

THE LUNA CHOOSING GAME

Chapter 391



An announcement went out for all the candidates to head to the foyer to receive the results of the most

recent event, the ball where we were supposed to look happy.

At that same ball, everything sort of fell apart. Joyce declared erroneously that he and I were having an

affair. Jane tried to kill me. Jane plummeted off the balcony and then disappeared into thin air curtesy,

we suspected, of Hawk himself.

I stood between Susie and Veronica in the foyer, with Tiffany nearby. Olivia and Lilliana were nearer the

stage, looking bored. Jessica, behind them, looked simultaneously nervous and annoyed. Of everyone

here, her situation was probably the worst.

She had thought she was making progress with Joyce. She'd had the rug pulled firmly out from under

her with Joyce's sudden declaration.

"Thank you for coming today," Nathan said, speaking into a microphone as he stands on top of the

stage. There were no cameras present for today's announcements, which wasn't totally unusual for announcements, but did seem odd in regards to the results being released.

Maybe the public had already been made aware of the results. Or maybe the entire event was edited for public consumption. I would have to ask Charlotte later.

"I will now give the results for the event. As you recall, points were to be awarded for those who seemed to be having the most fun at the event," Nathan said. "As such, the winner of the highest number of points was Susie, one of Joyce's candidates."

Susie gasped excitedly. I clapped for her. Others did too.

I was glad I showed Susie those dances, so that she could use them to her benefit. I likely would have

benefited too, had I not been called away to face off against Jane. I couldn't complain though, not that I

had my wolf back.

My standings were still precarious in the competition, which was a worry, but I was relieved at least that

Susie was no longer in danger with me.

Suddenly, Lilliana's hand shot up. She had not clapped for Susie. If anything, she seemed irritated by

all that was happening.

Nathan politely called on her.

+15 BONOS

Lilliana spoke loudly for the whole room to hear. “Isn’t it unfair for any of Prince Joyce’s selections to receive points, considering what happened?”

Nathan’s polite smile slipped into a sharp, disapproving grimace. He lifted his microphone once more.

“Prince Joyce is still a part of this competition.”

Maybe he’d expected questions like these. Maybe this was why there were no cameras in the room.

“But he made his intentions clear, going after a girl who is not even one of his selections,” Lilliana

continued despite Nathan’s clear dislike.

“Prince Julian cleared Piper’s name,” Tiffany said loudly, in my defense. “It’s pointless to bring that up.”

“I didn’t name her,” Lilliana snapped at Tiffany. To Nathan, she proceeded to argue. “Prince Joyce is the

one I’m questioning. If he has no interest in his own candidates, why should they continue to receive points?”

“Maybe you don’t blame Piper,” Jessica growled. She turned to me, and I could see now that what I

had confused for annoyance was actually bitter hatred. All directed at me. “But I do.”

"I didn't do anything," I said at once.

I could feel her hatred radiating off of her in shaky waves. Was this part of gaining my wolf? With my

heightened senses, was I now also able to perceiving others' emotions more distinctly?

I glanced at Veronica and found her watching me. I placed a hand over my chest, signaling that it was

giving me pain. She seemed to understand what I meant. She nodded.

Shit.

Jessica stormed toward me and each furious footfall hit me like a punch in chest. Her anger and hatred

was so strong I could practically taste it.

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Tiffany stepped in front of me, blocking Jessica from getting too closely.

"Her name is clear, Jessica," Tiffany said.

"I don't care if they didn't fuck," Jessica growled. "At the very least, she tricked him somehow. He's a

decent guy. He never would have behaved this way on his own."

"Back off, Jessica," Veronica said. Her voice was terrifyingly calm for the amount of anger that burned

in her own eyes. Veronica, I knew, was the only person in the room to truly be afraid of. She might be

away from the underground now, but she still had magic.

“I didn’t sleep with him. I didn’t trick him.” I wished she would believe me, but she shook her head at my

words, as if shaking them away from herself before they could sink in.

If I was free to talk, I would tell her that Nicholas was the one I wanted. That the night Joyce claimed

we were together, I was likely with his eldest brother instead. But that would endanger Nicholas and his

run for the crown.

So I had to keep my mouth shut and take the brunt of her rage without much of a defense.

“You slept with all of the princes,” Jessica said, and the words irked straight through me, pushing back

all my sense of calm. Of forgiveness. Instead my wolf reared its head, its own anger stoked.

“Admit it,” Jessica said. “You came here just for bragging rights. You wanted to fuck all three princes so

you could go home to your little hick town and feel important to all your hick friends!”

Heartbreak made people act irrationally. I knew that.

I didn’t want to hurt Jessica. She was already hurt. She was just taking it out on

1. me.

But the wolf was raging, and my energy had to
had to go somewhere.

"I. Am. Not. A. Whore," I growled very slowly, trying to keep myself under control.

"Then why do you act like one?"

"That's enough!" bellowed a male voice from the entryway. Everyone turned in
+15 BONOS

time to see Nicholas stalk forward. Tiffany sidestepped away as Nicholas took up place between

Jessica and I. He kept his back to me, facing her. His shoulders were taunt as a bowstring.

Yet tense as he was, his closeness gave comfort to my raging wolf. Slowly, my rage began to seep
away, as if it had never been there at all.

Thank God. I could barely control my strength. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt someone,

especially someone like Jessica, who acted only out of her own grief and heartbreak.

Veronica came closer to me. She glanced me over.

"I'm okay now," I whispered and she nodded.

Susie hooked her arm around mine. I gave her a reassuring squeeze.

Nicholas was a stone wall between me and Jessica's rage.

"I'm only saying what we all know!" Jessica shouted.

Into the microphone, Nathan scolded, "If you cannot control yourself from making such accusations,

Jessica, you will be removed from the competition."

"What does it matter?" Jessica shot back. "Prince Joyce only wants Piper."

