

THE LUNA CHOOSING GAME

Chapter 371



“Piper and I have been having an affair,” Joyce said into the microphone.

The King stepped forward and attempted to rip the microphone from his hands, but Joyce, younger and

stronger, shook him off with relative ease.

“Let me speak my truth, father!”

“You are out of your mind!” the King snapped back.

“I’m not! I have proof!”

The Queen stepped forward then. “Joyce, please. This is not the this. Let us speak privately.”

way to go

go about

“So you can cover it up? So you can push the love of my life off onto Julian? No!” Joyce was frantic, so

different from his usual, quiet persona. It was like looking at a different person.

I felt the accusation physically, like a blow, so I took a firm step backwards.

Then I remembered Jane,

“What have you done?!” I shouted,

No one but Jane could hear me. The ballroom was now full of chatter and other commotion. Only Joyce

on the microphone was louder than the rest.

“We slept together,” Joyce announced to the entire room.

My face burned. I’d only ever been alone with Joyce once, and that had been on the balcony that night

he locked me out there. The entire conversation lasted all of five minutes, if that.

“I have proof!” Joyce said again. He lifted his cell phone high. Something might have been on the

screen but I couldn’t see from this distance.

Nicholas made a move then. He snatched the phone from Joyce’s hand and smashed it hard onto the

ground. It shattered into pieces.

“Hey!” Joyce shouted.

A bit of hope shot through me. Nicholas was protecting me yet again.

Whatever photos Joyce had, had

to be doctored. If they were destroyed, then

Jane’s laugh interrupted my thoughts. “Your boyfriend is such a brute. So typical of an Alpha. It doesn’t

matter though. You can’t think I wouldn’t have copies? Oh, you did? How cute.” Looking at my face,

she laughed and laughed.

+15 BONOS

At the same time, Joyce announced, “I have backups, which I would be happy to provide to the press

as proof!”

“Why are you doing this to us?” the Queen asked her son. “Why are you trying to hurt us?”

“I’m not, mom, I...” For the first time, Joyce seemed unsure. He shook his head. “No, I know what I’m

doing. This is about what’s right.”

“Bulls hit,” came Nicholas’s voice. He wasn’t as close to the microphone as Joyce. He was softer,

farther away. But I would be able to pull Nicholas’s voice out of a thousand people talking at once. The

sound of his voice was so intrinsic to my being.

It was my second most-loved sound in the whole world, with the first being Elva’s laughter.

“You aren’t having an affair with Piper. You are delusional. Have you taken something?” Nicholas

demanded.

“Nicholas!” the Queen gasped.

Nicholas gave her a look. He motioned to Joyce. “Does this seem normal to you?”

“Don’t say such things,” the Queen said. She looked out over the watching crowd.

“Like a tower of cards,” Jane said. “One tiny puff of air, and the whole thing comes crashing down.”

I realized something then. The photos wouldn't have to be doctored.

Not if they weren't of me.

"You didn't?!" I asked Jane, outraged.

She shrugged. "He's not terrible-looking. And he's so sweet. Gullible really. Such a good little scapegoat."

"You are a monster," I said.

She looked at me with a smirk. "Don't put it all on me. Terry was the one who pulled him in first. Terry

saw something in the brat, I couldn't. But then... I

clearly hadn't been looking hard enough at the time. I see it now." She snorted. Thanks, Terry. A ss hole."

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"You have to stop this. It's getting out of hand. Don't you realize what this could do?"

+15 BONOS

She lifted a brow at me. "For your precious reputation."

"For the kingdom! The people are already doubting the royal family. You can't
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"You think I don't know that? You think everything hasn't been carefully fabricated? Newsflash, dumbas

s," Jane said cruelly. Her smile fell into a vicious snarl. "I want the royal family to fall almost as much as

I want to see you fall with it.” She schooled her face back into a smirk. “Two birds, one night of passion

with a quiet prince. It evens out.”

Hardly.

“Hold it!” shouted a new voice from the top of the stairs. Julian.

I turned in time to see Julian descending. He sauntered straight up onto the stage and yanked the

microphone away from Joyce. Joyce made a grab for it again, but Nicholas caught him by the upper

arms and forcibly held him back. Compared to Nicholas’s strength, Joyce was weakness incarnate.

“Hello, everyone,” Julian said with a smile. “I want to personally apologize for my wayward brother and

his ridiculous ‘announcement,’ which we all know is absolutely untrue.”

“How do you know?” someone shouted from the crowd.

Julian laughed, bright and loud. It startled most of the crowd into silence. He looked back to Joyce.

“Name the exact day and time those pictures were taken.”

Joyce lifted his chin in defiance. “Last Monday. At 9pm.”

I desperately tried to remember what I had been doing last Monday. The days had blurred together

somewhat. Either way, I knew I hadn’t been with Joyce.

Jane, however...

