

THE LUNA CHOOSING GAME

Chapter 361



He growled a little. “Good.” Then he did it again.

I dropped my head back. It hit the wall with a thud. This exposed my n*ck, and Nicholas dove forward,

latching himself onto the newly exposed skin.

The marks he’d made before were fading. He sought to renew them now, suckling and nipping at the

column on my throat.

I closed my eyes, enjoying the onslaught of his hot, wet mouth on my skin, as well as the hard dick

bucking up between my legs.

If only we weren’t wearing clothes, he would finally be inside of me. I wouldn’t be a virgin anymore. I’d

be his, body and soul.

What? No...

I shouldn’t think like that.

But lost as I was on the waves of lust and heat and pleasure, I had trouble remembering why.

I only wanted more.

“Don’t stop,” I begged. noveldrama

“Won’t.”

Suddenly he began to swirl his hips rather than punch forward, and the new motion caused new pleasures.

“Ah-ah!”

“Shh,” he said into my skin. “You have to be quiet.”

I didn’t trust myself, not with how good everything felt. So I brought my hand to my mouth and clenched

my teeth down on my knuckle. It wouldn’t stop all the noise, but it would stop most.

Nicholas, even during his correction, did not stop his gyrations. He did not slow.

In fact, now, with my fingers in my mouth, he began to pick up speed. His hard cock rubbed me in an

onslaught of pleasure. Of heat.

of yes...

And more, more, more..

The words didn’t come out, but the soft noises did: gentle gasps and wordless moans.

Nicholas, for his part, was losing himself too. He kept his mouth at my n*ck, but instead of lavishing

attention, he was grunting in time with his harsh thrusts.

“Mmf. Mmf. Mmf.” A fast rhythm. “Piper, God...”

“Hm, ah...oh,” I said in return.

We chased the pleasure together, hands clawing and pawing. I scratched down his shoulders. Still

gripping my a*s, he began to move me in tandem with his hips, bringing me harshly down as he bucked up against me.

It felt so good. It was never going to last.

I took my hand away from my mouth for only an instant. “Close,” I said, a warning, before I bit down on my knuckles again.

“I’ve got you,” Nicholas said, and I knew in my heart that was true.

Nicholas. Reliable, sexy Nicholas, always there.

“Come for me,” he growled. “Come from my cock.”

Not just your cock, I thought but couldn’t say. I didn’t trust my voice now. If I removed my fingers, I might end up screaming.

Close, close, so close.

And then –

“Nnngh!”

I came in a ripple of exploding pleasure.

“Piper,” he gasped, then bucked one final time. His hips trembled. His hands tightened.

Together, we rode the waves of our pleasure until they calmly subsided and lowered us back

to the earth.

Nicholas lowered me down to the ground, then stepped back. His breathing was heavy. Mine

matched his.

We took a moment to adjust ourselves.

“Nick...” I said as an opening. “We should take about this, right?”

He looked at me, and a hardness returned to his features. “We need to get back. They’ll notice we’re gone.”

So we weren’t going to talk about it.

And this didn’t actually change anything.

This was a release, maybe, from the tension between us. But, as I suspected, when we left this closet,

we’d

go back to our respected dates and pretend this didn’t happen at all.

I knew it would be like this.

It still hurt.

I pushed past him.

“Piper,” he started to say, but I didn’t want to hear anything he had to say now. He’d only keep hurting

me.

I reached the door and opening it, pushed out into the foyer.

Nicholas, who had been closely chasing me, came out in my shadow.

Before us, a camera crew were filming an interview with Nathan.

And we were directly in the shot.

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For a long moment, I was totally stunned. Then, I moved at once, covering my kiss-swollen red lips with my hand.

Nicholas came around to stand in front of me, blocking me from the camera's view. He looked much more put together than I felt.

Nathan gave him a curious look as the cameras moved in closer.

"Piper requested some advice on how to handle her relationship with Julian," Nicholas said, offering up the lie as an explanation before one could be asked for. "That damn closet is the only place we could speak privately on the matter."

Nathan narrowed his eyes with suspicion.

Nicholas shrugged. "Perhaps it is for the best if we destroy that footage. We wouldn't want anyone at home to get the wrong impression."

The producer straightened. "But Your Royal Highness, this footage is much more valuable than -"

“You will see that it’s destroyed, won’t you, Nathan?” Nicholas said, bluntly interrupting.

“Yes, that would be for the best,” Nathan said, frowning. “Though in the future, perhaps his highness might be more cautious where he holds his private discussions.” noveldrama
Nicholas’s voice lowered. “I’ll take that under advisement.”

I wasn’t sure about royal protocol but I had a feeling a prince receiving a reprimand from a Beta, even the King’s Beta, wasn’t appropriate.

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Nicholas glared at Nathan, and Nathan lowered his chin in submission.

“Thank you, Your Royal Highness,” Nathan said, much more courteously. Then, he turned his attention to the producer. “Now, about that footage...”

Nicholas placed his hand on my shoulder and guided me from the scene.

I looked back as we walked.

The producer looked at me, his gaze dipped down to my neck. I immediately covered it with my hands, wondering what he saw.