"He was mistaken about what happened that night," Nicholas said. He was using his authoritative

voice. It claimed the attention of the room. "Joyce was taken advantage of by a yet-unknown

adversary. Do not consider yourself out of the running, unless you lack compassion."

Jessica's face went pale. I felt as her own anger slipped away, replaced by a devastating kind of upset.

"Someone hurt him?"

Nicholas nodded.

She brought her hands to her face. "Oh, Prince Joyce... How terrible..." She slumped a little.

Nicholas looked to Nathan.


"If there are no other complaints?" Nathan asked.

With Nicholas present, the rest of the girls kept their mouths shut.

Though with my heightened senses, I could tell when Lilliana and Olivia looked at me with suspicion.

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After the announcements were completed, I stayed behind to privately speak to Nicholas. When the

other girls cleared the room, I said, "Thank you for the rescue."

"It seemed the other girls were ready to fight for you," Nicholas said.

"They were," I agreed. "But so was my wolf."

His face suddenly became more guarded. "Oh."

"Your entrance was timely."

"I'm glad then," he said. Then he cleared his throat. That was odd. So too was his inability to look me in

the eye.

"Nick?"

"I may or may not have been keeping tabs on you. Just to make sure you are okay."

"Which is it?" I asked. "May or may not."

He cleared his throat again. "May."

Maybe I should have been upset that he was tailing me around. Instead, I just felt relieved. I had nearly

lost myself, after all. I would have hated to hurt Jessica. She simply cared about Joyce. That shouldn't

have been a crime punished with a black eye. Or worse.

Nicholas watched me with a careful eye. "Are you okay?"

"I don't know," J admitted. "It feels like me and my wolf are at war with each other over control of my

body. I know it's not on purpose. We aren't enemies. We just aren't used to each other. I also suspect

that Jane kept her on a shorter leash. Miracle doesn't know what to do with the freedom I give her."

Nicholas nodded. "Hopefully you will learn to coexist sooner rather than later."

"We've both changed since we were last together," I said. It was difficult to explain. It was like seeing a

friend after a long time apart. We needed time to reconnect. Once we did, I was sure we would fall

together like we had never been separated. But first we had to make it through that learning curve.

"I wouldn't say you've changed all that much," Nicholas said. He gave me his rakish smile, the one he

often used when we were young and in love. He was being cute, but he had changed also. We'd all

grown since then.

But we didn't have to grow apart.

"Keep at it," Nicholas said. "Veronica told us that you and the wolf are meshing well. She said this is a

compatible match. You just can't give up."

I shuddered at the thought. "I will never give up my wolf again."

Inside me, Miracle grunted her agreement. Now that we'd found each other again, we would be

together for life.

We'd get through this patch.

Unfortunately, I had more worries than just my own inner turmoil.

"You heard the end of the announcements," I said. "The rankings."

He'd been kind not to have any reaction to them, but the fact remained that I was no the lowest ranking

of the all the candidates. I couldn't exactly blame the judges. I had disappeared halfway through the

event and not returned.

"Do you think I'll be eliminated?" I asked.

"I won't let that happen," Nicholas said.

I wanted to believe him, but if fair was fair, the bottom of the pack would be the first to go. My sole

purpose here was for public image, but even that was under fire. Joyce's comments surely didn't paint

me in a great light.

Then there were the protestors who considered me a traitor.

Maybe my purpose here had been served. Maybe the King would want me to leave.

At once, Nicholas clutched me by the shoulders. He dipped his head until he met my gaze, then held it

prisoner with his own.

"Do not worry about the elimination," Nicholas said in his most serious, earnest voice. The one that left

no room for argument. "Julian and I are in your corner every step of the way."

I wanted to believe him. I knew he meant the words, to have said them like that. But I also knew there

would come a time when no amount of bluster would save me from what was to come.

Truthfully, I was not meant to be a Queen, despite how much my wolf argued with me. Eventually, a

time would come when I would have to step to the side to let the true Luna reign.

For the sake of the kingdom, I would have to give Nicholas up. And Julian? I would never stand in the way of him finding his own true love.

Deep down, Nicholas understood that. He had to, since he had openly acknowledged he would never

give up the crown.

In moments like this, where he let his heart take the lead, he reminded me so much of the boy from

years ago that I had fallen so deeply in love with. So idealistic and hopeful. He looked forward and

could see a future worth fighting for. One that held love.

Age and the weight of the crown had weighed heavily on him in our years apart. He was still handsome

as ever, if not more so. Occasionally, I would see the idealistic boy within him. Yet just as often, I saw

his father.

A King did nothing selfishly. He lived and breathed for the sake of the kingdom.

When Nicholas wore the crown, he would do the same.

And I would disappear from his life.

I watched him now, as the realization came over his face, darkening his features.

Nicholas, so earnest and true, wanted to protect me forever. But he knew he couldn't.

"You have a wolf now," he said. "If I can train you

"Like our self-defense lessons?" I asked.

and your

your wolf..."

"More intense," he admitted. "Self-defense was about making enough time to escape. With your wolf..."

and with its strength... You might have a shot of fighting back."

Fighting back? Good, how long had I lived in fear of every shadow in the dark. Of every lingering eye, and errant hand.

Too many people tried to accost me, grabbed my assets, or threatened me for money or sex.

I'd denied them all, sometimes to my detriment. Sometimes sheer luck was the only way I made it through.

But now, with my wolf... Yes, maybe I could have the strength to finally defend myself.

I wanted to stay by Nicholas's side for as long as possible, but when the time came for me to go my way, it would be nice to have that advantage.

"I can't shield you forever," Nicholas said. "But if I train you and your wolf, you should be able to shield yourself and Elva."

Oh, God. Elva. A whole new wave of worries washed over me. Elva was developing her own wolf, and

it was powerful. As strong as I might be, did I dare hope to help her learn and keep her safe when the

whole of the underground would be after her?

I started to tremble.

Nicholas noticed and pulled me into his arms at once. I breathed him in, trying to find focus.

Inside, my wolf suffered no such insecurities.