I glanced at her now. She was watching the show with sudden annoyed interest. All of her smugness had vanished.

“That fucking asshole middle-child...”

Julian, it seemed, was a thorn in her side. An unseen wrench thrown into the machinery of her plans. /

Good.

Julian laughed again, good-naturedly. “That simply cannot be.” He shook his head as he turned from

Joyce to face the crowd. “I’m afraid that Piper was with me that night. And I have pictures to prove it, if necessary.”

+15 BONOS

Blood rushed to my face. Pictures? What pictures? He better be lying. Or maybe that’s where he was

just now? Doctoring photos?

God, I really didn’t want to know.

“Unless you are suggesting, brother, that I can’t satisfy my girlfriend?” He must have given the front row

of the crowd his most swoon-worthy look. A few girls shouted. It looked like someone fainted.

Nicholas backed up Julian’s words, the muscle to his flash. He held Joyce firmly, and shook him every time Joyce tried to speak.

“Don’t bother lying,” Nicholas said to Joyce, so firmly and sharp that I heard it. He was growling with barely-constrained rage.

“You’ve offended me, and you’ve offended my girlfriend, Joyce,” Julian said. His own voice had edge now, as he faced Joyce once more. “And you’ve offended all of these good people by attempting to disrupt this festival of fun and joy. You’ve picked a sad time to cry for attention.”

Joyce looked around at his family. Then, though I couldn’t see from this distance, it almost looked like he started crying.

“We should speak privately now,” the Queen said, placing her hand on Joyce’s shoulder. “Don’t you agree?”

Joyce nodded.

Julian turned back to the crowd. “Sorry for the unpleasantness, everyone. Please, return to your merriment with our best wishes. We will return to you soon.”

He motioned for the orchestra to start again, then went with his family off the stage.

Beside me, Jane threw her champagne glass onto the floor and jumped to her feet.

Her rage-filled eyes found me, and she lunged.



As Jane lunged toward me, I made my own move, reaching into my bodice.

Jane grabbed my left arm, but I used my right hand to wrap the cuff on Jane's wrist.

I expected her to wince, or gasp, or have some kind of reaction at all. Instead, she just seemed

amused. She stopped short, but she also smiled at me. It was a devilish-looking smile, cat-like.

"What's this?" she asked. "Using my own toys against me?"

"It dampens the strength of my wolf," I said. "The one you stole."

"Cute that you think I need the wolf to have the upper hand here."

"I caught you," I said. I couldn't understand how she could be so calm about this. She was acting like

she had one something, when I was the one who had trapped her.

Her smile was sharp as a dagger's edge. "Who caught who exactly, Piper?"

A crunch of metal sounded. A cold metal bracelet closed around my own wrist. A handcuff?

She'd handcuffed us together.

"Now be a good girl and come with me somewhere a little quieter," Jane said.

I blatantly refused and pulled against her hold. Without her wolf strength, we were more or less evenly

matched in strength. I might have even had a slight advantage due to surprise.

Jane had grown accustomed to the strength of my wolf. She didn't realize how much more effort she would have to put in without it.

I grabbed her arm and she grabbed mine, and we tossed and turned, each trying to get the upper hand. No one else seemed to notice. Maybe to any outside observer, it seemed like we were doing another silly dance.

But then, Jane swiftly snatched a steak knife from one of the cutlery settings on the table and wedged it up against my ribs.

I immediately froze.

"Enough of this foolishness," she growled. "I tire of these games."

"You can't murder me here," I said. "They would catch you before you get out of

"So sure about that, are you?"

When she said it like that, I wasn't. After all, she had already escaped the palace guard so many times

before. I couldn't be so naïve as to think she didn't have a backup plan for this time as well.

"Don't do anything stupid," I said, and it felt like a plea.

Jane shifted her gaze to the view of the night sky out the nearby floor to ceiling windows.

“The stars are beautiful tonight,” she said. “Maybe we should go get a closer look. A bit of fresh air might do us both some good.”

I knew that by going out onto the balcony with her, I might as well have been signing my own death

warrant. But, admittedly, things didn’t appear much better by staying here instead.

The sharp end of that knife was still pressed up against my ribcage. All Jane would have to do is push

and it would slip between my ribs and touch my heart. I’d be dead before I even hit the floor.

“Very well,” I said. If we went outside, I could at least delay the inevitable somewhat. The best I could

hope for now was that by stalling, I could give Veronica time to get to Nicholas and Julian. But I

imagined both princes were behind locked doors at the moment, impossible to reach.

Unless...

My necklace!

With my free hand, I reached up, but Jane noticed and too quickly, grabbed the chain of my necklace

and yanked, breaking it free. She tossed it over her shoulder. It skidded along the floor and

disappeared behind a nearby curtain.

With it, disappeared my hopes of a timely rescue.

“None of that,” Jane growled. “Terry warned me about that little device.”

