

The Luna Choosing Game #Chapter 321 - Read The Luna Choosing Game Chapter 321

Chapter 321

Chapter 0321

Nicholas

A late night knock rattled my door, rousing me from my sleep. I groaned, threw my arm over my eyes, and turned over, ready to ignore it.

But then it came again, louder.

Sighing, I lowered my arm and checked my clock. Midnight.

Who could be trying to reach me now?

My heart immediately jumped into my throat. Piper.

Who else would visit me this late? Unannounced?

Perhaps she had changed her mind about pushing the distance between us. Maybe she wanted me to hold her again. God, I couldn't wait to feel her in my arms once more.

In a rush, I threw back my blankets and hopped from my bed. At the door, I wasted no time in drawing it open.

When I saw Piper there, a sense of relief surged through me so fully, I nearly toppled over. My knees went weak. My heart thundered out of control.

"Piper," I said.

At once, she pounced toward me, jumping straight into my willing arms. She wrapped her own arms around my neck, and hooked her legs around my waist. Her mouth found mine, latching on for a passionate kiss.

She was being more aggressive than usual, demanding where usually she allowed me the lead. But who was I to deny her? Or to deny myself, when she was all that I ever wanted?

I could be malleable, if this was how she wanted me every now and then. Whatever kept her mouth on mine and her body pressed against me.

God, I had missed her so much, I had felt her seeped down into my very bones. Her name was carved along my ribs, I was certain. Her voice, her mouth, her body, everything about her was seared into my heart.

I couldn't exist without my want of her, my love.

Which was why I felt so confused when my soul, which usually burned brightly in her presence, felt more unsure than happy.

In the back of my mind, my wolf began to growl – not with its usual possessive intent, but with something darker... something warning...

Piper's hands slipped into the space between us. She was undressing herself.

"Whoa," I said, breaking the kiss. "Slow down, Piper. It's okay. I'm here, we've got all night." Piper shook her head. "Want you," she said, voice rough.

No, this felt like too big a difference from the last time I had seen her. Was that why my wolf was unhappy? We needed to make sure this was what she truly wanted, and she wasn't just acting because she thought I wanted this.

"No. We need to talk first." I tried to lower her down, but her legs wouldn't release from around me. "Piper?"

I looked up at her, desperate to know her expression. What I saw there sent a violent shiver through me.

You stupid asshole, I thought at myself, hating myself in that moment.

Piper – no, Jane – wrapped a collar around my neck.

Knowing this wasn't Piper, I dropped her and stumbled backwards. Jane landed on her feet like I had barely inconvenienced her. A sharp smirk quirked one corner of her mouth.

I tugged at the collar but it wouldn't budge. "What is this?"

"Be a good little dog, and sit," Jane said. Shame went through me. How could I ever think this vile woman with her sharp, vindictive voice could ever be my beautiful and kind Piper?

Jane's command sent a zip of pain shooting through my body. I grit my teeth, not wanting to show weakness.

"Is this how you mean to play?" she asked. "You think you can fight one of the strongest anti-werewolf measures in the underground?"

A magical collar? Designed to debilitate a werewolf?

"You will not control me," I growled. My wolf itched under the surface of my skin. The collar had chained him back, but we both fought against those binds. The collar was powerful magic, but we would not go down without a fight.

"You seemed quite eager to do my bidding up until a moment ago," she said, and winked.

Disgust churned in my stomach. I'd need a shower to remove her scent. I'd use all the mouthwash in the kingdom to get the taste of my mouth.

I could do neither of those things now, so I had to settle for staining my floors with her blood.

Roaring against the hold of the collar, I tensed all my muscles and shot forward. She was quick and darted out of the way.

"You wouldn't hurt me, would you?" she teased. "Not when I look so much like your beloved Piper."

"You are nothing like her!" I growled.

She lifted her chin. "We wear the same face, you oaf. That had been more than enough for you when you kissed me." She tapped her finger against the side of her mouth as her smile grew. "Do you think Piper will be upset with that? She's so fond of you. It would break her little heart."

Rage grew within me, an ever-burning flame. I would never let her get away with purposefully hurting Piper.

I lunged for her again. My hands, half claws now, sliced into the meat of her arm. She yelped as she dodged away before I could take hold.

"You fucking dog." Cursing, she rushed to an innocuous part of the wall. There was nothing there, just a picture of a sailboat and some crown molding.

She reached up, touched part of the sailboat, and an entire door opened right there in that spot on the wall. I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it. There hadn't been any creases in the wall, no giveaways at all.

This secret passage had been perfectly hidden, even here, in my private rooms. How long had it been there, sitting unnoticed?

From the new doorway, a score of men dressed in black came pouring out. Members of the underground organization, most likely.

"Capture him," Jane gave the orders. "Rough him up if you have to, to make him complacent, but don't kill him. Hawk wants the bastard alive." 2

Bastard? I was a prince.

The men started forward, coming closer. They lacked caution. I taught them with sharp tooth and claw that they should never underestimate a wounded animal.

"How is he shifting?" one of the members asked. "Isn't the collar working?"

"He's an Alpha," Jane said, shoving one of the men forward. "Don't be such a goddamn coward."

The damned collar did limit some of my senses. I could fight off three or four at once, fifth added a challenge. One landed a solid blow to my jaw that unsteadied me. A sixth shoved me down to my knees.

They all piled on top of me, containing my arms and legs. A snapped against their hold, biting at anything I could reach.

I was caught painfully in a half-way state of shifting. My jaw was extended, my teeth sharp. But I couldn't press all the way. It felt as if an invisible wall was holding back.

