration of their covers and spines.

“I want to come back here,” I said in amazement. When the danger had passed, I would love to be lost for a while within these tomes and these stories, surrounded by the smell of a library and the dash of lavender that a servant had placed on a hook at the end of a bookcase.

“I promise,” Nicholas said.

The passageway was deep within the stacks, tucked away within the bookcase itself. It was a narrow opening, Nicholas and Julian would have to be careful not to hit their heads.

“How did you ever find this?” I asked.

“We suspected this room held something,” Julian said, lifting a rolled-up map. “It’s close to many places, but far from our regular route. It’s where I would have put in a passageway.”

Julian set aside the maps onto one of the tables on the library then followed a guard into the

passageway. A moment later, his head reappeared. “It’s an old one. The stone ground is uneven. Be careful, Piper.”

“She’s not going in,” Nicholas said, but Julian disappeared again quickly without listening.

“I am going in,” I said, and rushed to the opening.

“Piper!” Nicholas called, following behind me.

I was slighter than him, I slipped into the passageway without much effort. He, meanwhile, had to crumple himself up some to stay with me.

He moved quickly, however, even like that, so he stayed near. His hand slipped around me. Please don't run off without me."

"I'm safe," I said. "Julian's here too." Though he was so far ahead, I could only make out the outline of his body in the flashlight several yards ahead.

Then, at once, a loud crash sounded from the far end of the passageway, it echoed down the corridor, coming closer.

Nicholas grabbed by arm and yanked me into the hard line of his body. It was a tight fit, but somehow, he managed to press me against the wall of the passageway, with his body covering mine.

His breath was even. I felt his chest rise and fall. Mine, meanwhile, was going wild.

His hands were on either sides of my waist, keeping me still and safe.

His body was all around mine, so close, it was as if we were one.

I looked up at him, and found his golden gaze peering down at me, watchful and alert.

"Are you hurt?" he whispered.

I shook my head a little, just once. It was all I could manage.

This close, his lips were so near mine. All I would have to do is press forward just a hair and

"Hey!" Julian called from further down the passageway. "You guys are going to want to see this!"

I swallowed hard.

Nicholas eased back away from me.

I immediately felt colder. My heart ached.

"Stay behind me," Nicholas said, and I was too speechless to argue.

I stayed in his shadow as we pressed forward. Eventually, the passage opened into a tiny room with a small desk and a patch of hay covered with a blanket in the corner, a makeshift bed.

A second passage led from the room in the other direction. Julian stood there, barking orders.

“Get down there and see where that comes out. Keep an eye out for any offshoots in the passage. Check the ceiling too.”

When the guard disappeared, he turned back to Nicholas and I. He waved toward the desk.

There was a handwritten note, pinned to the wood with the sharp end of a dagger.

In my sister’s delicate scrawl, written text read, You’ll never catch me.

Chapter 309

Chapter 0309

In the following days, new rules were assigned to the candidates. None were allowed to wander the palace without a personal guard. No one was allowed outside, not even into the gardens.

The King and Queen had totally barricaded themselves away. Joyce had too. Only Nicholas and Julian could occasionally be seen, flittering through the hallways with maps and blueprints under their arms.

They’ve kept me privy to their activities, mostly with messages sent through Mark.

Despite the number of passageways found, my sister remained like a ghost. She always seemed to be one step ahead. No one really knew how it was possible. Julian and Nicholas were getting more and more frustrated.

The tension in the palace was cracking, soon to break one way or another. The candidates were stir- crazy. Even the guard seemed unnerved. Outside, the protestors chanted day and night without end.

One morning, at breakfast, Tiffany dropped her face onto her empty plate and said, “I’m going to scream.”

Veronica calmly continued to eat her oatmeal.

Susie leaned forward. "All this is only temporary," she said. Then she looked at me. "Right?"

I worried my bottom lip with my teeth. Truthfully, I had no idea. No one did. That was part of the reason everyone was so on edge.