She started to dig the knife in, forcing me to move. “I’m tired of being nice,” she said. “Outside. Now.”

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I complied, unwilling to be skewered. She hid the knife against my side as she ushered me toward the

door. I looked back but none of the royal family was to be seen. Neither was Veronica.

I maybe could have caught Susie’s attention, if I called out or flagged her down. She was valiantly

trying to get the silly dances going again. But her limited knowledge of the current situation might cause

her to place herself into more danger than she would realize.

I couldn’t risk her. Jane wouldn’t hesitate to hurt Susie, if Jane’s attack on Nicholas was any indication.

I wished more than anything that Nicholas would appear. I could meet his eyes, and even across the

room, he would know what was wrong.

But he had his hands full with Joyce. Another of Jane's plans to upset the royal family. And me.

Jane had meant for the consequences to be worse than they seemed like they were going to be. But

even if her full plan failed, she had still managed to get my most stalwart protector as far from me as

possible.

I was on my own now. Either death or salvation... it was all in my hands now. And my hands alone.

Jane forced me out onto the balcony. There were other groups and couples there, laughing and

chatting. A couple was pointing up at the stars.

So many witnesses.

Jane kept the knife digging into my side, a warning not to speak. She continued dragging me further

down the balcony, until we reached a more secluded area on the other side of a wall. None of the other

guests could see us anymore. And as the loud music began again, I doubted they could hear us either.

"Well, we're here," I said. "We're isolated. Alone. Now will you tell me just what your plan was?"

If I could get her talking... If I could keep her talking...

"What did you think the plan was, dumbass?" Jane snarled. "That idiot Joyce was supposed to

humiliate you. But those two guard dogs of yours always seem to be circling. At least, I could cast a

stain upon the royal family. Scandal after scandal will not be perceived well by the public.”

“They’ll recover,” I said. “The people still believe in them.”

“God, you are so naïve,” Jane said. “There are cracks in the foundation, Piper. Soon the entire thing is

going to fall down. Do you understand? They are weak. And you only add to their weakness. I see it,

and the people are starting to wake up to it too.”

“They aren’t weak,” I said. The King and Queen I had lukewarm feelings for, but Nicholas wasn’t like

them. He was strong and brave, and had the people’s best interests in mind. And if he believed in his

parents’ strengths and abilities, then I would too.

“You mean Nicholas isn’t weak,” Jane said. “He doesn’t run this kingdom, Piper. And even if he did...

he might be the worst of them all.”

“You don’t know what you are talking about,” I snapped.

“Of course, I do. How strong could that asshole be? He fell for you. The man has no imagination.”

Odd. “You sound jealous.”

At the accusation, her face crumpled up in rage. “Why should you be the one to find love while I am the

one who has worked the hardest and suffered the most?!

It's unfair!"

Oh. She was jealous. But then, I guess I knew that. She saw me as some kind of golden child, doted upon while she was cast aside.

That wasn't true, not how I remembered it.

"Jane..."

"No. I'm doing talking. I wanted to humiliate you." She flashed the knife under the moonlight. "But if I can't do that, I'll just kill you."

Chapter 374



Nicholas

I pushed my errant brother through the door of the first nearby empty room. It was a library with floor to ceiling bookcases.

I shoved Joyce into the center of the room and he fell to his knees. The King and Queen came in

behind me, with Julian sauntering in last. Nathan closed the door to the room and stood outside of it,

protecting the shattered remains of our privacy.

Joyce whimpered where he sat on the ground. He wiped at his eyes where genuine tears were

beginning to well. His face was a mix of fading determination and building sadness and stress.

“Joyce, you absolute twat,” Julian said, and there was unbridled fury in his voice. Fury I couldn’t quite

bring myself to feel for my youngest brother.

I had never hated my brother. He kept to himself, but seemed thoughtful and well-educated. Perhaps

his lack of social awareness led to his downfall here. As furious as I was, for his accusations against

Piper, I felt angrier at myself for being unable to protect his weakness.

As an older brother, I failed him.

“I wasn’t lying,” Joyce said. His bottom lip trembled. “I slept with Piper.”

Our father rubbed his forehead and growled with annoyance.

Our mother was softer. She knelt down and spoke softly, “Joyce. We know that’s not true.”

I shot a quick glare to Julian, who pointedly avoided looking at me. Yes, I was relieved that he had

stood up and announced Piper was with him, even though it was a horrible, horrible lie. This protected

Piper’s reputation from the tarnish of being with all of the princes.

But facts were, Piper was still a virgin. And the only one here I would tolerate her being with was me.

Even if we couldn't be together. Even if everything was a big mess...

No. I should protect Piper from me too.

Joyce shook his head vehemently. "Maybe she left Julian and came to me. I don't know. But she

knocked on my door in the middle of the night and then... She was

The King looked first at Julian, then at me. "How well do we trust Piper?"