Jane stepped closer. She seemed positively gleeful as she gazed down at me.

"Why are you doing this?" I demanded, my voice raw, torn between man and wolf. Jane huffed a harsh

laugh. "Why else? My sister loves you. And I want to see her suffer."

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Julian and I ran all the way to Nicholas's room. I knocked on the door, but there was no answer.

"Maybe he's asleep," I said.

"See if it's locked," Julian said.

I tried the handle. The door opened at once, pushing inward. Together, Julian and I stumbled into the room. Then, I gasped.

Furniture had been shoved over. The carpet was torn to shreds, like wolf claws had sliced straight through. There were claw marks etched into the wall.

"He struggled," Julian said, stepping into the center of the room. He paused, and turned to me. "Do you feel that?"

"Feel what?"

He lifted his head and looked around. "Magic."

Now that he mentioned it, now that I knew what to focus on, yes. I could feel it too, like a tingle in the back of my mind. Or my nose preparing for a sneeze.

"How could this happen?" I asked, wandering around the room. The claw marks seemed to lead toward a wall, like someone had been dragged there.

Nicholas. What have they done to you?

Then, distantly, muffled through stone and wood, I heard a wolf howl.

I knew that wolf. I could feel it pull inside of me much like my own had.

But this one didn't belong to me. It was Nicholas.

"Shit," Julian said. "He's here. Somewhere. There has to be a passage." Julian went for the bookcase.

I turned back to the wall, where a painting of a sailboat hung.

“There’s nothing there, Piper. Keep searching!”

That didn’t seem right. Visually, I knew I should have been able to see the outlines of a passageway, especially if it had been recently used. But right now, my heart was pulling me here.

This is the way, it seemed to whisper. This will lead you to Nick.

“Piper, stop wasting time!”

I lifted my hand and put it to the wall. It felt sturdy, but under that was the now-familiar tingle of magic.

The passage was here, I was certain of it.

I closed my eyes, and let the pull of my heart lead the way. It compelled me to lift a hand. My fingers brushed against the brushstrokes of the painting.

I pressed down.

There was a click.

And just like that, a door swung open, revealing an opening right in front of me.

Julian rushed to my side. Disbelief widened his features. “How did you do that?”

“I don’t know,” I said honestly.

“Well, to hell with it, let’s go.” He nudged me aside so he could enter the passageway first. I followed him down, down a winding stairwell. It opened up into a room filled with cages.

Nicholas was there in wolf form, a collar tight around his neck. One of the cages had been burst through, iron bars bent. He snapped wildly at some men in dark clothing who were trying to corner him.

He seemed tired, weakened somehow, in a way I had never seen him before.

“Get to him,” Julian barked at me. “Remove that damn collar.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Save my brother.”

I'd never seen Julian so angry. His eyes were wild with it. His hands shook, trembling with barely contained rage.

He shifted in a blink of an eye, fully human one second, and fully wolf in the next.

Before I could even think to react, he barreled forward. He tackled into two of the men, pushing them away from his brother and sending them into the wall. They hit it with an oof, and landed in heaps.

I entered the fray as well, dodging what I could. Julian had already turned around and tackled two more, clearing a path for me.

I fell to my knees at Nicholas's side. He inched forward, trying to place himself in front of me. “Nick, let me help you.”/

He growled at anyone who came too close. He snapped at an arm, a hand. Julian took care of most of the rest. The collar was an obvious hindrance.

I grabbed it with both hands. The magic sparkled under my touch, shooting pain up into my arms. I gasped, but held on. If I could get him free, he would likely regain his strength. I didn't have a wolf, I couldn't save us from this. But he could.

If I could just get him free. novelbin

A hand grabbed my shoulder and yanked me back. I released the collar to touch the offender's wrist between my hands. Then I twisted, just as Nicholas had shown me in self-defense class. The attacker stumbled backwards.

I darted forward again, eager to return to Nicholas.

Yet before I could get to his side, someone tackled me, sending me sliding along the ground. No, not a person, a wolf.

I watched, my eyes widening in horror as a wolf stepped closer to me.

My whole heart shattered.

This was my wolf, a piece of me that had been so violently ripped away and given instead to my sister. Now, she was using it against me.

Everything hurt. My heart, my soul, the growing bruises from where I'd been shoved to the ground.

My wolf growled at me as it stepped closer.

I knew it, but it didn't seem to know me. At least, not with Jane so close behind its eyes.

I could feel its closeness, the way its very presence filled up the dark hole that had been tore of out me.

I wished with all my heart that Veronica had been able to find an answer before now. I wished so very much that I could welcome my wolf back into my person.

But she hadn't.

And now I faced my wolf head-on, not as a friend, but as an enemy.

Would Jane make it kill me? Could she be that cruel?

I already knew the answer. What better way to kill me than to have my wolf tear out my throat?

Tears welled in my eyes. One escaped, sliding down along the curve of my cheek.

Behind the wolf's back, I watched as Julian and Nicholas continued to fight off the attackers. Nicholas was whimpering, wounds all over his body.

It would be up to Julian to save him now. God, I hoped they would escape.

No such bright future waited for me.

The wolf stepped closer to me.

"It's okay," I said. "I'm not mad. It's not your fault."

I smiled a little, it wobbled from my tears. "I'm here now. I'm sorry it took me so long to find you. To see you. You must have been so frightened, all alone."

I tried to remember back. My wolf and I had been close as could be once. It had been so strong, so

bright, and wonderful. It had given me confidence beyond my wildest dreams.

I had felt so low since it had been stolen from me.

