

THE LUNA CHOOSING GAME

Chapter 421



I was tired from a long day of acting and handling drama. So when I finally made my way back to my room, my feet were slow, my pace sluggish. I didn't reach the hallway where the candidates' rooms were until well after the others had already gone.

Maybe this was why I found Mark standing alone outside of Susie's door. The sight of his face gave me pause. He looked absolutely devastated. When my feet started working again, and I came closer, he noticed and immediately straightened.

He didn't have to. We knew each other well enough that I considered us friends by now. Though I was certainly closer with Susie, Mark constantly put himself in danger for me and Elva. He'd well-earned my friendship.

So I stopped before I could pass him, and I asked him flat-out, "Are you okay?"

The hard edge he was trying so hard to keep in his face faded away, and sadness and worry contorted his features once more.

"Susie won't see me," he said. "I don't know why. If I did something, she isn't telling me."

I didn't know what to tell him. I didn't want to break Susie's confidence, and I knew she hadn't decided what to tell Mark. That she was sending him away without seeing him was a bad sign.

Mark could have broken down the door. That he wasn't spoke to how much of a gentleman he was. He wanted to respect Susie, always.

I wished I had been more insistent that Mark was someone she could trust.

Then again, I knew how scary it was to be facing the world with a baby. You couldn't think about just yourself anymore. And those tough decisions, the ones about keeping people close, were much harder to make.

I suspected Susie's love of Mark was what really wanted her to keep him at a distance. A baby out of wedlock could ruin both their lives.

"I haven't seen her since she fainted," Mark said. His gaze dropped down to the ground. "I don't know what to do, Piper."

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"Just give her some time," I said. "I'm sure she will be willing to talk to you soon. "Soon? But why not now? No one will tell me anything!" Mark pushed a hand through his hair. I'd never seen him like this before, so discombobulated. It was a little endearing. Was

this the side of him that he showed only to Susie? Only forSusie?

He reached into his inside jacket pocket and produced a letter. He held it out for me. Susie's name was written in neat, tight scrawl across the front of the envelope.

"She won't speak to me, but she may speak to you, Piper," Mark said. "If you get in there. If you talk to her. Please... give her this."

I accepted the letter from his hands, then moved for him to step aside. Once he did, I took his place at the door.

"Just wait here, okay?" I asked.

At his nod, I knocked on the door.

“Go away!” Susie shouted. Her voice was hoarse, like she had been crying. She’d probably been crying for several days.

“It’s Piper!” I called back.

Silence replied for several long moments, before Susie’s voice came through once more. You can come in. But only you, Piper!”

I glanced at Mark, then opened the door and stepped through it. I closed it behind me, locking Mark outside.

Susie was sitting at a small table near the fireplace. She doesn’t look much better than when she had been lying in bed. There are red rings under her eyes and her face is splotchy.

Even if I hadn’t surmised she’d been crying from her voice, the evidence is clear in her features. As well as the downward curve of her shoulders. She was slouched in her seat, with her head low, like she couldn’t be bothered to lift it.

I approached her, then sat beside her at the only other seat at the table.

“How are you feelings?” I asked, worried about her health and the baby.

“Physically, just drained,” she said. “But it’s probably from the crying...”

She pulled a tissue from the box on the table. Beneath her feet, a sea of used, crumpled-up tissues littered the floor.

I placed Mark’s letter on the table, then slid it across to Susie.

Susie laughed once, sourly, when she saw it. She continued sliding it across the table to where a pile were stacked.

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“She’s been sliding letters under my door every hour on the hour,” she said. Her voice cracked, emphasizing her misery. 2

“Maybe you should just speak to him,” I said, trying once more to convince her. “Mark is a good man. He won’t disappoint you.”

“I know,” she said, “Or at least, I think so. But you are right. He is a good man.” She looked at me, heartbreak in her eyes. “So how can I derail his life by telling him the truth? Shouldn’t I just leave him, leave everything, and go back home? Hide away and have my baby – my shame in private?”