"Implicitly," I said at once. Piper's honor would not be questioned here. I'd damned well see to that.

I might have failed Joyce, but I would not fail Piper.

The King stared at me for a long moment. I held his gaze, matching his ferocity with my own. He would

see that I'm serious.

His gaze then switched to Julian. Julian didn't waver either.

"And she was with you?" the King asked.

"Does it matter, really?" Julian deflected. "What we know for a fact is that she wasn't with Joyce. I'm not

sure they've even had more than two conversations together."

"So he hallucinated?" the King asked.

"I didn't imagine it!" Joyce said, outrage overtaking the tears for a moment. Our mother touched his

shoulder. "I didn't," he said softer, to her. "She was real.". He sniffled. "She was my first."

Go d da mn Jane. She would pay for this.

I thought this outburst would thaw Julian's frozen heart toward Joyce, as it had done for me, but Julian

just glared at our youngest brother.

"You are a good actor," Julian said. "If I didn't already suspect you, I might have bought what happened

tonight same as the rest of the family."

"I'm not!" Joyce said.

The King's words were sharp, "This is no time to fling baseless accusations, Julian."

"What's so baseless? We all saw what he did tonight," Joyce said. "That's not something Joyce would

have thought up on his own."

A sinking pit opened up in my stomach. "What are you talking about, Julian?"

Julian considered me. "Whether or not the story tonight is concocted..."

"It wasn't!" Joyce cried.

"It could have been black magic," the Luna said. "Someone disguised..."

"You can't mean the underground is behind this!" the King said, fired up now.

going to need it. His face was already red.

"They manipulated my baby," the Luna said. "It's the only explanation."

Joyce avoided our mother's loving gaze. He was the most spoiled of us three princes. He received the

most attention from our parents, particularly the Luna. Usually he ate it up. But this time...



Something was different.

Maybe he was manipulated, But I was suddenly starting to realize that that manipulation might not have all that recent.

Locking eyes with Julian, he nodded at me. “You get it. Remember how, on the night you were almost

taken, Nicholas, Joyce lured Piper to the balcony and trapped her there. He wanted her out of the way

in case she decided to...” He didn’t finish, but we both knew.

They didn’t want Piper to be present when I was taken. If Piper had been with me that night, I would

have immediately known Jane was the one at the door, and she wouldn’t have been able to get the

collar on me.

Neither of us could say that allowed without revealing Jane’s existence, and my promise to keep that

secret for Piper kept my mouth firmly shut.

“But if Joyce was involved in that incident,” I said, “Then how far back does his connection to the

underground go?”

"You are all talking nonsense," the Luna said, but there was panic in her eyes. Her hand on Joyce's

shoulder wasn't holding on quite as tightly anymore.

Joyce, meanwhile, was still playing pathetic.

"We should check for the mark," I said, and glanced at our father for permission.

"No!" the Luna said, but there was fear in her voice. Maybe she didn't want to know the truth.

The King, however, could see that it was necessary. "Do it."

I stepped toward Joyce. He immediately cowered away.

"T-this isn't necessary!" he said, and his voice was shaking.

"Don't make this difficult," Julian said.

I took another step. Joyce tried to dodge from me, but I gripped his shirt and yanked it up.

There, on Joyce's chest was a tattoo of an upside down wolf skull. The symbol of the underground.

It was not a fresh tattoo, but seemed stretched out with his growth spirts. Then he was like Veronica,

taken in as a child, manipulated and groomed for the

"S hit," Julian said.

I understood the sentiment.

The King had gone quiet. The Queen was softly crying.

Joyce looked hollowed out and broken. He was silent now, frozen. He didn't whimper, didn't cry. He just

sat there staring at nothing.

“We have to keep this secret,” the King said. “Terry’s betrayal was enough to break the public’s trust in

us, but this? This would ruin everything...”

“We can’t just keep him around,” Julian said. “Listening.”

“How could you?” the Luna sobbed softly to Joyce. Joyce stared blankly back. Oh, my little boy.”

“Maybe we could deprogram him. He’s obviously brainwashed. We could bring him back,” I said. I

looked at Julian. Like Veronica. Maybe she could even help.

Julian sighed, and I knew he was conceding. He’d been ice cold before, but now that the truth had fully

been brought to light, he seemed more resigned.

Maybe he was thinking of all the intel we could get from Joyce if he did return to

us.

Or maybe he, too, was just worried about our youngest brother.

“Fine,” Julian said.

“Then we are in agreement,” the King said.

—

“Yes, we ah!” I clutched at my chest as a shot of sharp fear spiked through me. Inside, my wolf was

snarling, and throwing itself against the walls I used to contain it.

“Nicholas?” Julian asked, stepping closer.

"It's Piper," I said. I had no idea how I knew my words were true, but I could feel the truth in them with

every fiber of my being. Wherever Piper was, she was terrified. "She's in trouble."