“I won’t leave you again,” I said. “We’ll be together... I’ll be with you this time.”

Another tear. “Don’t feel bad.”

Nicholas tried to turn around, toward me, but one of the men gripped him by the collar and yanked him toward a new cage.

Julian had his hands full, fighting off the rest, some of which wielded cattle prods.

The princes had to survive. It didn’t matter what happened to me.

“Just let them go. Please...”

My wolf took a step. Snarling, it lifted its lips away from its teeth.

I closed my eyes, breath in tatters, and tried to accept my fate.



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CAMILLA’S P.O.V

I watched as she walked out of the room and I waited until she had shut the door behind her before I

turned to Ryker with a teasing smile. “Looks like you have a new fan.”

He rolled his eyes at me and turned back to the table. “We were discussing something very important

before she came.”

I raised my hands in mock surrender. "I guess it is settled about the night lock. I can't take it unless we

are very certain that we will see him. Where do we keep it until then?"

"We can keep it in one of the offices or in our room," Ryker began but I shook my head. There was no

guarantee that no one would keep it safer than he would, the problem was that everyone else would

expect it.

"If someone were to go looking for it, that would be the first place that they would look," I dropped my

voice to a whisper in case of any more eavesdroppers. "I think Christine should hide it, probably in the

same place that you hid the map of the tunnels. No one else can know where it is, not even us."

"Are you sure?" she asked and I nodded. "What if you need to get it and I'm not there?"

"We will deal with that if it ever comes to it but right now, I don't want to risk it getting taken. I'm not

saying we have any spies in here but I am just trying to be safe."

She thought about it for a second before nodding. "Fine, but what if you kept some in Ryker's office like

he suggested. Just a small amount of it so that if anyone goes looking for it, they will think that they

found everything and they wouldn't expect you to have any more hidden away."

I realized that was a brilliant idea and we all agreed to it. Ryker and I took the small quantity of the berries and hid it safely in his office. Fortunately, they had a long shelf life so I wasn't worried about them getting spoiled within the next week or so. It gave us a little time to figure out how we wanted to do this. If it exceeded a week then I had no idea how we were going to deal with it or handle the situation. Ryker tried to assure me that everything was going to be fine but I couldn't ignore the nagging feeling that something was going to go terribly wrong.

He met with the guards while I went out for training, Loris wasn't out there so I trained on my own. I had come to find it relaxing rather than a painful reminder of all I couldn't do. There was just something about the water that soothed my nerves. It was almost like an extension of myself and I loved it. I didn't know how long I stayed there, I just knew that I was moving. I felt formidable and untouchable for the first time in a

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long time. I let the water slide back into the stream and was about to leave when I decided to try something.

After Loris had realized I wasn't making any progress in getting water out of the moisture in the air or out of the ground, he had decided to let it be and he focused on other aspects of my powers. I looked around to make sure no one was looking and crouched down to the ground. I could feel the water- I always had. The problem was that I could never reach it. It didn't matter how much I pulled or tugged, it just never came within my reach.

I closed my eyes and tried to pull on the water but it wouldn't rise. I could have sworn I felt it move an inch but that was it. I muttered a curse under my breath and huffed as I kicked a small stone in my path. I turned to return to the palace but was surprised to find Ryker standing there. I was surprised that I hadn't noticed him earlier.

"How long have you been watching me?" I asked and he shrugged.

"Not long, you're doing much better than before."

"I still can't get to it," I gestured off handedly to the floor and he shrugged. "I just never thought it would be that difficult, you know."

"You'll get to it sooner or later," he kept his tone soft and encouraging. He reached out to me and I

wasted no time in letting my hand slip into his.

Just as I did, there was a noise behind us. His hold on me tightened and he pulled me behind him. I

could barely see over his shoulder and I think that was his plan because he made sure that I was

hidden behind him. You wouldn't have even known I was present if you had walked in.

"Ryker," I began but he held up a hand to stop me. "It was probably just the wind or something. There is no one here."

"Yes there is," he said simply and when I opened my mouth to protest he shot me a hard look. I

decided to stay silent for the sole reason that he had more experience than I did when it came to

people and fighting so he probably knew more. "Walk away slowly and go back to the palace."

"Are you crazy? I'm not leaving you out here."

"Camilla, do you ever listen to me?" he sounded annoyed but underneath all of that, there was a hint of

admiration. "I don't want you to get hurt."

"I am getting a toothache from just watching you," I turned to the woods and I saw a vampire leaning

against the trees. It was the one who had led me into the mountains. I hadn't seen him in a while and a

part of me had hoped he was dead. “You wolves need better protection. You have no idea how easy it was for me to get in here.”

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Ryker growled and I saw a flash of fear in his eyes. He even took a slow step backwards. It was good

to know that they were smart enough to ascertain when someone was a genuine threat to them and

that was exactly what Ryker was. He was the most patient and loving partner on the planet but that

didn't mean that he still wasn't the Alpha everyone thought that he was.

“You have two minutes to get the fuck out of here before I rip your head off your shoulders,” Ryker

warned.

“I'm not here to hurt either of you, relax,” he held up his hands to show that he meant no harm. “I simply

came to relay a message.”

“I'm not interested not fuck off. You have just one minute left.”

“I figured you wouldn't want to listen. Well, Alastair is a bit

upset that you would consider hurting him when he has been nothing but kind to you over the past few

weeks,” I raised a brow at his words. Did he really say the words kind when Alastair had killed more

wolves than I cared to count. “He was upset at the number of vampire casualties at your town and he

has promised to right the wrong.”