"I..."

"Piper," Nathan said from the doorway, startling me so badly, I nearly jumped out of my skin. Susie placed a concerned hand on my shoulder.

"You okay, Mommy?" Elva asked from my other side. Her eyes were wide and fearful. She hadn't asked many questions lately about what was going on, but surely even she could feel the terse environment around her.

I immediately wanted to put her at ease, so I forced a smile. "Of course, dear. I'm sorry to have scared you."

"It's okay," she said, but looked at me strangely, like she didn't quite believe me.

Nathan stepped closer to us.

"My apologies," I said to him, as I pushed myself up from my chair. "What did you need of me?"

"The King wishes to see you," Nathan said.

A hush fell across the table. Most of the candidates looked at me with curiosity. Lilliana and Olivia stared at me with daggers in their eyes.

I looked at Susie, "Susie, can you walk Elva to her room?"

Susie brightened. To suggest such a thing, meant she would soon see Mark again,

"This matter concerns the child as well," Nathan said suddenly, Susie's smile fell. Mine did too. "Bring the child with you."

"My name is Elva," Elva said. I



Nathan gave her a flat look. Elva wilted a little.

I held out my hand for her. "We'll go together, okay?"

Elva nodded and placed her small hand in mine.

I didn't this. Why would the King want to see Elva as well? What matters could possibly concern her? She was just an innocent child.

But I knew I couldn't ask. To even infer that the King might not have the best reasons for doing anything could be akin to treason, depending. And while the King might not be looking to kill me, I had no doubts the royal family was always on the hunt for reasons to have me kicked out.

I couldn't give him those reasons, so I followed Nathan with Elva beside me. We left the dining room and were led to a sitting room where the King, the Luna, and Julian were waiting. As we walked through the door, I felt as if we were disturbing an argument. They all looked stressed.

Julian then looked at me and Elva and smiled. He jumped to his feet.

As he came closer, I hissed quietly, "What is this about?"

He shook his head, then turned his attention to Elva. "Why don't you stay with me, little princess? I'll show you another fun trick while the adults have a talk."

"Oh, yes!" Elva said excitedly. She looked up at me. "Can I, Mommy, please?"

I couldn't say no to that pleading face even if I wanted to. I could also tell that Julian was trying to spare Elva from some harsh conversation. I felt unnerved, like I wasn't sure what I was walking into, but knowing Elva would be spared from it was a comfort.

"Yes, you can," I said. "Have fun."

Elva cheered as she moved from holding my hand to holding Julian's. "We won't go far," Julian said, and started leading her to the other side of the room. Curiously, I noticed cameras

To find out, I knew I would have to face the King and Queen, two people who I knew disliked me.

I swallowed down my fear and unease and approached them. They were sitting together on a matching pair of chairs. A deck of cards was on the table between them, cards a mess like they had played a game.

“Sit, Piper,” the King said, which gave me pause. In my previous meetings, the King never seemed to care about my comfort. This made me more concerned, but I took the third seat at the table, the one

Julian had been using.

“As you know, our image has taken a hit since the arrest of Terry,” the King said. The Luna glowered down at her hands in her lap. “To help that image, we need you and Julian to become a more serious couple.”

I blinked, surprised. I didn’t know what I had been expecting, but it wasn’t... that.

“The people love you, Piper, even with your low standings and poor showing in the past few events,” the Luna said. She sounded resentful about it. She wouldn’t look me in the eye.

The King gave her a look but she was too busy glaring at her hands to see it.

To me, the King said, “If we make it appear as if you accept and trust the royal family, despite the... situations that happened with Terry, then the rest of the kingdom might follow your lead. The easiest way to achieve this, we’ve decided, is for you and Julian to fall in love.” (1

“Not for real, of course,” the Luna added quickly. She gave the King her own look.

“I couldn’t care less if it’s real or not,” the King said. “At this point, we just need it to look believable. Give the people something pleasant to focus on while we sort out this nasty Terry business behind the scenes.”