Confusion seeped over Julian's face. He pulled out his phone. "She hasn't pressed the tracker."

"I'm telling you," I started, then growled. The wolf was winning the fight. I'd shift soon. I had to get to

Piper. She needed me.

I pushed away from my family and barreled toward the door.

Julian rushed after me. "You don't even know where she is!"

But I did. I had no idea how.

I could feel her presence tugging on my heart. All I had to do was follow.

Chapter 376



"Fucking bleed out, you stuck pig," Jane growled. She ripped the knife out of my thigh, and somehow

that hurt worse. The blood poured down, staining the front of my dress crimson.

I trembled. I couldn't find words, only cries of pain.

"You think I have any lingering feelings for you? For Elva?" Jane crouched over me. Her face was

twisted with vicious mockery. Her lip was curled in disgust. “I have hated you since the womb, bit ch. I

have lived and dreamed for this moment. And now that it is here?” Jane began to laugh maniacally.

Even in my pain, I felt my broken heart crack even further. I didn’t truly understand how I could have

still cared about Jane. She’d shown her true colors to me many times – attempting to kidnap Nicholas,

cursing Elva...

Maybe I had hoped that underneath it all, she could somehow be redeemed. She’d held a knife to my

throat before, but even then, I hadn’t fully been sure she’d push the blade into my skin.

But to see her now, so jovial in the face of my unbelievable pain? This eliminated all remaining doubt.

Jane meant to kill me. She had from the start, but now she had the means.

She was enjoying my pain. She wanted to bring Elva into the underground. She wanted to bring down

the royal family. And like this, broken and tattered and weak, I could do nothing to stop her.

I could only lie here as the blood pooled under my thighs, spreading around me so that my dress is

soaked with it.

I could only watch, as she lifted the knife toward the column of my throat. My neck was still marred with

love bites from Nicholas's tender attentions. Would Jane slice through those? Or could I remain

Nicholas's until the very end?

I wished I had more time with him. I would have been more honest about what I wanted... what he

meant to me.

I wished I could say goodbye. To him. To Julian. To Susie, and the rest of my friends. To Anna.

To Elva...

My darling little girl. When she'd been abandoned, I'd stepped into the role of doting mother so that she

would never feel alone.

But now I was going to have to leave her anyway.

I closed my eyes and sent a plea. I couldn't see Nicholas, couldn't hear him... but maybe he could still

receive the message somehow, if the universe chose to be kind.

Please take care of Elva. She won't understand.

Something quaked through my body then, like a roar that wasn't my own. It was almost... comforting. It

made me think of Nicholas. Of his protective instincts. Of his kind heart.

He was good with those orphans. He wouldn't leave Elva out in the cold. Nor would he let Jane have

her without a fight.

I tried to let the thoughts warm me, but I was growing very cold.

Blood loss, I knew.

The end was near for me.

Jane pressed the knife right up against my skin. A trickle of too-warm blood dripped down my cold neck.

“I hate you,” Jane said, voice twisted and ugly with her malice.

I looked at her, and even now, could see the girl she was when we were young. Her pigtails. Her bright eyes. The way she always followed me.

Tears fell from the corners of my eyes. I couldn’t stop them. I didn’t even want to try.

“I love you, Jane,” I said, because it was true. Even now, even after everything. She was and always would be my sister. I could hate her, and I did, but I loved her too.

Her face contorted further, evil joy replaced now by vicious fury.

“Eat dirt, Piper!”

I closed my eyes, and waited for the kiss of metal to slice through my neck. Goodbye, Nicholas.

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I stared down Jane. That knife of hers was precariously close to me, and with us handcuffed together, I

couldn't exactly make a break for it. At this point, the only thing I could do to defend myself was keep

Jane talking. And in the moment, I could only think of one thing to talk about.

The photograph that had been used for Elva's curse still bothered me.

Veronica had said that the

talisman would have to have significant emotional meaning to the caster of the curse. For Jane to use

that photograph meant that she had

emotional attachment to it, and further, to Elva.

For so long, I had thought her entirely indifferent to her daughter, but the picture of Jane and Elva had

meaning for Jane.

She couldn't have been as indifferent as I'd thought.

So as that knife came closer to my ribcage, I hastily said, "What about Elva?"

Jane stilled her hand. "What about her?"

"It would hurt her to lose me," I said, banking on Jane's secret affection.

Jane's voice was a low growl. "She'll get over it."

"I know you care about her..."

"You don't know anything," Jane snapped.

"You kept that picture," I said.

"A frivolous attachment that I am better off without," Jane said. "Or didn't your little turncoat mention

that part? It's the nature of the curse. The talisman was a symbol, not the actual fuel. I didn't just

sacrifice that photo..."

I gasped. "You sacrificed the remainder of your feelings for Elva."

"A small price to pay."