Nicholas glanced at me but didn’t say anything.

“How badly does it look?” I asked.

“It’s not that noticeable,” Nicholas said, though his voice wavered with dishonesty.

“Nicholas?” I wanted the truth.

He sighed. “Maybe wear a scarf for the next few days...”

I kept my hands near my neck the rest of the walk to my
room.

When I was inside, I quickly rushed into the bathroom to see my reflection. Looking in the mirror, I could see that love

bites littered my face and down my throat were red marks.

I looked something like I’d been attacked by an angry giant mosquito.

I immediately left the bathroom to head into the closet instead, where I only relaxed when I had a scarf

wrapped twice around my neck.

When I walked back into the bedroom, Charlotte looked up from the sewing machine to give me a lifted

brow expression.

I shrugged helplessly.

Falling under Nicholas’s spell in the coat closet had not been on my agenda. But when I was around

him, it was like I couldn’t help myself. He was so strong and handsome and kind. All I wanted was to be

closer to him. Even, it seemed, to my own detriment.

The only solution, then, was to avoid him entirely. And the only way to ensure that I could avoid him

was to simply not leave my room.

Some might call it hiding, to not leave my room for three days in a row. Charlotte rolled her eyes as she

brought me and Elva three meals a day.

Elva was as confused as anyone. "Is something wrong, Mommy?"

"I just don't feel very well," I said. It wasn't untrue. I was working on making myself sick over this.

Elva tilted her head. "Is that why you've been wearing scarves?

You're cold?"

"Uh..." I didn't want to lie to my little girl, but I sure as heck didn't want to have to explain the marks on

my neck. They were blessedly fading. If I had a wolf, they would have been gone by now. As it wa my

human body was so weak.

"I guess I am a little cold," I said.

Elva, the sweetheart, instantly gave me a hug. "To warm you up!"

The night before the event, I couldn't hide anymore. Julian himself was waiting at my door, expecting

me to attend the final meeting between him, Nicholas, and Veronica. We had to iron out the details of

the plan.

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If I missed it, Nicholas would undoubtedly take the cuff and make his own plans. He'd exclude me, giving me some excuse about protection, while selflessly throwing himself into the same danger I'd face.

I couldn't let him do that.

So I looped my arm with Julian's and let him lead me to the sitting room where Nicholas and Veronica were waiting. When Julian and I entered, Nicholas glared at where Julian's arm held mine. On reflex, I retracted my arm from Julian's.

Julian didn't seem outwardly bothered by it. He sauntered into the room like he owned it. "Careful with your glare, Nicholas. Hold it too long, and your face might stay that way." Nicholas growled lightly.

Veronica stood from the couch. She was holding the box with the cuff again. "Enough child play. The event is tomorrow evening, and we are no closer to deciding on a plan."

"It's difficult when we aren't sure how Jane will make her m

Julian said. "I've been keeping my ear to the ground, and though have a few leads, I can't act yet."

"Leads?" I asked, coming into the circle the other three had forme
What leads?"

"I can't tell you, yet," Julian said. "They are merely rumors as of now."

“We can’t act on rumors,” Nicholas said.

Julian shrugged and nodded.

“I’ll take the cuff,” I said. Nicholas opened his mouth, likely to argue, yet before he could, I pushed

forward. “Whatever Jane’s other plans, we know she will personally enjoy mocking me. The odds she

will come to me are higher than anyone else.”

Nicholas furrowed his brow, but his mouth closed. He knew I was right.

“Besides,” I said, laughing a little to hide my own sadness and fear. As the only one without a wolf, if

she gets the cuff away from me and tries to use it on me instead, it won’t have any effect.”

Veronica held the box to me. I accepted it.

“If we’re done -” Veronica started.

“Wait,” Julian said. Looking at me, he fished his hand into his inside coat pocket. He retrieved a

beautiful necklace: a full moon pendant on a long silver chain.

“Another tracker?” I asked.

He nodded. “Come here and turn around.”

I obeyed. Then he draped the necklace around my neck. He my hair to the side and clasped the

necklace behind my neck.

I carefully avoided looking at Nicholas, but I could still feel his jealous irritation rankle over me, as if I

was the one jealous.

To show there was no partiality on my part, I asked, "Everyone will receive the signal this time, right?"

Julian didn't answer right away. Not until I turned around and looked at him.

"Yes. Nicholas and I will receive a message with your GPS location. All you have to do is press down

on the moon."

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"Thank you," I said.

"Piper." Nicholas's voice was growly. In addition to the jealousy, was also worry. I could see it in his

eyes as I faced him once more.

Things felt strained between us. Yes, we'd shared a fantastic moment there in that closet, but it had not

cleared any of the uncertainty between us. If anything, only felt more confused and

embarrassed than before.

I could share in Nicholas's worry though. I certainly wasn't looking forward to seeing Jane again.

I was afraid for what I would have to do. I'd still do it, but... I understood as much as Nicholas and novel drama

Julian and likely Veronica, that there was a less than zero chance of me being hurt tomorrow night.

“Please,” Nicholas said, softly now. “Promise me you will be careful.”