“You have a lot of nerve coming to my home and saying that,” Ryker took a slow step towards the

vampire who took one back. “What’s stopping me from killing you where you stand?”

“I’m just the messenger. Your fight isn’t with me.”

+5

Ryker moved so fast that I barely had time to register it. One minute, he was standing by me and the

next, he had his hands around the vampire’s throat and was squeezing tightly. The vampire clawed at

his hands and despite the blood dripping down his arms, Ryker never made one move to let him go. I

stood fixated in my spot and unable to say anything.

“If you kill me, you will inquire Alastair’s wrath. I was the first man he turned, I am his closest ally and

confidante.”

“I don’t give a sh it.”

“You should, we could wipe out this pack in a matter of seconds. You should think about that, Alastair

would not be pleased in the slightest,” I could see that he was just trying to buy time to save his life but

Ryker wasn't having it.

“He should have thought about it before sending you here. Let this serve as a warning to the rest of

you. If any of you comes near my home or my family, you will die.”

I thought Ryker would let him go to deliver the warning but to my shock, he twisted his neck and I

watched as the vampire crumpled to the ground.

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Ryker stood over the body and turned to me. “Get me a torch, now.”

That forced my legs to move. “Is he dead?”

“No, you can only kill them with fire or by tearing off their heads. I just twisted it. He will be up in an

hour or less and we cannot have that happening.”

+5

I watched in shock and slight horror as Ryker lit a fire over the body of the fallen vampire. He stood

there and watched it burn. I couldn't even look at the body, my eyes were fixated on Ryker.

“You could have kept him for questioning,” I began slowly and he shrugged.

“Why didn't you?”

“He was a threat to you,” he said simply. “If you weren’t here then maybe, but I had to think of the possibility that he would try to attack you and I couldn’t risk that. It doesn’t matter now, he is dead, come.”

I was shocked by how casually Ryker was saying everything but I took his outstretched hand and walked in step with him.

“He said that Alastair wanted to even out the numbers, what did he mean?”

“I don’t know and honestly, I don’t think I want to find out.”

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Despite what Nicholas had said, by the time Julian came rushing back with an onslaught of guards,

Nicholas and I were back in his rooms. Nicholas had gone into the bathroom to shower and change. I

sat just outside, a towel in my hands, wiping the blood off of my face.

Julian stayed with me while the guards descended into the open passageway. He took one look at me,

shook his head, snatched the towel from my hands, and more forcefully wiped at my forehead.

“There,” he said, and handed the towel back to me.

“Thank you,” I said softly. My hands were trembling. I still felt somewhat in shock.

Julian noticed. He stepped closer. “Piper...”

The bathroom door opened, and Nicholas appeared. He glanced between Julian and me, but didn’t

seem jealous this time.

Instead, when he looked back to Julian, gratitude was plain on his face. "Thank you, Julian. Without your help... well, I don't want to think about what would have happened." "Piper's the one who found you," Julian said. He half-turned away. I wouldn't let him escape credit so easily. "I wouldn't have known anything was wrong at all, if you hadn't intuited it," I said.

Julian pushed a hand through his hair. "Give me a break."

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He was embarrassed, I realized then. It was such a rare sight on Julian that I almost didn't recognize it.

I knew then, with absolutely surety, that despite the brothers many problems, fights, and

disagreements, they did actually care for each other deep down. At the very least, they would come to the other's defense if their life was on the line.

That counted for something. Even if neither brother seemed willing to admit it yet.

"So what did Jane want with you anyway?" Julian asked. "I don't suppose she revealed any hint of her plan."

Nicholas shook his head. "She only said that she wanted to hurt Piper."

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A shiver rushed through me. She very nearly had hurt me. Nicholas, hurting me with my own wolf... All

of it cut me so deeply. That it had been my own twin sister that had hated me enough to commit these acts...

"It can't have been just that," Julian said. "With you in their pocket, a lot of people would have done just

about anything to keep you safe. Piper. Our father.” Julian sighed. “You know
3/2

+15 BONUS

“Uh...” Nicholas’s gaze slipped sideways. He refused to look at either me or Julian. That seemed rather suspicious.

“Nick?” I asked, and he swallowed.

Suddenly, Julian’s eyes went wide. “You didn’t!”

“It wasn’t like that,” Nicholas said quickly.

“Like hell it wasn’t. How else would you let your guard down?”

“I don’t understand.” I looked to Julian for explanation.

His lips curled up into a smile. “Your prince locked lips with your evil sister.”

This time, my eyes bugged. I searched Nicholas’s face, hopeful for an indication that Julian was just

trying to stir the pot like always. Instead what I saw was guilt.

Nicholas lowered his head. “She pretended to be you, Piper. I... didn’t notice as quickly as I should have.”

My heart cracked in half. Jane had come here, pretending to me, and Nicholas had... let her? 2

“I had been so desperate to see you, and I thought...” Nicholas cleared his throat. “But I told her to stop

right away. She was different. She was moving too quickly and my wolf didn’t trust her.” He looked at

me, eyes sad. “I’m so sorry, Piper.’ 1

“It’s not your fault,” I said at once, because it wasn’t, even though it hurt me. Nicholas had been tricked.

Hadn’t I been tricked too? I had been so desperate to see Nicholas that I had followed a note straight

into potential danger? If Nicholas had a twin brother, wouldn’t I have fallen for the same trap?

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I shook my head. "What we need to focus on is stopping Jane once and for all, and getting my wolf back."

"Then let's go," Julian said.

"Go where?" Nicholas asked.

But I knew where he'd meant. "Veronica."