"She's just a child," I said. "If you've ever cared for her at all -"

you

"I gave her up to you, Piper, so that you could give her a life. And what have done? You brought her

straight back here, tied her up with this royal sham, and made her some kind of political adornment."

Jane snorted bitterly. "She's better off dead."

"That's not true.

"It doesn't matter," Jane said. "You had your chance and you blew it. Now, from the start. She will make a fine addition to the underground organization... Hawk will see to that."

"No. Nicholas would never allow that."

"He won't have any choice."

I shook my head. "You can't do this, Jane. You know more than anyone how that would change Elva..."

"tried to keep her out," Jane said. For a tiny, sliver of a moment, there was a hint of regret in her voice..

"Then continue to do so," I said. I saw a thread of hope here and grabbed it with both hands. "Let me

go, and I -”

“Ah! You just want to be free. You don’t actually care about her.”

“No, that’s not

“I tire of your empty words, Piper. Just as I tire of your face. I will rid you of both!”

She lunged the knife. I twisted at the last minute, and it harmlessly swiped through my dress.

I reached for her arm holding the knife and held her away. We grabbled. Like this, with the wolf

contained, our strengths were more or less equal, but where my biggest hardship over the years had

been dealing with overbearing

customers, Jane had been preparing for war.

Her skills far outpaced my own. So though I could hold her back, I couldn’t properly predict her

movements, especially as she ducked to the ground and kicked by feet straight out from under me.

I landed on my back with an oof.

Jane raised the knife, and slammed it down – straight into my thigh.

“Aaah!!” I cried out, overwhelmed by pain. It shot through my entire being that spread outwards almost,

spiking out across an invisible bond I didn’t understand.

I couldn’t move. I couldn’t catch my breath.

Blood stained my dress.

God, it hurt so much. The metal pressed down near to the bone, slicing through muscle and fat. I

couldn't think, but for the pain. I couldn't move.

Chapter 378



A roar echoed across the balcony so loudly that I felt the tiles rattle under my battered, broken body.

Then, at once, a wolf appeared as if from nowhere.

Or maybe my senses were too sluggish. It was hard to keep track of what was happening. I was so

tired and cold. I wanted to sleep.

Jane moved much faster. In a flash, she had me upright and was kneeling behind me, as if using me as

a shield. She kept that knife to my throat.

Before me, the large Alpha wolf I knew was Nicholas snarled and barked.

Behind him, Julian and

Veronica came running.

"Stay where you are. All of you!" Jane called out.

Nicholas began to pace back and forth, all while not coming any closer.

Jane seemed twitchy. The knife nicked my neck, and a fresh pearl of blood trailed down my neck.

Honestly, I was surprised I had any left inside of me to give.

“Wait!” Julian said. He held up both hands, palms forward. Horror was evident on his face. I must have

looked like real hell for him to take on that expression.

And Veronica... I had never in my life seen her so pale and frightened. I didn’t know her eyes could go

that round and big.

“Let’s talk this through,” Julian said.

“There’s nothing to talk about, middle-child,” Jane grumbled, but there was a hint of desperation in her

too.

“Let Piper go,” Julian said, “And maybe you can survive this encounter.”

“You threaten me?” Jane said.

“I’m telling you the facts,” Julian countered. “If you kill Piper, Nicholas will go ballistic. Full scorched

earth, you got it? He’ll be pulling pieces of your bones out from between his teeth for weeks.”

“So be it,” Jane said. “I’d rather die than to keep letting Piper keep living like a queen.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way,” Julian said, and inched closer.

“Hold it!” Jane said. Another drop of blood escaped my skin. “I said not to move.”

Nicholas growled, loud and dangerous.

Julian stopped. “Okay, okay. Sorry. Listen. We can expel Piper from the games. We can send her and

the kid out onto the street...'

Nicholas snapped at him. Julian ignored his brother.

"Just don't kill her. Hell, you could even take her place here. No one would be the wiser. That's what

you want, right? Then you would get treated like a queen...'

As Julian talked, distracting Jane, I noticed slight movement in how Veronica was holding herself. It

almost seemed as if... light... was forming between her hands. 1

My thoughts were slow, dragging through the quickly numbing pain. Else I would have known sooner

that she was casting a spell.

"And I'm supposed to believe that you would let me trounce around in my sister's place?" Jane said.

"Where's the security? No, I would have to keep Piper with me. Or... perhaps Elva..."

"No..." I whispered. It was the best I could muster at the moment. I couldn't lift my arms anymore.

Nicholas growled again. The eyes of his wolf were red with rage.

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"It's something to think about," Julian continued. He ignored another, harsher snap from Nicholas. This

one drew blood on his hand. He only winced a little. " But I have another alternative..."

"And what's that?" Jane asked.

The light in Veronica's palms sparked and danced. It became bigger and brighter.

"You can get f cked," Julian said, voice suddenly icy.

The light snapped.

For the length of a heartbeat, nothing happened.