If harm was coming for me, no promise would save me. But for Nicholas, I would try.

“I promise,” I told him, and hoped I could keep it.

Chapter 364



The night of the event, I could barely contain my nerves as Charlotte helped me into my golden dress.

It turned out beautifully, each layer complimenting the next. Pastel yellow, then warm creamy orange,

and finally a shimmering golden that sparkled when I shifted my skirts.

Charlotte nodded, pleased. But then she said, “Don’t forget the gloves.”

The gloves were the same shimmery gold. They matched the dress and the ribbons threaded through

my hair, holding it up and like a crown around the top of my head.

I slipped the gloves onto my hands. I was trembling. Charlotte didn’t comment on it, she simply helped

me pull the lengthy gloves up my biceps.

Then Charlotte reached for Veronica’s box. She brought it closer to me, then opened the lid. I

swallowed hard as I lifted the cuff from the box. In my hands, it felt like any other kind of leather cuff

bracelet. But then, without a wolf, I was likely unable to detect the magic upon it.

“Where should I put it?” I asked. My dress didn’t have pockets.

“Couldn’t you just wear it yourself?” Charlotte asked. “Since it doesn’t affect you?” I trusted Charlotte

with my life, and kept her apprised on everything going on. She’d been sworn to secrecy. noveldrama

I considered her suggestion, but then I shook my head. “I don’t know how well it can be detected. I

don’t want to dance with someone and for them to feel it if it brushes them or something.”

Charlotte nodded. “Well...” She cleared her throat. There is one spot someone shouldn’t brush against.

I blinked at her, confused.

She lifted a finger and then motioned down between her breasts.

My eyes went wide. Here I was, thinking I could hide it in my hair, or in a purse? And Charlotte was

providing an entirely different, slightly scandalous, but entirely genius plan.

The bracelet cuff was malleable. I easily shoved it down flat. Then I stuffed it down my bosom. I righted

my breasts, pushing them up a bit more, to further hide the cuff.

“Is it hidden?” I asked.

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“Yes.”

“Do my breasts look normal?” I asked.

“Yes.”

I signed in relief. It wasn’t terribly comfortable. The leather of the cuff was jabbing the underside of my

breast in an uncomfortable way. But I could live.

Besides, the dull press of the cuff was a relief. If I felt it, I could remind myself that it was there. I liked

having that reassurance.

When I was finally ready, it was time to say goodnight to Elva. Elva had her back to me this entire time,

despite the nanny’s gentle coaxing. Her little arms were crossed. She was still upset about being

excluded.

“Elva...” I came around to see her face. There were no tears, but she was wearing a tier-one pout. It

broke my entire heart and made me want to forget the entire event tonight.

But that wouldn’t help her. Or us.

I needed the points from attending tonight’s event. And I needed to catch Jane once and for all.

Staying here would only hinder both of those objectives.

“After tonight,” I said, kneeling before her, “Everything will be different. It will be safe for you again, and

we can get out of this room.'

Elva looked down sadly.

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I didn't dare hug her, afraid the cuff might affect her even from under my clothing. But I did lean forward

and kiss her forehead.

"Have some fun, then get some sleep," I said. "I'll be back before you know it."

She didn't respond. She just keep looking sad.

"I love you,

Elva."

She sniffled. "I love you, too, Mommy."

With those words in my heart, I knew I would have the courage to do what needed doing tonight. For Elva. For me. For all of us.

Chapter 365



Jane would never be able to hurt us again.

A soft knock sounded on the door. Then the guard calls through, "It's Prince Julian."

"Let him in," I call back. I brushed a few hairs back from Elva's face, gave her another quick kiss, then

went to face my destiny.

Maybe that was too dramatic. For now, I was only facing Julian.

Even I could admit he looked handsome in his dark tuxedo. His bowtie was the same pastel yellow that

made up the majority of my dress. This was part of our ploy as a couple – matching outfits.

“You look beautiful,” he said as I came close.

“The dress is gorgeous,” I agreed.

“I’m not just talking about the dress,” Julian said.

I rolled my eyes because he had to be kidding me.

“Though...” he said, then trailed off.

“What?” noveldrama

He had a puzzled expression on his face. He held my gaze for a long moment, then his eyes started

drifting down./

“Did you put the cuff in your bra?” he asked.

I smacked him playfully on the shoulder. He laughed.

But then I looked down, suddenly nervous. “Is it obvious? How could you tell?”

“I guessed,” he said.

I wasn’t entirely sure I believed that, but it also seemed unlikely that Julian would attempt to foil our

mission. If the cuff was obvious, he would let me know.

Maybe he really did guess.

“Where else would you put it?” he asked, then waggled his eyebrows.

I gave him another playful smack, and he laughed again.

“Come on, lovely. Our ball awaits!”

He led me out into the hallway. I expected his charm to dim, now that we were seemed bound and determined to keep the mood light.

“You didn’t tell me how great I look in my tuxedo,” Julian said.

“You look fine,” I said. It was an obvious lie. We both knew it.

“It’s okay,” Julian said. “I don’t need validation. I know I look good enough to eat.”