By the time the three of us knocked on Veronica's door, it was close to 3:30 in the morning. Yet she

opened the door like she'd been expecting us. She was still wearing her clothes from the day before.

Maybe she hadn't been to bed yet.

She stepped back, giving us room to enter. "Come in."

Her lights were on. A pile of books was stacked tall on top of her desk, with a second pile beside it.

She looked between the three of us. "Something happened."

Quickly, I gave her a brief account of events. Julian nodded along, chiming in where he could. Nicholas

stayed behind, frowning at her. He hadn't liked being kept out of the loop with Veronica's identity. I

supposed I couldn't fault him for not trusting her right away, considering.

When I reached the point in the story where Jane shifted into my wolf and attacked me, Veronica

perked up. When I said, my wolf/held back, she stopped me.

"It was going to kill you," she said.

"I think so, yes," I said. I was proud of myself for keeping the tremor out of my voice. It quaked my

hands instead.

Nicholas finally stepped closer. He came to my side and took one of my shaking hands in his.

Veronica didn't so much as bat an eye at his movement. Her full focus was on me now.

"But then it backed off," she said.

"Yes."

Suddenly, she clapped her hands together. "That's it!"

I'd never seen her emoté so openly, so I watched in shock for a minute. Julian did too, though he

recovered quicker.

"That's what, Veronica?" he asked.

1/2

+15 BONUS

Nicholas kissed me again, on the forehead this time. I closed my eyes to enjoy the press of his lips.

"I'm heading up," Julian said. "Going to send for the guard. You two going to be alright...?" Julian

glanced at us, then rolled his eyes. "Never mind. Stupid question. Just try to separate before the

bigshots get here, okay?"

Nicholas glanced down at me. The blood had smeared at his lips. I imagined I had a lip-shaped blood

stain on my forehead.

Maybe I should have been appalled by that thought. I wasn't.

"No promises," Nicholas said.

4/4

+15 BONUS

"The wolf never fully bonded with Jane," Veronica said. She spoke quickly with excitement. It still

belongs to Piper in its heart. Else it would have followed blindly and killed Piper without a second

thought."

"And that changes things?" Julian asked.

“That changes everything.” In a flourish, she turned toward her desk and rushed over. “That makes all

of this so much simpler. Whoever completed the ritual must have been such an amateur, or they were

rushed, or... no. Likely the receiver of the wolf was not an adequate candidate.”

She glanced over her shoulder at me. “Did Jane have her own wolf?”

“A weak one,” I said. I’d always wondered what had happened to it, since she had claimed mine now.

Surely there couldn’t be room inside of her for two different wolves?

“A foolish mistake,” Veronica said. “Instead of trying to cultivate the strength of her own wolf, she stole

someone else’s. To do that, she would have had to sacrifice her own.”

I gasped. “Is it dead?” She could have given it to another.

“Most likely.”

compass,

I wasn’t sure why I was surprised. Someone like Jane, with such a limited moral might not see anything

wrong with sacrificing that part of herself to make room for something she considered better.

“Your wolf never trusted her,” Veronica said. “It must have retained some of its memories. Ah, this is

fantastic. You must have had a strong bond. This will help us.”

I could hear what Veronica was saying but I was afraid to surmise further. I didn’t dare hope.

Nicholas had no such inhibitions. “Does this mean you can give Piper her wolf back?”

“Yes,” Veronica said, so simply, like that didn’t change my entire world. “All we have to do now is trap

Jane. And I can return Piper’s wolf.”

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“Okay,” I said. “Um, so how do we trap Jane?” I looked at Julian. He’s typically the master of schemes.

I expected him to have a few up his sleeves.

Right now, however, he seemed a bit blank. He shook his head, as if to recover. “We just need to lure

her in... if we could... prepare a closet to trap her...”

“A closet?” I ask.

“Something to...” He rubbed his forehead. “Something, confining.”

“She likely has back ways out of every room in the palace, closets included,” Nicholas said. It wouldn’t

surprise me.”

“What if we jump out behind her and put a sack over her?” I asked.

Julian, Veronica, and Nicolas all looked at me.

I blinked. “What?”

Julian rubbed his temples next.

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It was only after a few moments that I realized the many, various flaws with the plan I announced so

confidentially. A few moments more and I started to feel how achy my joints were and how heavy my

eyelids were.

The adrenaline of the day was wearing off, and my body was worn.

“We should break for the night,” Veronica said. “You’ve all had an exhausting day. We should return to

this with fresh minds.”

Julian, Nicholas, and I glanced at each other. In them, I could see the exhaustion that I felt. No doubt,

they saw the same in me.

“That’s probably a good idea,” Julian said.

“I

agree,

“Nicholas replied.

“Yeah.” I was reluctant to admit it. I wanted to stay up, think of a plan, and resolve everything right

away. But... shifting my gaze to Nicholas, and his healing but still battle-bruised body, I couldn’t deny

some rest was in order.

Veronica bid us goodnight and we left the room.

“I’ll walk you to your room,” Nicholas told me.

Julian frowned but seemed too tired to argue. “We’ll talk tomorrow.”

Before he could walk away, I pulled him into a quick hug. “Thank you, Julian.”

+15 BONUS

He gave me a light squeeze in return, then sighed and let me go. He quickly saluted as he turned and

walked down the hallway, back toward the royal family’s private rooms.

It occurred to me then, and I asked Nicholas, “Where will you sleep tonight?”

Nicholas shrugged. “There’s plenty of spare rooms.”

“But...”

“Mark will know which one, in case you need me.” He held out his arm, and I slipped mine through his.

He began to lead me down the hallway.