"If they come for our mate or our pup," Miracle growled in my head, "We will fight them with fang and

claw. They will know our wrath."¹

I tried to tell her that I haven't fought in so long, and even then, it had only been pretend.

"Maybe you haven't fought," Miracle said. "But I have."



I met with Nicholas in the same weight room we had our self-defense training. He'd had it cleared out

again, this time so he and I could practice fighting.

"Now that you have Miracle's strength to aid you, you don't need to rely on the same self-defense

tactics as before. Those will still aid you of course, but you are not at such a disadvantage now."

I nodded as I continued stretching. Nicholas had insisted on it. It had been a few days since my

disappearing act, but he was still worried about me having pushed my muscles too hard. I was sore for

a full day afterwards.

When I finished, I stood upright. He stood facing me.

He waved me forward. "Come at me like you mean to attack me.

"Shouldn't it be the other way around?" I asked.

He frowned a little. "Pretend I'm some asshole who took Elva."

A vicious, angry growl escaped my throat before I realize it. Miracle had made her feelings known on

that matter.

“There you go. Keep that energy.” He waved me forward again. “You won’t hurt me.”

Miracle, despite her burst of anger, still seemed hesitant to attack the man she considered our mate.

“He won’t let us hurt him,” I whisper to myself, to Miracle inside of me. “He just wants to help up protect

Elva.”

With that reassurance, Miracle seemed more onboard. I felt her strength surge through me.

“Ready?” Nicholas asked.

I nodded.

He lowered into an attack stance. I followed suit. Our stances were similar. It had been some time since

I trained as a warrior in physical combat, but I remember Nicholas beside me in the same training. He’d

likely perfected the art since then, while I’d let my skills fade away.

Even so, at the core, we’d been trained the same moves.

It was no surprise then, when I pounced, Nicholas met my pounce with the same

of his own. Our arms latched, and we grappled.

Even with my wolf strength, his own wolf strength should have outmatched me.

“You are holding back,” I said, voice strained from the effort. If I could get even one of his arms to slip, I

could toss him over my shoulder.

He smiled back. He was enjoying this. "It's your first day," he said. He didn't sound strained at all.

"I have to learn," I said.

"Not everyone is as strong as me," he said.

I knew what he meant, though he tried to stay humble.

Very few people were as strong as him. His Alpha was fierce.

"Our mate is strong," Miracle whispered in appreciation.

We need to be strong for him, too.

Miracle gave me even more strength and I put everything I had into knocking Nicholas off-balance.

However, Nicholas was built like a brick wall, and when I pushed, instead of him moving backwards, I

did. Somehow, I'd managed to knock myself off-balance!

Nicholas jumped at the sudden opening, and in the next instant, my back was flat against the mat of

the floor. Nicholas was directly on top of me pinning me down.

"It was a good effort," he said.

I looked up at him. His hands were on my arms, and his legs were over my legs, holding me to the mat.

My chest was heaving. My adrenaline was surging.

Nicholas's gaze dipped down to my lips.

I licked them.

He moved in a flash, down, down, until his mouth was on mine and we were aggressively making out.

God, he was so hot. I could feel his rock hard body on top of me. And he was so strong. The

way he shoved me down like I was nothing at all.

All of it set me on fire. I tried to pull my arms free, testing his hold, but it was firm. Pleasure zipped up

and down my spine. I liked being at his mercy.

"I win," he whispered against my mouth.

2:4

He always had the upper hand, but I wasn't about to argue the point, not when I was also getting what I wanted.

Instead, I teased him further. "Winners get rewards," I said.

Fire sparked hot in his gaze. "And what reward do I win?"

"Me," I said.

A low growl erupted from the back of his throat. "Lucky me." He leaned down to kiss me again. God knew I wanted him to.

But a polite cough sounded from the gym entrance, stopping us. We both glanced over. I expected

Mark or one of Nicholas's other trusted guards to be there. They were the only ones who were

supposed to have access while we were there.

However, it was Brian, Julian's Beta, who waited patiently for us now.

"That guy can get in anywhere," Nicholas cursed under his breath as he stood, then helped me up.

Together we walked toward Brian.

Brian seemed absolutely unfazed to have seen us making out. He probably knew every single facet

about our relationship. Hell, he probably knew even more than I did.

"Julian called for you two," Brian said.

Nicholas and I glanced at each other.

Nicholas and I followed Brian into Julian's personal chambers. Julian himself was standing in front of a

large wide-screen television that took up the majority of one wall. It was lavish and outrageous. The

biggest screen I'd ever seen in my life.

When he saw us, he walked straight up to us. "Have you seen this?"

Behind him, on the screen, the news was showing a special report. Several of the King's statues had

been defaced in cities and towns all across the kingdom.

Some were beheaded, with the stone heads either at the statue's feet or missing altogether. Every

single one had the word TYRANT spray painted in red across the body.

Captivated, Nicholas walked toward the screens. His face was carefully blank. I could only guess at the

emotions he felt. Even my heightened senses couldn't perceive them.

I had a suspicion he was purposefully hiding them from me.

Which meant he was likely hiding fear.

"Dad's wrapped up in a meeting with his advisors," Julian said. "Nathan won't let me ten feet near the door."

"They must be thinking of some kind of PR strategy," Nicholas said.

"They already have one: the competition," Julian said. Nicholas and I both looked at him. What did he

mean? "You know who else is in that meeting with dear old Dad and his advisors. The television

producers in charge of the competition."

I tried to imagine what that could mean.

The public was turning against the royal family, even with the competition, even with my presence

inside of it. If those PR moves were failing, they would have to find something else. Something bigger.

Were they about to up the stakes of the competition somehow? But the grand prize was to be Luna.

What could be bigger than that?

"Nick," I said, because I wanted to be close to him suddenly. If the royal family fell, he would fall too.

Nicholas immediately opened his arms and wrapped them around me. “I’ll keep you safe from this,” he said.

“It’s not me I’m worried about,” I told him.