I knew what he was doing: attempting to distract me from my own fears with light-hearted flirtation and

humor. It was ridiculous. But also... incredibly helpful. Despite myself, I couldn’t help but feel grateful.

I was still scared, my heart racing, but at least my hands weren’t shaking anymore.

“We look like quite the pair together,” Julian said. “We’ll be the talk of the event for sure. Romeo and his golden sunshine personified.”

“You mean Romeo and Juliet,” I said.

“Nah,” he replied. “That story is much too sad. I prefer a version where Romeo falls for the morning

light instead. It’s much easier than loving a woman.

“If you look at the sun, you’ll go blind,” I said.

“So he loves something he can’t have,” Julian said. “That’s not so uncommon.”

This was a ridiculous conversation. It made me wonder if Julian had even read Shakespeare.

But then, as we neared the ballroom, I saw Nicholas.

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He was standing alone. He wore a similar suit to Julian, but on Nicholas, stretched across his muscles,

he looked devastatingly handsome. My mouth watered on instinct.

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If we were together, I would have pulled him away just to admire that suit privately. And then take it off of him.

But we weren't together.

And more, we were here tonight for a purpose.

Nicholas looked up and saw me. His eyes went a little wide as he took me in. When his gaze met mine,

and mine his, we stared at each other for a long moment.

My heart raced.

The admiration was so clear in his eyes, it was nearly overwhelming. Finally, I had to lower my gaze for fear I would go blind.





When I looked back up at Nicholas, he was still staring at me. Maybe he would have stared forever, I didn't know.

But then Olivia appeared near his arm. She touched his forearm and he had to look down at her.

She wore a dress the color of the ocean, fluid, with white trim. Nicholas wore a matching tie.

Like Julian and I, they were a matching pair. It was a bitter reminder of our roles tonight, something I seemed to so easily forget every time I looked Nicholas in the eye.

Olivia tugged on Nicholas's arm, and he acquiesced to her command, not looking back.

Disappointment surged through me. I hadn't expected that we would have all walked into together like

some kind of royal parade, but it would have been nice to receive some acknowledgement.

"Looks like Nicholas is going to have his hands full tonight," Julian said.

"Yes," I agreed, annoyed how quickly and easily he followed Olivia's summons.

"We shouldn't assume that we can depend on him," Julian said. "He's going to be very busy upholding all of our appearances tonight."

I looked at Julian sideways. "And us?"

"We should stay together," Julian said. "To do our part, of course, but also for protection."

"I don't need your protection," I said on instinct. I was so used to doing everything alone. Sometimes it

still felt hardwired in me. I regretted it immediately. If things went south, I really might need him. I

opened my mouth to take it back, but Julian beat me to it, complete with a cheeky grin.

"I meant, protection for me. I don't want to be outside of three feet of that cuff." He purposefully dropped

his gaze to my bosom.

I went to smack him, but, laughing, he dodged out of the way.

I smiled in return, but it didn't feel as honest as it had before. Seeing Nicholas and being reminded just

how far out of reach he was really felt like it hurt something deep within me.

My soul, maybe? Was that

possible?

"Come on, my Queen." Julian held out his hand. "At the very least, we should walk in together."

"Keep your eyes only in appropriate places," I said, eying his hand with suspicion.

He crossed his heart with his other hand. None of his fingers were crossed, but I still didn't believe him

at all.

Still, knowing I had no other choice, I placed my hand in Julian's.

We were announced as one, "Prince Julian and Miss Piper." Some of the guests present became very

excited. Several clapped, a few brave souls whistled.

I startled, but Julian ate it all up, waving.

"Our adoring public," Julian whispered to me. "Let's not keep them waiting."

Together, we descended the stairs. No sooner did we reach the bottom stair, than we were swarmed by

a group of enthusiastic guests.

"Piper! Piper, there you are. Gosh it's so exciting to see you in the flesh," said one young woman, her

eyes bright and sparkling. She had an older man in tow, presumably her long-suffering father if their

similar facial features were anything to go by. "I begged and begged my dad until he let me come

tonight."

"I am deeply apologetic to you, Your Royal Highness, and to you, Miss Piper," the father said.

"Don't be ridiculous!" Julian answered, all smiles and easy acceptance. "It is an honor and a pleasure

to meet you and your daughter here tonight, good sir." He shifted his gaze to the young woman. "Miss."

He was laying on the smolder and it was incredibly affective. The girl's face went red as a cherry

tomato, and she was entirely speechless for a long moment.

Julian sharpened his smile into a devilish smirk, and she placed a hand to her heart.

“Oh my God...” she breathed.

As the young woman was stunned, another bold woman weaved her way to the front of the group.

“Piper!” this woman said, and pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose.

“So interesting that you

were publically introduced with Prince Julian...”

“Was it?” I asked.

+15 BONOS

“Not so interesting,” Julian said, cutting in. “I believe I’ve made my intentions toward Piper well known

to the entire kingdom.”

“Maybe,” the woman said.

Julian’s sharp gaze sliced to her. She seemed immune, matching it with a sharp gaze of her own.