As we walked through the quiet, my thoughts were a jumbled mess. I almost lost Nicholas tonight,

which had my heart all twisted up inside. And when I thought of how Jane was able to fool Nicholas...

When she had kissed him...

Everything hurt so much worse when I thought of my twin pressing her lips to Nicholas’s. I knew it

wasn't his fault. He had thought it was me.

But it still speared me through the heart. I wanted to be the one Nicholas kissed, and all I had been

doing lately was push him away.

Nicholas, who had seemingly been lost in his own thoughts, broke the silence first. "Piper. Tonight.

Earlier. How did you know I was missing so quickly?" His voice lowered. "And why had

you been out with Julian so late?"

As messed up as it was, his jealousy healed a part of me. I didn't want to be caught in this dark, ugly

feeling all alone. That he was there with me, helped.

"I received a note to meet out on the balcony," I said. I worried my bottom lip with my teeth, unsure if I

should reveal the next part. Though, in the end, I was too tired to reason myself why I should keep it a

secret. "I thought it was from you."

"And it was Julian?"

"No," I said. "Joyce."

Nicholas frowned. "Joyce?"

I nodded. "He was proving a point to me, about how I'm too trusting. I put myself into dangerous

situations without consideration for my own well-being."

"I can't argue that..."

I ignored that dig. "But then he accidentally locked me onto the balcony."

Nicholas frowned deeper. "Accidentally?"

I couldn't imagine it any other way. "I was trying to climb down a tree, when I slipped and landed on

Julian. When I told him what happened, he said we should check on you."

Nicholas's face was growing increasingly sterner.

+15 BONUS

“Did I say something wrong?” I asked him.

“No...” He ran a hand down his face. “But there’s a lot to think about.” His You thought that note was

from me and foolishly obeyed it.’

gaze

slid to me.

“Yes...” I glanced up at him from under my eyelashes. “And you opened the door in the middle of the

night and assumed it was me...”

“)

“I’d hoped,” he said. He sighed and some of his rising tension slipped away. “I wanted to see you so

badly.”

“I’d hoped, too,” I replied. “It was the same for me.”

“It was?”

“Yes.”

His gaze slowly drifted down to my mouth. Mine dropped to his much quicker.

One moment, we were walking side by side down a barren hallway, and the next, Nicholas and

I were kissing, shoving each other into an alcove.

I brushed my fingers through his hair. His arms were firm around my waist.

“Piper...” he said when we came up for air. “Kiss me.”

So I did. I kept kissing him until I was certain I removed the stain of Jane from his lips and marked them

as mine instead.

His tongue licked along the seam of my lips, then easily slipped into my waiting mouth. I moaned

against him.

He traced one hand up the length of my spine. The other fell to the curve of my backside.

Inside, my cold heart thawed. A warmth sparked and burned at the inside of my chest. It wasn't

unpleasant. It felt reassuring. Happy, almost.

I fell into the feeling, let it fully surround me just as Nicholas did.

"Nick," I breathed, and his lips moved to the side of my neck. I gripped at his shoulders, my knees

going weak.

Eventually, when our lips were swollen-red, and both our necks covered in various marks from each

other, we pulled away. The love bites I'd left on Nicholas were already fading, part of his being an

Alpha, his faster healing rate.

The marks on my neck, however, would linger much longer, since I lacked a wolf.

Nicholas ran his thumb along them now, humming pleasantly.

+15 BONUS

His jealousy was at least sated. Mine was too, for now, though the minute those marks healed, I would

want to leave more of them.

"I should get you back to your room before I lose control of myself," he said.

I didn't care about his loss of control. What I did care about was the overexertion of his already-

exhausted body.

So I agreed.

Nicholas led me to my door where the guards were keeping watch. Then he leaned down and sweetly

kissed my cheek – like we hadn't just had our tongues down each other's throats not five minutes

before.

I was so fond of this man. I was so glad he was safe.

I clutched his sleeve tightly, suddenly afraid to let go. "Be careful."

He crossed his finger over his heart. "I swear."

Nodding, I stepped away from him. Already, the bright burning light inside of me felt dimmer somehow.

And I felt a cold shiver.

Chapter 327

Chapter 0327

The next morning, as I was preparing for the day, a messenger came to the door to call me to a

meeting with the King, I immediately put back the jeans and t-shirt I was going to wear and selected a

dress instead. Charlotte helped me dress in a hurry, and then I rushed to follow the

messenger.

I was led to Nicholas's private rooms where the King was pacing back and forth in front of the secret

passageway opening on the wall. Nicholas and Julian were there as well. Nicholas stood straight, as if

at attention. Julian had his arms crossed.

When the King noticed me, he stopped pacing. "Now that we are all here, I want someone to explain to

me exactly what happened here last night. The guard told me what they could, but there are many

blanks that need filled in."

I swallowed hard, not sure where to even begin. The King looked at me with such intense focus that I

felt vulnerable in a way I didn't like. Under such scrutiny, it was difficult to get my thoughts in order,

especially my necessary lies.

Fortunately, Julian stepped in first. "The underground organization attempted a bold move last night by

attempting to kidnap Nicholas."

“Nicholas?” The King’s sharp gaze snapped toward his eldest son. “Why wasn’t your guard up against

such an attack? The guard found no sign of forced entry.”

I held my breath. Please don’t mention Jane!

“I mistakenly believed that the person at my door was someone who could be trusted,” Nicholas said,

keeping it vague, thank goodness.

The King narrowed his eyes. “Who?”

Nicholas hesitated only an instant, before replying, “A guard.”