“We all better prepare ourselves,” Julian said. “Whatever they are planning, it’s likely to affect all of us.”

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The next day at lunch time, Elva and I walked down to the dining room to have lunch with the rest of the candidates. As soon as I walked through the door, I felt the tension in the room. No one was smiling, not even Susie as she saw me. She waved as we came closer.

Per the contest rules, none of us were supposed to watch television or use our cell phones. As such, we shouldn’t have any knowledge of what was going on in the outside world. None of us should be aware of the news of the dire recent events with the King’s statues being defaced.

Yet everyone still seemed to know, if their whispered words and worried faces were anything to go by.

I took the open seat beside Susie and Elva hopped into the seat on the other side of me. Susie gave us both a smile then, but it was tight and dishonest. Still, I appreciated the effort and gave her one of my own.

I imagined she heard the news from Mark. Veronica likely heard it from Julian, if she didn’t have other means. If any of them were kind to their servants, as I

was with Charlotte, the servants would likely talk with them. Or maybe a bribe was what was needed.

“What do you think will happen to us?” Tiffany whisper–yelled to Veronica.

“No one cares about us,” Veronica said. “It’s the royal family that is in danger.”

“Unless they burn the whole palace down.”

“Shh,” I said, scolding them both. Veronica nodded. Tiffany seemed affronted – until I dipped my head to Elva.

“Oh,” she mouthed. “Sorry.”

“What are they talking about, Mommy?” Elva asked.

“Nothing, honey,” I said and leaned over to kiss her on the top of her head. “What do you want for lunch today?”

—

Fortunately, this one time, Elva didn’t seem to want to press. “Grilled cheese?”

“I think they can do that.” I waved down a servant and asked, “Two grilled cheese sandwiches please?”

The servant took the order and quietly left the room.

I had brought a coloring book and crayons for Elva to keep her busy, and set them up for her now so she could work while we waited.

At the other end of the table, Jessica was speaking with Lilliana.

“Do you think they’ll end the competition?” Jessica asked. “After everything we’ve all been through, that would be such a terrible shame.”

Her words rankled my nerves. How could she care about the competition when the royal family’s lives were on the line? Hell, all of our lives were, if what Tiffany feared came to pass and the protesters burned the place down.

But sure, Jessica, worry about the competition.

If I didn't have so much self-control and will, I would have walked over to her and smacked her upside the head.

It didn't take long for our grilled cheeses to arrive, and Elva and I ate. To distract Elva from the girls' chatter, I talked to her about innocuous things, like different kinds of flowers and if we should play a game later, to see how many kinds of birds we could spot in the garden.

As we were finishing up, Nathan came into the room. He cleared his throat to gain our attention. When he had it, he said loudly, "Ladies, in two hours, your presence is requested at the front entrance of the palace for a special announcement."

All of us looked at each other. Some seemed confused. Most looked worried.

"Even me?" Elva asked.

Nathan looked at her like he was surprised she had spoken to him. "Yes, even you."

She looked at me and beamed. I tried to smile back, despite the nervousness that was brewing up inside of me.

To the rest of us, Nathan continued, "This announcement will be televised, so we ask that you dress your best. Do you understand?"

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"Yes," a few girls said. The rest nodded. I just watched, a bit in shock.

"Good," Nathan said. "Do not be late." Then he left us.

The girls all looked at each other again. And then, at once, in a rush, they stood up and headed for the door.

“What are you going to wear?” Tiffany asked Veronica as they too made their way out. I didn’t hear Veronica’s reply.

Elva and I were the last to leave. We would need time to pick and plan our outfits, but I wasn’t overly worried. Likely Charlotte already had everything handled. And if she didn’t, a simple sundress would do. I was not quite as knowledgeable about outfits as the other girls.

As we walked through the hallways, I paused when we spotted Nicholas and Julian coming toward us.

“Nick–lass!” Elva shouted and ran forward. “Jul–an!”

Nicholas hugged her, and then Julian scooped her up into his arms and swung her around. She giggled and laughed, then hung onto him around his neck as he pulled her closer.

“Have you been practicing what I showed you?” Julian asked her.

Elva nodded her head grandly, but after spotting me watching, she stopped. She leaned in and whispered too loudly to be kept secret, “Mommy doesn’t like it.”

I had to talk to her about that later. It didn’t bother me so much, anymore.

With Elva so thoroughly distracted in a discussion with Julian, Nicholas came closer to me.

“I take it you’ve heard the news?” he asked.

“Yes. Do you have any idea what’s going on?”

“No. We’re just as much in the dark. The King is likely planning something

drastic to help bring the royal family into a better light with the public. Julian and

I have speculated what that could be, but we're just guessing."

"What are your guesses?" I asked.

"I don't want to worry you," he said.

That didn't make me feel any better. "Nick..."

"I'll protect you, Piper. Whatever it is, you have nothing to fear."

"But who will protect you?" I asked.

He smiled a little at me, but didn't say a word. I knew what he was thinking, an old tenant in werewolf culture: an Alpha protects his family.

I wished he would say so allowed, but I knew he couldn't. We weren't really a family. We never would be.

But his desire to protect me and Elva made me want to protect him too. I had strength now. If worse came to worse, I would find my own ways to keep him safe.

Two hours later, I, Elva, and the rest of the girls were led to stand in a line out front of the palace. Nathan waited until we were in place.

The cameras were already set up and rolling. The King and Queen were missing, but Nicholas and Julian were there as representatives, standing beside Nathan on a platform.

The protesters outside of the gate were held back a fair bit from the fences by security. The roads were clear.

Nathan, holding a microphone, addressed the cameras. "To add some excitement to our competition, and to spice things up, the royal family has decided that a new contender should be added to the lineup."

On the road, a limo pulled up to the gate. The gate opened, and the limo pulled through. It slowly crept up the driveway and came to a stop right in front of the platform.

My mind was reeling. A new contender? Was that allowed? Though if it was the royal family's decision, I supposed anything was.