“We’re all enjoying your romance, of course,” she said. “Though... we are all also enjoying your other

entanglements, Miss Piper.” She said the words while still looking at Julian. It almost felt like an attack.

Did this woman not like Julian?

“I don’t have other entanglements,” I said carefully.

“Oh, no?” She looked at me now, and her gaze was so probing, I wondered if she could see all my secrets just by looking at me. “No... love triangle? You can’t deny that Prince Nicholas also called your name at the last selection ceremony. And then there is the way he looks at you...”

A few other women in the group voiced their agreement.

One girl sighed dreamily. She asked, “What’s it like to be wanted by two different princes, Piper?”

“That’s not...” I started to say. How did they know? Were they part of the group that Charlotte

mentioned, who invested so much time and energy into dissecting all the footage of Nicholas and I

together?

I had to get a handle on this. Now.

I cleared my throat. “I am dating Prince Julian and no one else. Prince Nicholas and I are friends, but

that is all.” The words tasted like ash on my tongue, but they were necessary.

“Friends with benefits, maybe...” someone snickered. I didn’t see who.

“Hey,” I said, offended.

“Ladies, let’s calm down a moment,” Julian began.

The young woman who had swooned over Julian seemed to recover now. She glared at the woman

with glasses like she wanted to set her on fire with her eyes.

“How dare you insinuate that Prince Julian is not more than enough to satisfy Miss Piper,” the young woman said angrily.

“I’m only calling it like I see it,” said the woman with glasses. She gave the young woman a returning glare, almost as fierce.

I looked at Julian, but the bastard was near-laughing, like he was actually enjoying this.

“Julian,” I said under my breath, hoping to remind him of our purpose here.

He looked at me, then seemed sheepish. At least he was mildly ashamed at having been caught. “Now, ladies!” he tried again.

They weren’t listening to him.

“Darling, please,” said the young woman’s father.

She wasn’t listening to him either.

“I won’t have you insult Prince Julian like this,” the young woman said.

“There’s no shame in finding

Prince Nicholas so much more appealing,” said the woman with glasses.

I held up both hands. This was getting out of hand.

Yet, suddenly, Nicholas appeared beside us. He cut straight through the crowd, ignoring their gapes

and whispers. He came straight up to me and said, “Piper, I need to speak with you.” He looked around

at all the people. "Privately."

Several of the guests gasped.

The young woman seemed put out.

The woman with the glasses was smiling smugly.

Julian was watching it all with amusement dancing in his eyes. noveldrama

I covered my face with my hands and wished the world would swallow me whole.

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Nicholas continued to stare at me, waiting for my answer. He seemed entirely unbothered by the

gathered crowd of their assumptions.

"Piper?" he asked, when I hesitated.

"Of course we can speak," I said.

Nodding, he turned.

"If you will excuse me," I said, first to Julian and then to the gathered crowd.

Then I darted to follow in

Nicholas's shadow. He had already started walking

away.

When we were far side.

gh out of earshot, I moved from Nicholas's shadow to his

“Those girls are the same ones who have made assumptions about us... I’m afraid your request might

have added more fuel to the fire,” I said.

“I need to speak with you. Did you want me to wait until after the ball?”

“No, of course not. But those girls... and probably others...” I stepped closer to him and lowered my

voice. I didn’t want to risk being overheard. “They can tell about us just from the way you look at me.”

Nicolas lifted his brow, then glanced at the limited space between us. I quickly stepped to the side,

away from him. He frowned, clearly displeased by the action.

The displeasure seeped into his voice. “Am I supposed to stop looking at you?”

“No,” I huffed. “But when you look at me in a certain way...”

“What certain way?” he asked.

I glanced around quickly. Nicholas had walked us into the corner of the room, away from the any

eavesdroppers. Good. I could drop the act for a minute.

“Come on, Nick. Why are you being so difficult about this?”

“I’m not being difficult, Piper. I just don’t think it matters. They are always going to think what they want,

but they don’t have proof.”

“But we need to play our parts. We need to keep up appearances.”

“We are doing that.”

“Are we? When we keep looking at each other like we love each other? I bit
+15 BONOS

Nicholas didn't like that. His brow lowered. He stepped closer to me, right up into my space. “Looking at each other like we what, Piper?”

I swallowed down the words. Looking up at the intensity of his gaze, I felt a warmth in my chest. He

knew what I had been about to say. He had to. He just wanted me to admit it.

But how could I? This was hardly the time or the place, even though my heart hammered from simply

being near him. From him looking at me like this.

I looked away first.

He didn't initially react, not that I could tell. But oh so slowly, he stepped backwards, creating more noveldrama

space between us. It felt as wide as a canyon. I hated it.

Yet I couldn't take it back. The moment, rightly or not, had ended. All I could do was press forward.

“What did you want to talk about?” I asked.

“I didn't get the chance to speak with you before,” he said, sounding earnest, but Piper, please don't act

tonight without telling me. I know how eager you are to take down Jane, but it's dangerous. Too

dangerous for you alone. Bring me with you. Let me be your muscle.”