“You can hardly fault him for trusting a guard, father,” Julian said, smoothly sliding in. “At that time of

night, he likely thought it was an emergency and wasn’t thinking for his own safety.”

“Well, you should have been,” the King said. “We have enough chaos around here, without my oldest

prince to go missing.”

Nicholas swallowed. “Yes, sir.”

“Yeah, and you were concerned about his well-being too, right, father?” Julian added. He smirked but it

had an edge. “He could have died last night.”

“Unlikely, if they meant to kidnap him,” the King said, turning away. He switched his focus to me now.

“And what was your part in this, Piper? I’ve heard many accounts that you were

+15 BONUS

His eye twitched, like he expected me to deny it.

“I was here,” I said.

“Piper was with me last night,” Julian said. “We arrived together to the scene.”

The King blinked. “...together?”

“Yes,” Julian continued. He walked across the room to stand at my side. Easily, he slipped his arm

around my waist, resting his hand on my hip. "Together."

Behind the King, Nicholas glared at Julian. Julian just smiled brighter.

"I see," the King said, and eased somewhat. He smiled a little. "Yes. Good. Very good. Did the cameras see you?"

"Perhaps we should focus on the task at hand," Nicholas said.

The King turned to him. "Yes, you're right. The underground organization is growing bolder by the

minute. I cannot have them threaten my livelihood."

"And your kids," Julian added. "Don't forget we're flesh and blood."

"What else would I be talking about, Julian?" the King snapped.

Julian closed his mouth. His fingers tightened on my hip, ever so slightly.

"I will need to speak to Joseph about this," the King said, and stormed from the room without another

word – or a backwards look.

I hated him a little then, for not giving his children the comfort they were looking for in him. Nicholas

and Julian seemed fine, standing tall, but this was not the behavior a father should have after one of his

children was nearly kidnapped or killed.

If someone had tried to take Elva, I would have burned down the whole palace in search of the

attacker. I suspected that was also true for Nicholas and Julian. Thank God they managed to grow

some empathy even growing up in an environment that lacked any.

Chapter 328

Chapter 0328

"I

guess that's that," Julian said, and snaked his arm away from me.

Nicholas looked at the dark opening in the wall, a stern expression on his face.

I felt powerless. There was nothing I could say to replace a father's love.

With the King's absence, Nicholas spoke more truthfully. "This escapade is only going to last for so

long. Eventually we're going to have to reveal the truth about Jane."

Julian stepped closer to him and lowered his voice. "It will be easier to explain when Jane is caught.

Else we will only cast doubt on Piper herself."

I joined them by the window. I didn't know what to do. I wanted to keep Jane a secret, to keep Elva and

the world from knowing about my twin. But wasn't it selfish to want to keep this secret, when Jane was

actively endangering Nicholas?

If the guards had known about my twin... Even if the result would be in expelling me for my relation,

then they might have caught Jane before she ever had a chance to hurt Nicholas.

My secret wasn't just hurting people, it could get someone killed.

"Maybe it's worth it... to tell the truth."

"No," Julian said fiercely. "The King will not believe it. He'll punish you instead. We need Jane in hand

before we go forward." He looked at Nicholas. "Surely you see that?"

Nicholas looked at me. "We'll keep quiet for now." A muscle ticked in his jaw.

"I won't risk you getting hurt," I said.

He shook his head. "I won't risk you being cast out or worse. I can protect myself, Piper. Julian is right,

in this instance..." His gaze shifted, and he glared at Julian.

Julian laughed. "Thanks for the confidence."

I understood then, that Nicholas initial reservation might have had less to do with the danger and

everything to do with the game Julian and I would now need to continue to play.

“You’ll have to keep up this fake dating ruse now,” Nicholas said. “The King thinks you two are fooling

around for real. He will expect that behavior to continue.”

Julian shrugged. “So he will. It’s not the end of the world. No one dies if Piper has to kiss me.” Nicholas

glowered.

My heart sank. “Julian,” I said. “Maybe you could give me a moment to speak to Nicholas, alone.”

+15 BONUS

Julian glanced between us and sighed. “Fine.” With reluctance, he turned and left. When he was gone,

I stepped closer to Nicholas. Anyone could come in at any moment, so I couldn’t risk too much

affection. But, alternatively, I couldn’t do nothing. So I reached out and placed my hand on his forearm.

He looked down at my hand. “I hate this.”

“I know,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

“No.” He looked up at my face. “I’m sorry, Piper. If it were up to me –

“I know,” I said, stopping him. I didn’t want to hear the could-have-beens. The never-would -bes.

Nicholas’s jaw clenched. Then he spoke. “It should be you and me. Not him. No one will listen. No one

will see.”

My heart warmed at the anger in his voice. He wanted to be with me. I wanted to be with him too.

But the world just wasn’t that kind.

“With Julian and me, it’s not real,” I reminded him. “It’s just an act.” I swallowed hard. “It’s not fake with

you.”

His gaze softened. “Piper...”

“If it were up to me, Nick, it would be us.”

He inched closer to me.

It would never be up to us, and that hurt. But knowing that it was something we both wished for was a

soothing balm.

“Someday...” he started, but couldn’t finish.

I knew why.

No matter how much we wished it, there was no someday for us.

Chapter 329

Chapter 0329

In full view of the watchful cameras, Julian and I stood side by side in the kitchen, a plate of cookies on

the counter before us. We’d already rolled out the dough, cut the shapes, and baked them in the oven.

These were the finished results.

It had been difficult to relax in front of the camera crew, including the producer who would call out

random commands like, “Put flour on her nose, Julian!” Or, “Smile at him, Piper!”