The limo came to a stop. The door popped open.

I held my breath.

A woman stepped out of the car, a blonde with a big, practiced smile. I recognized her from television, but also from the pictures in Nicholas's room.

This wasn't just another contender.

This woman was Bridget.

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I immediately looked to Nicholas. His eyes were wide, locked straight on Bridget. Beside him, Julian was equally flabbergasted.

Looking at Bridget, I found she was staring straight back. Her smile softened. She seemed more genuine than before.

At once, Nicholas and Julian broke out with big smiles of their own. Each cut straight through me.

"Isn't that Bridget, the movie star?" Tiffany whispered from beside me. On the other side, Jessica grumbled, "What hope do any of us have now?"

Nicholas moved first. He rushed toward the edge of the platform and then hopped down. He all but ran to greet Bridget at her car. She held open her arms and then hugged.

“Shit,” Lilliana cursed. I wouldn’t agree with her on much, but in this, I felt our opinions were in tandem.

The cameras moved closer, eager to capture the reunion on film. Nicholas’s smile was brighter and happier than they usually see. Typically for the public, he was so reserved, but for Bridget, his old flame, he was more like the person that I knew.

They ended their hug but stayed near. They looked at each other. I couldn’t hear what they were saying from my distance, but it seemed friendly and familiar. At one point, they both started laughing.

The only person with a face more dire than my own in the crowd might have been Julian. His smile at first seeing Bridget shifted into a grim sort of frown.

I remembered his stories about how Nicholas stole away his true love. I could see now, how that would have so fully upset him. My own heart felt like it was shattering into pieces.

But then Bridget looked past Nicholas to Julian and waved him closer. Like a golden retriever on a leash, his luminous smile immediately returned, and he hopped off the stage to join her. She pulled him into a hug too. He held her tightly.

My heart cracked in half twice.

In the distance, the protests of the crowd dimmed down with Bridget’s sudden arrival. Instead, they seemed at first confused, and then excited. A chant began, Bridget, Bridget!” like the deeds of the past were forgotten and gone, and all that

mattered was the sudden arrival of a mega celebrity.

Perhaps the King truly knew what he was doing. Maybe Bridget's arrival was what they needed to save themselves. And if her presence was what might ultimately keep Nicholas alive, I couldn't fault her for it. Even as jealousy ripped through me.

I bit back a growl. My emotions were still running high. My wolf was pacing unhappily across my mind, her words a whisper in my ear.

"She stands too closely to our mate."

He's not our mate, I reminded her.

Miracle did not agree.

When the princess had finished their reunion with the princess, Nathan came forward to with the microphone. She blew kisses to the previously-protesting crowd who cheered wildly in response.

Her words in the microphone echoed through the area.

"I'm so happy to be here," she said, and even her voice was beautiful. "I'd like to thank the royal family for asking me to join the competition. And it is amazing to have so much support from my fans. I love you all!"

She blew a few more kisses to the crowd. One girl shrieked so loudly, I think she might have passed out.

After her speech, Bridget was brought to where I, Elva, and the other candidates were standing. She was introduced to us one at a time.

Olivia shook her hand. "How nice to meet you. Your films have always been something of an... entertainment." That was not a compliment, but Bridget just smiled brighter. She'd likely heard any and all insults before. Maybe, coming here, she'd been expecting a few more.

"I'm glad they've brought you some amusement," Bridget shot back.

Lilliana offered her own bright smile, like she fully intended to outdo Bridget's in sheer wattage.

"An absolute pleasure to meet you, Bridget," Lilliana said. I wondered if she might have actually meant it this time. One actor might respect the ability of another.

Veronica greeted Bridget without much fanfare. "Hello."

Jessica did so while staring down at the ground. "So nice to meet you." She spoke through her teeth.

Tiffany was much less subtle. "Well, I might as well start packing my bags now. "Nonsense," Bridget replied magnanimously. "We all have equal chance." Tiffany snorted a laugh. Then she sighed. "Did you have to be funny, too?",

Only Susie seemed entirely indifferent to meeting Bridget. Though with her heart firmly tied to Mark's, she hadn't much to worry about. "Nice to meet you."

When Bridget finally made her way to me, her smile was just as bright as it had been at the start, like meeting all these people was no great effort. Maybe as a superstar celebrity, she was used to all kinds of reactions.

"You must be Piper," she said and held out her hand. I shook it. Then she looked down at Elva, who watched her back with wide eyes. "And this must be Elva."

"You're pretty," Elva said.

"Thank you," Bridget said kindly. "A lovely compliment from such a beautiful girl."

Elva blushed fiercely, then half-hid behind my skirts.

“Sorry,” I said to Bridget. “She gets embarrassed with too much attention.”

“It’s fine,” Bridget said. “She’s lovely. I want a family of my own someday, once I find the right gentleman, of course.” She glanced behind her to where Nicholas and Julian stood, not too far away. “Nicholas wants a big family, you know.”

I did know that. I swallowed down the vile thoughts that were pouring into my head. Bridget clearly had her sights set on Nicholas. These words to me now, delivered as nicely as they were, were not exactly a threat, but more a stake of claim.

As if I had not already been here for several weeks now, growing affections with Nicholas all on my own.

“He’s told me so,” I said, trying hard not to sound as hostile as I felt, especially with my wolf pacing angrily in my mind.

“Oh? You must feel so blessed to have been able to spend so much time with him,” Bridget says. “I apologize if I might cut into some of that time now. I plan to connect with him, and with Julian too. We all have so much in common. Shared history too.”

“Yes. Me too.”

Her smile never changed, but her eyes were alert and dancing. She was planning

things, thinking twelve steps ahead.

I should trust her words, I knew. She was being kind enough, really. We didn’t have to be friends, like I was with Susie and Veronica, and even Tiffany.

But my wolf snarled in my head and I couldn’t begin to let myself relax around her.

She was a good actress. Her friendliness could be an act. Her words did contain an edge that could have given away her true intentions.