The offer seemed genuine, but I knew better than to assume it could be fully counted on. Nicholas on his own was sure and true. If he made promises, he sought to keep them. But tonight, his attention was divided. How much did he owe to me, and how much did he owe to his actual date Olivia?

"Won't you be too busy with Olivia?" I said, cruelly. I didn't want to hurt him, but I was hurt. So the words slipped out. I dipped my head in shame.

A moment's quiet passed between us. Outside our small, two person bubble, the ball proceeded in fashion. Music began, and the cameras took to capturing the smiling faces of the dancers.

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Then, to me, Nicholas spoke again, "Look at me, Piper."

I hesitated at first, but he didn't move from his spot in front of me, like he was patiently waiting me out.

So, eventually, I chanced a glance upwards.

Nicholas captured my gaze with his own and held me captive. He held so much emotion in his eyes - blatant affection - it stole my breath away.

"You know who I'd rather be with," he said.

He meant me.

And the words stole my breath away.

I'd rather be with him too. "Nicholas..."

"Find me," he said, "before you make a move on Jane..." He sighed. "Or find Julian. Just don't do anything on your own."

This felt like a pivotal moment, like he was barring his heart, and it was time for me to do the same. I wouldn't disappoint him. I wanted him to know his affections were reciprocated, in case there was any question about it.

"I'll find you," I said. It was a difficult thing to promise. No one knew when or how Jane would appear. It was likely that Nicholas would be in an entirely different part of the room. But no, I would still make an effort to get to him.

I would try, anyway. Because he wanted me to.

Slowly, he nodded. "Thank you." But I could see with the flash of uncertainty in his eyes that he didn't quite believe me. noveldrama

"I'll have my necklace," I said, gesturing to where the full moon pendant rested just above my bosom.

Nicholas frowned deeper at it. "Yes, but..."

Beside us, Julian cleared his throat, making us both jump. This added a few more inches between us.

"If you are done stealing my girlfriend, Nicholas?" Julian said. "I think your fangirls got enough pictures of you two to satisfy them."

We all glanced back at the overeager group of women who had inched closer to where they now stood. Many looked embarrassed at having finally been

noticed. The woman with the glasses was still recording on her phone, unashamed.

Julian made a show of offering his arm to Piper. Piper quickly accepted, afraid any hesitation would come off poorly on the video.

Nicholas glowered, but I couldn't point it out to him without making it seem like I was speaking to him privately again. So I just accepted that he would glare. The girl with glasses moved her fingers over the screen like she was zooming in.

Julian all but rushed me away from Nicholas, and the group of girls.

"You two all huddled and broody in the corner," Julian said. He spoke with an upbeat cantor, but I knew I was being lectured. "Did you forget the purpose of tonight's event?"

"To catch Jane..."

"No!" Julian swooped me onto the dance floor.

Suddenly his hand was on my hip and the other clutching mine as he pulled me into step with the rest of the dancers.

"We are supposed to look like we are having fun, remember? All sunshine and happiness, to let all the good people at home know how great everything is," Julian said. His smile was bright and wide, and it didn't look fake at all.

God he was a good actor. Dangerously good.

If he wasn't a prince, he could have been a movie star. He had the looks and the talent, not that I would admit either to him. He was smug enough as it was.

But he was right in this too. I hadn't forgotten the theme of the night's event exactly, I'd just been preoccupied.

"I've always believed in putting art into practice," Julian said as he spun me around. I felt light as a feather in his capable hands. "So maybe rather than pretending to have fun... how about we actually have some?"

Chapter 369



The King and Queen watched from atop their thrones as the princes danced with and among the candidates and guests, while the cameras swooped in and out to capture all.

We kept our smiles bright, eager to show how much fun we were having – all to maintain our standing in the competition, of course.

My cheeks were starting to hurt from how big and fake I was smiling. Fake laughter sounded all around me, every contestant competing with each other for the royal family's attention – as well as for the cameras.

Eventually, as Julian was swirling me around the dance floor, I noticed Susie standing near the edge of it. Her smile was shaky. She seemed more nervous than happy, even to pretend.

I tapped Julian on the shoulder and motioned toward Susie. "I need to talk to her."

He understood and released me. "I'll make the rounds." He instantly disappeared back among the dancers, with a new partner now. He switched so quickly, I didn't even see who it was.

It didn't really matter, though, so I hurried to Susie's side instead. Relief covered her face the moment she noticed me.

"Piper. Thank goodness."

“What’s going on?” I asked her.

She worried her hands together. “I can’t do this.”

“Do what? Dance?” I knew she could dance. I’d seen her do the steps countless times before. She’d even taught me a few moves.

“Pretend,” she said.

I stepped beside her and we both looked out over the dance floor. From this angle, the scrunched up

too-much smiling faces seemed extra unnerving. It looked like everyone had a clown mask on. Only

Julian looked truly genuine, though he was the best actor.

Nicholas was dancing with Olivia, I noticed. He wasn’t smiling at all, but a prince didn’t really need to.

Olivia seemed pleased. She wasn’t overselling it.

Lilliana, meanwhile, was laughing so loudly, smile so big, that it hurt me just

“Everyone looks so phony right now,” Susie said, “I know we need to try to lift the spirits of the kingdom, but... Won’t they be able to tell it’s not real?”