Then, Jane lurched forward and screamed.

And I suddenly felt... powerful.

My wolf, my old friend, rushed back into my body, refilling the empty crevice that had laid barren for

years and years. My wolf was warmed, welcomed, and almost too much.

I was a thirsty woman suddenly drowning under a cascade of water. I held out my arms, looking for something to hold onto.

Nicholas lunged forward, teeth first. He snapped his jaw, shattering the

Jane was still screaming. Nicholas, growling, rushed toward her. She stood in an attempt to stop him.

His teeth sunk into her shoulder.

I twitched on the ground. Julian and Veronica came to me. They knelt in my blood, ruining their

beautiful clothes. I pushed weakly at them, trying to stop them.

Julian misunderstood and caught my hand in his.

"What's happening to her? Is the wolf back? Will it heal... all this?" He sounded panicked. That wasn't

like him at all.

Why was he panicked? I couldn't remember?

Oh, wait. Yes. The blood. The stab wound...

Odd, that all felt so very distant anymore.

But I wasn't cold like I had been before. Now, heat pulsed through me.

I felt like I had died and was coming alive again, inch by inch.

"Piper?" Veronica said. She hovered over me, staring down. She wasn't as frightened as she had been

before. Her calmness eased some of the fear in me. Veronica knew what was happening. If she was

calm, I would be okay. "Don't fight the wolf. Let it in."

I tried to do as I was told. I didn't fully understand how to do it, but I eased some of my tensing muscles

and forced myself to breathe.

Julian squeezed my hand through it all. Or maybe I squeezed his. I had trouble telling for sure.

Eventually, the burning light within me ebbed to a dull glow. My wolf was there, present and consuming,

but duller... Or maybe I was getting used to it again.

Either way, I felt strong enough to sit up.

"Are you alright?" Julian asked.

I opened my mouth to reply, when I heard growling from behind me. Nicholas was still fighting Jane!

Jane had swiped at Nicholas with the knife. He was bleeding from the leg and shoulder, but he was

unrelenting in his attacks.

“Nick!” I called, scared for him.

He glanced back at the sound of my voice.

Jane lunged toward him.

“No!” I screamed.

Nicholas turned sharply in an attempt to dodge, but Jane hadn’t given him enough room. They collided.

Jane, suddenly off-balance, slipped straight over the banister of the balcony.

“Jane!” I cried and dove forward. I caught on of her arms with both of mine through the banisters. I was

stronger now, with my wolf. I could hold on. I could save her.

Jane still held the knife in her other hand. She lifted it.

Did she mean to stab me? She couldn’t!

“Don’t!” I said.

“It should have been you,” she growled at me. There was blood on her teeth.

Even like this, so near to

dropping to her demise, she glared with open hatred. She said again, screaming, “It should have been

you!”

Then she sliced at my hand.

I tried to hold on through the pain but she sliced again and again until...

The blood made it difficult to maintain a grip. Jane slipped out of my grip. As she fell, she smiled, a vicious cruel thing that I knew would live in memory forever.

my

I turned away, eyes squeezed shut, not wanting to see the moment of impact. Hands pulled me away from the ledge. Suddenly, I found myself against a very human chest. A pair of strong arms wrapped around me.

I held onto Nicholas, both hands clawing at his back.

“I killed her...” I whispered. “I killed my sister.”

Chapter 379



“She killed her f u c k i n g self,” Julian snapped. “She didn’t give you a chance to save her life. Instead she stabbed you. Repeatedly.”

Nicholas dragged his fingers through my hair, soothingly scratching at my scalp with his stubby fingernails.

leaned into him, burying my face in his chest. I was a sobbing, blo o d y mess. I couldn’t think straight.

My sister was dead. My wolf was back. Everything was too hot; too much. I felt like I was falling apart.

Nicholas was my anchor. He didn't once let me go.

In my ear, his voice was a quiet rumble, "We have to check your wounds..."

I shook my head, vehemently against moving even an inch away from him. He was warmth and safety.

His presence smoothed some of the rankled fears within me.

"Please, Piper..." Nicholas whispered. "For me."

For... Nicholas? Yes. I could do that. I could do anything for him.

He helped turn me in his arms so that my back was to his chest. His arms wrapped around my waist

and kept me snug in his lap, cradled in his chest.

"Good girl," he said, and I preened at the praise. Or maybe my wolf did? It was difficult to tell where one

of us ended and the other began. Had it always been that way? Had I been alone in this body so long

that I'd forgotten?

Julian began to lift my dress. To do so, he had to peel it away from the skin of my legs. Both were damp

with blood.

"Holy f uck," Julian cursed under his breath. He'd said it quietly, but I'd heard it like he had said it clearly

in my ear. Was this werewolf hearing?

I squeezed my eyes shut, afraid to see how bad the wound was.

"It's already healing," Nicholas said. I felt his voice rumble through his chest.