“So nice to finally meet you, Piper,” Bridget said. “I hope we can grow to be very close. I’d love to be friends with you.”

“Don’t trust her,” whispered my wolf, and this time I was inclined to agree.

at would be great,” I said, but I wasn’t as good as an actress as she was. She could likely see straight through me.

Her smile never faltered. “Wonderful.”

Chapter 398



That night, the King and Queen finally made an appearance at the night’s formal dinner. They greeted Bridget like a doting set of parents would, hugging her and kissing her cheek. Nicholas and Julian were right there with them.

The rest of us candidates were already inside the dining room waiting and forced to watch.

“God, I’m going to be sick,” Tiffany said. She put her elbows on the table and dropped her head into her hands.

Veronica awkwardly patted her shoulder.

Bridget and the royal family entered the dining room like some kind of royal parade. The King and Queen took their usual seats. Nicholas and Julian stayed standing as they counted the chairs. None of us candidates had made room for Bridget to sit down.

It seemed that was to be decided now.

“Where should I sit?” Bridget asked with innocent wide eyes. There were plenty of empty seats at the table. She could just as easily take one as her own.

She batted her eyelashes at Nicholas and Julian.

Both men moved at once. They personally asked each girl to move down one seat. When Julian came to me, he didn’t even have the nerve to look apologetic.

“Please move, Piper,” Julian said.

“But Julian...”

“No time for arguments,” he said. “Everyone’s hungry.”

It felt strange getting the brush off from him. I wanted to snap back and maybe wake him from whatever witchcraft might have ensnared him, but with so many people and cameras watching, I didn’t dare call him out here and now.

Later, I vowed in my head, as I begrudgingly rose from my chair. With all the girls shifted; the only open seat now was on the other side of the table, which meant I would have to watch this terrible show of Nicholas and Julian falling all over themselves to keep Bridget’s attention.

My jealousy buzzed under the surface of my skin. Nicholas hadn’t looked at me since Bridget stepped out of that car.

I lowered myself into my new seat and tried to withhold my growing anger. I felt

like I was holding a wolf back with only a paper chain.

Bridget found her seat directly between Nicholas and Julian. She smiled at them both, they both couldn’t seem to stop looking at her.

Susie, dear friend that she was, moved from her previous seat to sit beside me.

She leaned in close to whisper, "You look like you need a friend."

"I can't believe this is happening," I whispered back, careful not to catch the attention of the cameras. This truly was my worst nightmare. Bridget was here, like she had walked out of my worst, darkest dream.

If only Nicholas would look at me once, maybe I could endure. As it was, I felt alone. Abandoned.

What a foolish notion. This was just a vision of how things were always going to be. The competition wasn't going to last forever. Eventually I would have to leave Nicholas behind and return to the diner and my apartment. Two jobs to pay for Elva's medical bills.

A curse that still hasn't been cured..

A sister that was still on the run.

A life full of hardship and loneliness.

Maybe this wasn't as bad, considering. At least while I was here, I had three steady meals for me and Elva, as well as help with Elva's medical bills.

Even if Nicholas left me early, abandoning me to the competition, I could endure.

For Elva, I could endure anything.

"We should run," my wolf whispered, and I felt the itch of it deep within me.

Yes, a run would feel so good right about now. I could let loose and be free, without these worries and hurts hounding me so closely.

No. I had to hold myself back.

We promised Elva we wouldn't disappear again, I replied in my mind.

Miracle quieted then, not wanting to hurt our pup.

Nicholas proposed a toast, and stood up to deliver it. "It's a wonder," he said, holding his drink aloft, "what life hands us when we least suspect it." He lifted his drink higher. "To old friends."

The royal family replied right away. "To old friends!"

The candidates were slightly slower. "To old friends..."

Olivia didn't say anything, she just drank.

Tiffany covered her eyes as she said it.

Susie kept her eyes on me.

I whispered, "To old friends," but I wasn't saying it to mean Nicholas and Bridget. Instead, I meant Nicholas and me.

Nicholas returned to his seat. Bridget gripped his arm.

"A wonderful toast, Nicholas," she said.

I carefully lowered my drink down to the table.

Our salads came and I thanked the server as they lowered mine in front of me. I picked up my fork.

Across the table, Bridget let her hand linger on Nicholas's arms. Slowly, she traced her fingers down from his elbow to his wrist.

He glanced at her, a bit of surprise in his eyes.

"Piper," Susie said in a whisper-yell.

I looked down at my hand. I had bent my fork straight in half.

I quickly lowered it down into my lap before the cameras could catch it.

Susie gave me a worried look. It was one that I mirrored as I looked back at her.

Again, Miracle whispered, "Run."

God, I wanted to so badly, even more than before. I did my best to hold it in.

I somehow made it through dinner, but at the end of the meal, I felt like I was at the end of my rope. I had to get away. I had to run. I...

I had to speak with Nicholas.

He had told me, if the urge got too overwhelming to find him, to speak with him and he would help me. Maybe he would kiss me until I felt like myself again.

I waited outside the dining room. Blessedly, he came out first on his own.

"Nick," I said, and my voice cracked.

He looked down at me with sudden urgency. "Piper?"

"Nick, I need —"

"There you are, Nicholas," Bridget said. She stepped out of the dining room. "I'm hoping you weren't planning on running away before we could finish reminiscing?" She came to stand at his side. "Oh, Piper. I'm sorry, I didn't see you there. You don't mind if I pull him away for a moment."

"Actually," I started to say.

"It's been so long. You understand. It's important to Nicholas that we rebuild all the bridges lost to time between us."

I looked up at Nicholas. He wasn't disputing her words, but he was looking at me with concern.

"Are you alright, Piper?"

What could I possibly have said? No? I needed him to help keep me level, my returned wolf was pacing so wildly within me I felt I might jump out of my own skin. But I couldn't say any of that in front of Bridget.

If she knew about my weakness, would she use it against me?