She looked at me for guidance, and I was honored that she sought out my opinion. Only, I didn’t know what answer to give her.

Yes, most likely the people would be able to tell this was fake. Hell, even if it wasn’t, what kind of message was it truly sending? Sorry you are experiencing such strife, at least all the rich elites are still fine? It all seemed grossly inappropriate.

But... maybe, if I was being optimistic, I could see how the royal family was desperate enough to try. If

part of the public unease was distrust in the stability of the royal family, showing that they could still

maintain the events of the competition could be a step in the right direction.

I sighed, then met Susie's gaze. Neither of us were political players or strategists. We were just two young women caught in a game created by people with more power than we'd ever hold.

Then I remembered Julian's words, before he pulled me onto the dance floor.

"Maybe instead of pretending," I told Susie now, "We could try to have fun for real,"

Susie's eyes went wide, as if surprised. Did she think we could only pretend?" How?"

"We're friends, aren't we?" I asked.

"Of course," she said.

"Then let's start acting like it."

*I wrapped her arm around mine and pulled her with me toward the dance floor.

"What are we doing?" she asked, though went along with it.

"Dancing," I said. "Forget the stuffy moves and the practiced dances. Let me show you some of the dances from my pack."

At once, I started a dance that mimics pushing a shopping cart. "Then you reach," I said, and lifted my arm up, as if pulling an item off the shelf, then mimicked placing said item into the shopping cart. "And drop."

Susie's eyes were wide, even as her smile grew bigger, more honest. "That looks ridiculous."

"I know," I said. "It's so fun. You try."noveldrama

Immediately Susie began the same dance. It was a bit strange, doing such an informal dance while listening to an orchestra, but a beat was a beat. Anything was possible.

Susie mimed putting items in her imagined shopping cart and then laughed and laughed. "Wait, what if I need something heavy?" She pretended to lift something off the ground with both hands.

It was outrageous and messed up the entire beat, but it was so funny, watching Susie in her formal gown pretending to lift something heavy.

I laughed so hard I snorted.

Our antics quickly drew the attention of others.

"What's that dance? I've never seen it before?" Tiffany asked, joining us.

"A shopping cart dance," Susie said.

"Teach me!" Tiffany said. Susie eagerly agreed. A few of the guests followed along. Susie came out of her shell a bit, perhaps seeing how much they actually enjoyed it. Even Veronica joined us.

Soon, half the dance floor was with people, young and old, men and women, attempting the shopping cart dance.

"I have another one!" I announced and they all turned to me. I very carefully taught them how to do the sprinkler move, by bending one elbow and moving in a semi-circle, mimicking the movements of a lawn sprinkler.

It was another outlandish dance that made everyone laugh and want to try it.

Susie pulled me into a quick hug. "This is amazing."

"It is when it's with friends." I smiled at her.

I didn't realize the cameras had shifted from recording the formal dancers to watching us instead. Our smiles and laughter was certainly more honest than

that of the other side. More so now, in fact, since that side had begun to glare at us.

All except Nicholas, who was looking right at me, pride clear on his face. I pulled my bottom lip between my teeth, hoping to hide how wide my smile was growing in response.

Making Nicholas proud? It made something warm burn within me. For a moment, I felt like a little sun myself, full of warmth and light and happiness.

But then Olivia tugged on Nicholas's arm, and he was forced to look away.

My sunshine dimmed somewhat.

I glanced across the room, searching for Julian. It seemed odd that he hadn't joined us for our silly dances. That seemed like something Julian would have been first in line to try.

But I didn't see him anywhere. Not on our half of the dancefloor, or on the other half. Not by the refreshment table. Not by the King and Queen on the throne.

He could have stepped out for a moment, I guessed, but we'd been dancing for a while.

Had that lead of his panned out? Surely he would have said something.

Then, something caught my eye. A figure in black among an assortment of bright, vibrant, jovial colors.

A stranger was wearing a tight, floor-length black gown, and a black brimmed hat with a veil that hid her face. She took a seat at one of the tables along the outer edge of the ballroom. She held a champagne glass but made no effort to drink from it.

I knew it was Jane, even from across the room.

Chapter 370



That was Jane. I had zero doubts.

What I needed to do now was keep my promise and alert Nicholas. Yet when I turned to find him, I saw

him stepping onto the stage where the thrones were, with Olivia on his arm. The King and Queen were greeting them warmly.

I couldn't exactly interrupt that without repercussions. Best to leave it.

I glanced around for Julian, but he was still missing. Where did he go?

The only one of our little group that I could locate was Veronica. I went to her now. She sensed my

seriousness at once, and dropped the preamble of the dance.

"She's here," I said.

Veronica, to her credit, did not attempt to look around. She just kept looking at me.

"Both Nicholas and Julian are out of reach," I said. "But I have to act before Jane gets away. I'll delay

as much as I'm able. Please get Nicholas as soon as he's off that stage."

Veronica did glance this time, up to the stage.

"Do you need time to get ready for the magic to return my wolf?" I asked her.