The Queen frowned deeper. She clearly hated this plan. For her to even help suggest it only spoke to how truly dire the situation was.

The royal family had to be in worse trouble than I thought.

Which meant Nicholas was in danger.

If the people revolt, he would be second in line behind the King. They would not be kind to him.

If I could somehow keep that from happening, I could keep Nicholas safe. After everything he had done for me, didn't I owe him that?

And even if I didn't owe him that, wouldn't I still do it?

I yearned, deep in my bones, to protect that man and keep him safe. I was no great warrior. I

contribute to any kind of think tank.

But I could do this.

I could pretend to be in love... @ With Julian.

Chapter 310

Chapter 0310

With the cameras arranged, I was immediately escorted by Nathan to the other side of the room where Julian was teaching Elva how to hide a card up her sleeve. Behind me, and Queen were escorted by guards out of the room.

I crossed my arms as I peered down at Julian. He smiled sheepishly up at me.

"Are you angrier with me for what's about to happen with the cameras, or that I was teaching Elva how to cheat at cards?" he asked.

"Both," I said.

"Fair."

"Mommy, look!" Elva lifted her sleeves and ten cards came spilling out.

Julian laughed. "She's an enthusiastic learner."

I shook my head, even as I knelt down beside them. "Elva, you shouldn't learn things from Julian."

"But Jul-an is fun!" she said.

I slide a glance his way.

He smirks. "More fun than Nicholas?" His eyes are alight. He is clearly expecting an answer of a

positive sort.

"No!" Elva said. "Nick-lass is best." 2

"Elva," I chided softly.

"What?" she asked.

I worried Julian might be angry, but he just laughs. Still, behind it, somewhere in his see a dash of hurt. He doesn't mention it so neither do I, not wanting to embarrass him.

gaze,

I

"Why don't we pick up the mess we made, hm?" I asked Elva, who immediately agreed and started collecting the cards.

With her distracted, I turned toward Julian. He was already looking at me. novelbin

"You going to be okay with this?" I asked him.

He seemed surprised. "Shouldn't I be asking you that?"

I shrug a little. "It seems unfair to both of us." I glanced at Elva as she reached for a card hidden under the couch. "All of us," I amended.

"I regret any hurt or confusion this causes Elva," Julian said. "But pretending to be fond of you is no great challenge, Piper." I brought my attention back to Julian. He acted like this sometimes, said or did things that made me wonder if the fondness he felt for me carved deeper than friendship. He always seemed to pull away before I could get too close to the truth. Or maybe it was me who pulled away, afraid of what I would find if I looked too closely. Julian was as off-limits as Nicholas was. More so, being Nicholas's brother. I was fond of him, cared for him deeply, but the depths of my feelings for Julian could never match what I felt for Nicholas.

For now, though, I would have to pretend.

“Will you be able to do this?” Julian asked me. Leaning closer, he let his voice drop low.

“Yes,” I said. “For the good of the kingdom.” For Ni chola s’s sake.

The producers finished setting up, and then waved for us to begin. We sat with Elva for a while, playing cards. Julian taught her a trick while I fondly watched. That part wasn’t hard. I wasn’t playing pretend.

But then, with Elva distracted with her cards, Julian and I stepped off to the side. We sat together on a nearby couch, legs touching from hip to knee. Julian slipped his arm around my waist.

Julian nuzzled at my cheek. In my ear, he whispered, “You are too tense. You look like you are about to slap me at any moment.”

I knew that, I did. But I had no idea how to calm down.

“Deep breaths,” Julian guided me. “Let your shoulders relax. I’m not going to hurt you.”

“I know that,” I whispered, because it felt important for him to know.

He traced his hand up the length of my arm to my shoulder, then jumped to cradle by cheek. He turned my face toward him. It took everything I had not to pull away.

His eyes were a little sad as he took me in.

“Piper,” he said. Softer, he added, “Pretend I’m him.”