I didn't trust her. I couldn't trust her..

So I offered a tight-lipped smile. "Of course, I am."

Nicholas didn't seem convinced, but Bridget was pulling on his arm.

"If you are sure," he said.

"I am," I lied.

I watched as Bridget pulled Nicholas away. He looked back once, twice, but didn't come back to me.

Chapter 399



I stayed in my room from then out as much as I was able. Staying near Elva helped me keep in mind my promise to her. I would not abandon her again. And so long as I was in my room, I was safe from running into Nicholas and Bridget and seeing whatever was going on between the two of them unfold.

Elva seemed happy to have me near, and we played a lot, including the game I had promised where we sat in the window and counted the different kinds of birds we could see down in the gardens.

While Elva was awake and active, we had a great time. Even when her tutors arrived and she learned, I sat quietly and listened, proud of how smart my little girl was.

But times where Elva was entertaining herself, or like now, was lying down to rest, my thoughts began to fester and my jealousy burned so brightly it was difficult to control.

Charlotte noticed my unhappiness. She was always around, and as one of the servants, there was no hiding any gossip from her.

She tried to stay tight-lipped around me for a time, and I appreciated her for it. But eventually, I cracked.

“What is everyone saying?” I asked.

She knew right away what I meant. “About Bridget and Nicholas?”

I nodded.

“The people think they would be a good match. They’ve totally enthralled the nation. There isn’t so much news about... that unpleasantness as before,” Charlotte said.

“The protests?”

“Still ongoing, but not quite as boisterous as before. If this was the royal family’s plan, it seems to be working.”

I could be grateful for that.

“What about the staff?” I asked. “What do they think about Bridget?”

“They’re star-struck,” said Charlotte. “Who can blame them? You think we’d all be used to seeing celebrities working here. But a movie star? That’s on an entirely different level somehow. And she has been so kind to all of us.”

I could be glad about that too. Someone who acted rude to the staff was unforgivable.

“Charlotte,” I began. This question was the hardest to ask. “Do you know anything about their past?”

“I wasn’t here then,” she said.

“I know, but... if you’ve heard anything...”

“Some of the older staff do like to gossip,” Charlotte admitted, after a moment. She worried her bottom lip like she was afraid to talk.

“I want to know,” I said. “I know it will hurt me, but... I have to hear it Charlotte. I’d rather hear it from you than learn it on television or through one of the other girls.”

“Very well.”

Charlotte and I took seats facing each other near the sewing machines still arranged in the center of the room. I quickly glanced behind me, but Elva was still fast asleep.

Comforted by that, I gave Charlotte my full focus.

“I don’t know the full story, of course, just bits and pieces,” Charlotte said. “But apparently Bridget and Prince Nicholas were practically inseparable as they grew up. They were constantly with each other. Sometimes Prince Julian tagged along.”

She cleared her throat. She was holding something back.

“Charlotte?”

“The cook, she was here then. She said they often held hands. One day, when she caught Bridget alone, Bridget told the cook that she was going to marry Prince Nicholas someday. It charmed the whole staff then. Everyone wanted to pair them together.

“Some time later, Bridget’s family moved away and she went with them. From what I hear, Prince Nicholas was totally heartbroken. He wouldn’t leave his room. for large chunks of time. Many times, I heard he flew to see her, or she came to see him.

“But as it so often goes, time and distance continued to stretch things out between them. Visits grew farther apart. Phone calls were fewer. Eventually

they grew apart. The cook says Nicholas turned into a different person after that. Someone harder, I guess.

“Though one of the wait staff told me that’s about when Nicholas left home to go to the Academy.”

That was when he met me.

For a moment, I just sat there quietly, letting Charlotte’s words sink down into my brain. I let myself process them, turning them over and over again.

Yet even after processing them, even after examining them from every which way, trying to find the ways that would hurt me the least, I could only focus on one overarching thing..

From every angle, it seemed as if Bridget had been Nicholas’s true love. His one that got away.

If he changed when he went to the Academy, when he met me, then who was I but a rebound? All those months we were together. All those whispered promises and words of love. Maybe he hadn’t meant them at all.

No, I couldn’t believe that. That hurt far too much. He had meant his love for me.

It was just that his love for Bridget was much stronger.

If anything, I was Bridget’s replacement.

“Thank you for telling me,” I said to Charlotte.

“Of course,” she said, and seemed apologetic about it. She didn’t mean to be. I received exactly what I had asked for.

I stood from the chair. “I need to go for a walk. Will you stay with Elva? The nanny should be back soon from her break.”

“I’d be happy to,” Charlotte said. “Are you going to be okay on your own?”

Was she asking me if I was going to run?

“I’ll be okay,” I said. My heart was heavy with heartache, but I had no desire to make a break for it or anything. Right now, I just wanted to walk and think, and clear my head.

I headed out from the room and started down the hallway. I had no real destination in mind. With the garden still closed to all but the royal family, I couldn’t wander there without making a scene, So I made my way toward the kitchens instead. Not to cook, just to move my feet.

I thought of Nicholas, with his arms wrapped around me, whispering how much he loved me in my ear. In the next instant, I thought of him with Bridget instead.

I kept walking. And walking. Walking until my legs hurt.

And then I saw them, standing in the middle of the ballroom as I stood at the top of the stair. Bridget and Nicholas dancing in a room with no music.

My frazzled heart sank further down to the floor.

As I watched, shocked and silent, another displeased figure joined my side.

“That asshole is doing it again,” Julian grumbled. “Look at them down there. Not a care in the fucking world.”

It did seem overly romantic, dancing with no music on, though as I continued to watch, I noticed that Bridget seemed more forceful than properly led, and Nicholas didn’t seem all that happy. If he had agreed to this dance, he had wanted it to end some time ago.

“I see what he’s doing,” Julian said, blinded by his own jealousy. “He wants to steal her away again, before I even get the chance.”

“I’m not sure...” I tried to say, but Julian didn’t even seem to be listening to me. Julian growled, “I won’t let you win this time, Nicholas.”