She looked back to me. "I'm ready now. But it will cause a scene. We can't do it here. We will need to

move her. Piper, I don't know..."

I'd never seen Veronica uneasy, even in other high-stress situations. Was she worried for me?

"We can't let Jane get away," I said.

"She's baiting you," Veronica said. "Just like we thought she would. It would be foolish to

go alone."

I couldn't argue with that, but to achieve the end goal of finally ridding us of Jane, I was willing to let

myself fall into the trap.

"That's why we gave me the cuff," I said. "I can get closest."

"Piper," she said, frowning.

"I'll be okay, Veronica." It was nice, in a way, to know she was worried. It meant she truly did care about

me. I had so few friends. Each one was very precious. I hoped Veronica knew she was a friend for life

now, no matter how long or short

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415 BONOS

"You better be," she said.

I nodded. "The minute Nicholas or Julian is free. Please. Let them know."

"I will," Veronica said.

I gave her a small smile, then I left her. I crossed over the dance floor, ignoring the cheers of the informal dancers and the glares of the more formal dancers. I came out the other side and felt like a soldier marching onto a battlefield.

Before me, Jane, dressed all in black, reclined on a chair. She had her legs crossed at the knee and dangled one foot, looking for all the world like she was enjoying herself. Maybe she was.

It had me on edge. I would have thought she'd have her grunts with her somehow, but she was sitting alone at the round table, with not a soul around her.

As I came closer, Jane began to giggle as if I pleased her immensely with my very presence. Knowing how much she hated me, I immediately tensed further.

"Piper, you look like you might shake to pieces," Jane said, a teasing lilt in her voice. "Does something have you frightened? Or someone, rather."

"I'm not afraid," I said, a lie. Truthfully, I was terrified, but I was also determined. Something Jane would find out very soon.

"Tense, then," Jane said, sizing me up. "Like a coiled up spring. Or a prisoner heading for the chopping block."

I tried to ignore the implication of death in her last remark.

“You, meanwhile, seem fall too calm,” I said.

Jane shrugged. “I’m just enjoying the night, and why not? Tonight’s the night I get to watch your world fall apart.”

I didn’t have the faintest idea what she was talking about. It could be bulls hit, but knowing her, it more likely meant she had a plot in the works.

It didn’t matter. I had to act quickly. Now. Before I lost my chance.

I glanced at her slim wrist. She wasn’t wearing gloves, breaking the rules of the Luna. Though she was breaking many other rules, simply by being here.

If I could get closer, maybe I could reach out and clasp the cuff over her wrist before she even knew

what I was doing. She likely suspected me of some act, but

+15 BONOS

I just needed a distraction, or a=

“Everyone!” shouted a voice.

The orchestra stopped abruptly, some players faster than others. One violin screeched out of tune. The

man on the bass drum thumped for a few more beats.

I glanced behind me, to where Joyce was standing at the edge of the stage where his parents’ thrones

were. He held his hands outstretched. He was speaking, but it was hard to hear.

“Someone give him a microphone!” called a good natured guest on the dance floor.

One of the musicians handed a microphone over to Joyce. He held it too close to his mouth. He

sounded like a demon, words crackling in the speakers.

“I have an announcement,” he said.

“Joyce, we need to talk about this,” the King said from behind him, voice picked up on the microphone.

The King placed his hand on Joyce’s shoulder. Joyce ripped it from his grasp.

“You only want to stop me,” Joyce snapped.

“For good reason, son,” the Luna said.

“You can’t just give announcements without telling us what they are,” the King said. His voice was firm

but the words weren’t as harsh as I might have expected. It seemed the King and Queen had a soft

spot for their youngest son. From what I’d seen, Nicholas and Julian suffered much firmer treatment.

“I can’t conceal this any longer,” Joyce said. “You may not believe in us, but I do. I won’t go along with

this anymore. The world should know about the woman I love.”

The crowd gasped in unison. The cameras moved closer to the stage.

Joyce was in love with someone? Who could it be? Not Susie, surely. Maybe things really had sparked

between him and Jessica? She seemed sweet. I didn't know her all that well, but I'd give them my

blessing if it would have mattered to either of them.

Oddly, Jessica, when I spotted her in the crowd, seemed just as surprised as anyone else. Surely she

would know if the man who was in love with her was about to announce it to the entire kingdom?

Instead, Jessica just looked very pale.

+15 BONOS

But if not Jessica, then who?

"Oh, this is rich," Jane laughed from behind me. I swirled back to her. She smirked at me. "The party is

truly just about to begin, don't you think, Piper?"

"What do you know about this?" I demanded, stepping toward her. Screw the timing. I was going to use noveldrama

the cuff now. I lifted a hand toward my chest.

"What don't I know?" She said, laughing hard. "Careful now, you are about to miss the best part. I really

hope you enjoy the show, Piper. After all, I arranged it all just for you."

"What are you talking about?" I said.

Suddenly, Joyce shouted into the speakers. "You can't stop how Piper and I feel about each other."

My whole body froze.

I didn't just hear...

No...

Yet, when I turned around, Joyce was looking straight at me.

"Piper and I are in love."