At least, cookies now existed. The sweet treat might make the awkwardness of this fake date worth it. I

reach for one of the cookies. They should be warm enough now.

“Feed her one of the cookies, Julian,” the producer said.

I froze. Beside me, Julian did too. He glanced at me.

What could I do? We were supposed to be on a date. Feeding each other treats was a common date

practice. Nicholas and I had shared from each other’s plates all the time when we had been together.

So I nodded.

Julian plucked one of the cookies from the plate. Slowly, giving me time to prepare himself, he brought

it up to my face.

“Open wide,” he said with a cheeky grin. It might have been for show, or he was just enjoying himself.

He was hard to read on the best of days, let alone when he was actively playing a role.

I opened my mouth.

Julian placed the cookie on my tongue. I bit down and chewed. It was delicious, as I expected.

Julian brought the rest of the cookie up to his own mouth and ate it. After he chewed and swallowed,

his smile grew wide. “Delicious.” He inched closer. “But not as sweet as you.”

He was saying it for the cameras, I knew. I still blushed. What a line.

“Great,” the producer called. “Now kiss her, Julian!”

Julian’s gaze dropped to my lips. He was so good at this game. Meanwhile, my whole body locked up. I

could do most things, but kissing Julian still made me feel off-balance. It was a line I didn’t want to

cross, but I had to or I’d risk losing everything.

I licked my lips. They were chapped. This wasn’t going to be a good kiss.

I wished I was going to kiss Nicholas instead.

Julian gripped my upper arms. Then, he leaned down.

+15 BONUS

My whole body tensed. I squeezed my eyes closed. Hopefully he’d make this quick. How much of a

kiss did the producers need? Surely they could extend it out in post-production, if they needed to.

Julian came closer. I could feel his breath against my lips. Yet just as I expected him to press down, he

pulled away.

I peeked open one eye and saw him frowning at me.

“Julian?” I asked.

He whispered his answer, "I don't like kissing girls who don't want me to." He kept his voice soft, too

quiet for the cameras to hear over the bustle of the kitchen.

His words were kind, but I knew they meant trouble. "I'm sorry." I didn't know what else to say.

"I'll take care of it." He turned toward the cameras. "Piper is not feeling very well. I worry to kiss her in

such a state wouldn't end well for either of us."

The producer didn't seem pleased, but what could he possibly say against a prince? "A kiss would look

better for the public," the producer said, "but if you are sure..."

"I'm sure," Julian said, and left no room for argument.

The producer lamented. "Very well." To the crew, he said, "Let's

he said, "Let's wrap it up here."

Julian looked back at me. "I'll take you back to your room."

"I want to take the cookies back for Elva," I said. Julian nodded, and helped me find a container to carry

them safely. We lingered there in the kitchen after the camera crew had gone.

"We should probably have a talk about this," Julian said, and I felt my stomach sink. "We need to think

about what our relationship will have to look like going forward. We don't just have to fool the cameras

now, but also the King."

I knew that. "I really am trying."

"I know but..." He sighed. "Piper, we are going to have to kiss again to sell our intimacy properly."

"I know that," I said.

Julian looked at me. I couldn't quite meet his gaze. We had kissed before, and it wasn't terrible. Julian

was a good looking guy and a practiced kisser. The problem was that he wasn't the one I wanted to

kiss.

My heart and body wanted Nicholas. And kissing Julian felt like a betrayal to my own feelings.

“Maybe you should talk to Nicholas about this,” Julian said.

+15 BONUS

Startled, I did look back at him now. He couldn't be serious? But his smile was kind rather than smug

like usual.

“He's the reason you're holding back right?” Julian asked. “If you sort out what you need to, then

maybe you can get your head back into the game.”

I hooked my fingers together. “I wouldn't know where to begin.”

“Just make him understand,” Julian said. “If Nicholas fully understands that this isn't real, and that you

actually feel for him instead, that might make it easier for you.”

As I watched him, I began to notice a slight downward turn to the corner of his mouth. Did he not

believe what he was saying? No. That didn't seem right.

It more seemed like he was... pained by the words. But trying to hide it.

When we had first met, I never would have been able to notice. The dip was that slight. But now that I

had hung out with Julian a lot, I was able to more clearly discern the honest emotions behind Julian's

playboy façade.

But why would the words hurt him? That was what I didn't understand. It couldn't be that he had

feelings for me. It had to be more something to do with his constant competition with

Nicholas. 1

“Come on,” Julian said, and, carrying my cookies, I followed him into the stairwell.

As we walked by a front facing window, I paused. The number of protestors had increased again. The

seemed to stretch down the road as far as they could go.

The guard had reacted by adding a line of soldiers to stand at the gate.

The situation seemed a powder keg, ready to ignite.

Angry protestors on one side, armed guards on the other.

Julian stopped beside me and looked out the window as I did. I glanced at him in an attempt to assess

his reaction. Julian was more observant than me, and more astute. He could likely read this situation

better than me. He would know more clearly if we had reason to worry.

His face was a careful blank slate. His smile remained but it was hollow.

“Are we in trouble?” I asked him.

He hesitated in his reply, and that was answer enough.

The people still didn’t trust the royal family, even with the interviews from the candidates, and the other

efforts from within the palace.

+15 BONUS

What else could we do? There had to be something.

Yes, the people had reason to be frustrated and angry with their lot in life. I knew the hardships of the

commoner more than anyone else in the palace. But to revolt? It seemed too much.

Too violent. Too dangerous.

Julian looked at me. “Our fake relationship might not be enough to stop this.”