Chapter 400



The next morning, Nicholas and I had previously arranged to spend time training together. So at first light, I headed to the gym.

I wasn't sure he would remember. Maybe he made other plans and forgot to tell me about it. He had been so busy with Bridget lately, I had rarely even seen him, let alone spoken two words to him.

I had a sinking feeling in my chest, telling me I'd find the gym empty. Maybe the lights would be out. The door locked. Or maybe the room would be filled with guards training, if Nicholas had forgotten to claim the room for the day.

Just outside the door, I stood and inhaled a deep, long breath. Then I let it out.

Gathering my strength, I reached for the gym door and pulled. It opened. It wasn't locked.

Okay. So far so good.

I stepped inside. The lights were on.

Two things going good. I followed a familiar pathway down the corridors of the gym to the weight room where the mats were set up for sparring and training.

That door was unlocked too, and as I stepped inside, the room was empty. No stray guardsmen or women around.

For a moment, relief flooded me. Maybe he didn't forget after all. A second later, a sense of dread hit me instead.

If Nicholas hadn't forgotten, then where was he? Why was I now alone in this room?

I checked my watch. I was a few minutes early. So I set down my gear and decided to wait.

I waited until the time we were supposed to meet. Then I waited fifteen more minutes. Then twenty.

At a full hour past, my heart felt so tender it might shatter. So I gathered my gear, bit back my tears, and headed for the door.

At the very same moment, Nicholas rushed through it.

“Piper, I –”

He nearly ran straight into me, but stopped abruptly. He looked down at me in

+15 BONUS

surprise. When he saw the tears in my eyes, his face crumpled.

“I’m so sorry I’m late,” he said. “Were you waiting long?”

“A half hour.”

“I’m sorry.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Bridget came knocking on my door so early and wanted to have breakfast together. I don’t think I even woke up until I was halfway to the dining room. When I realized what had happened, I left at once. I don’t know. When I’m catching up with Bridget, I feel like I lose track of time.”

The sound of Bridget’s name cracked through me like a snapped rubber band. So he was with her instead of here with me. Of course.

Well, at least he was able to pull himself away to be here now. That had to be something.

I still felt miserable.

“It’s not like you to be late for anything,” I said.

"I'm so sorry, Piper. Truly. It's just so nice to catch up with an old friend. But I never meant to leave you waiting."

I nodded, not sure if I fully believed it. I didn't trust my voice.

"Please don't be angry," he said.

"I'm not angry."

He tilted his head, considering me. His eyes narrowed, he didn't believe me. He shouldn't have, I was lying through my teeth.

"Let's practice, okay?" he asked. It felt like an olive branch, and I was eager to take it. The last thing I wanted to hear was more apologies or excuses that involved Bridget.

"Okay," I said.

We were on the mat in our workout clothes, squaring off at each other. Nicholas had earlier tried to teach me how to throw a punch and now he wanted me to practice by trying to hit his jaw.

"You won't hurt me," he said.

"I'm stronger now," I reminded him.

"I'll be okay," he replied.

He was an Alpha, after all.

+15 BONUS

"Okay," I said.

I started toward him. He blocked my hit. He gave me a few pointers. It was difficult to pay attention. As he blocked my attacks, punch after punch, he moved with such grace that it seemed like he was dancing. Thinking of him dancing, reminded me of last night, of seeing him and Bridget in the ballroom.

My punches became wilder.

He ducked to dodge one. "Uh, Piper. You are going a bit off the rails."

I threw another wild punch, putting everything in it that I had. I grunted as I threw it.

"Piper, we should stop."

I couldn't stop. I had held my jealousy back for so long that now it was swelling into rage. I didn't want to hurt him, but I had too much energy, too much adrenaline, with nowhere for it to go.

Before I knew it, I was shifting in my wolf form.

Nicholas's eyes went wide, shocked. In the next instant, he shifted too.

He towered over me, an Alpha wolf to my smaller one.

He growled low and steady, demanding dominance. I felt the command deep in my bones.

Back down, he was saying.

And my body wanted to listen. It was even without my meaning to. Slowly, I laid down and he walked over me.

Shift back, his growl said now.

My body shivered at the order.

Slowly, I shifted back. I was breathing hard, staring up at an Alpha wolf.

Though it wasn't long before Nicholas shifted too, and he was staring down at me. He was breathing just as hard.

"Piper..."

"I'm sorry..." I whispered.

"Are you better...?"

“I don’t know...”

He licked his lips. “What do you need?”

+15 BÔNUS

I looked down at his lips, and he looked down at mine.

An instant nothing happened but a few heavy breaths.

“Piper?” Did he need permission?

Didn’t he know he already had it?

“Kiss me,” I said.

His mouth came crashing down, colliding with mine. I wrapped my arms around his neck, holding him closely. His fingers clawed into the mat at either side of me.

We kissed with

desperation, tongues lashing and entwining. It felt like having a drink of water after a long draught. I felt like maybe I was drowning.

But I wanted to drown. I buried my fingers through his hair. He growled against my mouth.

My wolf, finally, was satisfied, purring happily in my mind.

“Ours,” she whispered.

“Nick,” I breathed, when we came up for air.

He didn’t keep me waiting long before he plunged back down for another kiss.

His hands moved from the mat to my sides. His body dropped more fully over mine until I was fully engulfed with his weight, his scent. The feel of him reached every part of me, and I was satisfied.

Until I inhaled.

My wolf awoke from its happy place. I did too, not long after.

Nicholas, sensing my sudden stillness, leaned upwards. "Piper?"

I sniffed again just to be sure. And yes, there it was.

A scent of lilac and daisies. A feminine smell. Perfume.

Perfume that belonged to Bridget.

"Piper, what's wrong?"

I couldn't find my voice. I felt such a sudden vicious onslaught of anger and jealousy, that I was nearly feral.

Bridget. His ex.

She had come in and tried to scent my mate.