"I'm going to clean and wrap it anyway," Julian said. "Brian!" I opened my eyes in time to see Julian's

Beta hurry forward carrying a first aid kit. Julian accepted it, then said, "Keep everyone away from this

area. And send some guards downstairs..."

Abruptly, Veronica shifted directly into my view. "Look at me," she said, voice flat and serious.

I obeyed, meeting her eyes at once. She stared into mine for such a long moment, Julian had already

started to treat my leg by the time she was done.

"Good," she said.

"What...?" I had trouble with my words.

Fortunately, Veronica seemed to understand anyway. "I needed to inspect how well you have received

the wolf. The first few minutes are always critical."

I waited a beat, then two. When she didn't continue, I prompted; "And?" "Oh," she said. "Yes. So far, I

am very pleased with the results."

I let out a heavy exhale.

Julian finished wrapping my leg in a clean white bandage. He then handed the first aid kit to Nicholas.

Nicholas accepted it.

I didn't understand.

"For your hands," Nicholas whispered.

I lifted my hands to look at them, and only now saw the true damage Jane had done. She'd sliced several crisscrossing lines across the back of my palms.

Tears welled in my eyes again. If only I'd been able to hold on.

Nicholas gently reached out and collected one of my hands in his much bigger one. He opened an antiseptic wipe and began to clean the cuts. I felt a bit of a sting, but it was nothing compared to everything else I'd faced tonight.

If the wound on my leg was already healing, then these would too. Soon, there would be no evidence on my body that tonight had happened at all.

Well, at least not on the outside.

The sight of Jane falling... Her callous smile... That would remain seared onto my heart for the rest of my life.

When Nicholas finished cleaning one hand, he moved onto the other. Julian took the first hand in his and started picking the lock of the half of the handcuff that remained on my wrist. He had it loosened in six seconds flat. I knew because he counted.

Chapter 380



“New record?” Veronica asked.

Julian flashed a smug smile, even as he shrugged like it wasn’t a big deal. “It’s easier when you can

see it. Much harder when your hands are behind your back.”

I tried to smile with them. They were my friends. But it didn’t last on my lips. I was too strung out, too

numb. I didn’t feel real. I didn’t feel... alive.

I felt like I died the moment Jane stabbed me, and everything since then had just been a dream.

I began to tremble.

“Piper?”

I shifted against him, to look up into his face. There was softness in his eyes. He’d cleaned whatever

blood had been on his face.

He was so handsome in the moonlight. Even more so than usual, somehow, though he looked the

same as always. No, that wasn’t true. He looked... more defined. Like, I could see him better. Werewolf

sight?

Had my senses truly been so dull all this time?

“Are you alright?” Nicholas asked me, a hint of concern lilted his words.

I reached up a hand and placed it on the side of his face. He was so warm.

The cuts on the back of my

hand were already healing.

“Am I alive?” I asked him.

He blinked, startled for a moment. Then, he said, “Yes,” and leaned down to press his lips to mine.

It was a chaste little kiss, but it sent an explosion of joy within me. My wolf was pleased with this

connection. So was I.

Something seemed to thrum between Nicholas and I. For a moment, I could have sworn that I felt his

heartbeat, not only under my hand, but racing alongside my own in my chest.

It was strange but comforting, and I sunk into the feeling for as long as I could.

Julian’s phone rang, and it ruined the moment. Nicholas and I ended our kiss, though he didn’t let me

go far. Instead, he placed soft kisses first to my nose, then to my forehead.

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“What the hell do you mean, there’s nothing there?” Julian said in disbelief. “Are you in the right place?”

One second.”

Julian stood and walked toward the edge of the balcony. Fear shot through me, and I reached out and

snatched his wrist. He paused a moment, looking at me in question. When he saw my face, he

softened.

“I’m just looking, Piper, I swear. I’m not going anywhere.”

I shook my head. I wasn't ready to let him go. He could fall. Any of them could fall.

Julian shifted my grip so that we were holding hands instead.

"See? Now you've got me. No problem."

Veronica went to his other side and wrapped her arms around one of his. "I'll hold onto him from this

side, Piper."

She was giving serious consideration to my fear, unwarranted or not, and I was deeply appreciative.

Nicholas kissed my temple. "You are safe. We are all safe."

I watched warily as Julian inched closer to the edge of the balcony and peered over the edge. He still

had the phone to one of his ears.

"No, I see you," he said. "But... that doesn't make sense. Do you see anything? Blood? A dent?

Anything?"

Julian listened a moment more.

"What is it?" Nicholas asked. "What's wrong?"

When Julian returned his attention to me and Nicholas, he wore an expression of total bewilderment.

"Julian?" I asked.

"Jane is gone," he said.

"What do you mean, gone?" Nicholas asked.

“Exactly as I said.” Julian frowned at his phone. “No body. No blood. No trace of anything. It’s like she vanished...”