“Children are not always expected, but they are a blessing,” I said.

“It will ruin his life, Piper.”

“That’s what I thought too,” I said suddenly. I wouldn’t have Susie making the same mistakes I did, and suffer the same consequences.

She looked up at me, surprised.

“I thought leaving Nick behind was what was best. I couldn’t drag him down with me, especially not when I suddenly had a baby from nowhere. It would have totally derailed his life. And I hadn’t even known he was a prince back then. If I had, that would have only affirmed my decision.”

“So you did the right thing.”

“I made a choice I regretted every day after,” Piper said. “I took choice away from Nicholas without even asking him what he wanted. I never gave him a chance to do the right thing. And he would have. I thought I was saving him, but what I did was denying him a chance to help raise Elva.”

It was a deep regret of mine. I denied Nicholas the chance to raise Elva, just as I denied Elva the chance to have a father like Nicholas. If I would have asked him....

All I had to do was tell him the truth, and so many hurts could have been avoided.

“It’s far too late for me and Nick and Elva now, but it’s not for you, Susie. Give Mark a chance to be the kind of man who is worthy of your love and devotion. Do not make the choice for him.”

Susie was cracking. She kept glancing at the door.

“Any man who would write you that many letters at least deserves a face-to-face,” I added for good measure, nodding to the letter pile at the edge of the table. There were so many,

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they were starting to spill out onto the floor.

Suddenly, Susie rose from the chair. She crossed the room to the door. She looked back at me.

“What if he’s not out there?” she asked.

“He’s out there,” I said.

She took a steadying breath, then pulled open the door.

Mark was standing directly on the other side. 1

“Susie...”

“Mark, I’m pregnant.”

Chapter 422



A million different emotions flittered across Mark’s face in the span of an instant, but then, in the next, happiness won out. He barreled forward, scooped Susie up against him, and kissed her senseless. When they came up

for air, he peppered her entire face with butterfly kisses until she was giggling helplessly.

I inched closer to the door, wanting to give them their privacy.

“This is going to change everything,” Mark said, “But I swear to you I am in for every step. We’ll find a way to stay together, Susie. I swear to you. We will be a family.”

“Oh, Mark!”

I slipped out of the room before I could bear witness to what I was sure would be a love-

filled celebration.

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Out in the hallway, across the hall, Nicholas leaned against the wall, waiting for me. I quietly closed the door to Susie’s room, hiding the lovebirds within it not from Nicholy

who

likely knew everything, but from anyone else wandering the halls tonight.

And what a beautiful night it was turning out to be.

“He handled the news well, I take it,” Nicholas said.

“You knew he would,” I replied as I approached.

He shrugged. “Nice to have confirmation I made the right choice in my Beta.”

“You’ll have to let him go now, won’t you?” I asked.

“It’s a terrible rule that Betas have to be totally committed to their Alphas. Why shouldn’t they be allowed to have families of their own?”

I nodded in agreement, though the finer details of it were lost on me. I was never on the level of an Alpha, even in my prime, so I never expected to have any kind of Beta follow me around. That was mainly for the ultra-powerful and the elite.

Nicholas was both of those things.

“They’ll have a tough life on their own,” I said. “It’s hard out there if they have to make it any help.”

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“I wouldn’t cast off Susie’s parents quite yet. Sure, they want the best prospect for her, but they know their daughter. They will know she doesn’t aspire to being a Luna. If they love

ben, they might come around,” Nicholas said.

*Do they love her?” I asked.

hope so.” Nicholas said.

So did L. But the world of the elite was so different to everything I was used to. How could anyone raise a child just to hope to use them to gain more power? All I ever wanted for Elva was for her to be safe and happy.

Everything else was secondary. And if I had more children, I would want the same.

If I had more children....

I wanted more children.

I placed my hands to my stomach and imagined what it would be like if it was swollen with Ffe. I wanted to give Elva siblings so badly.

And I wanted Nicholas to be the father.

“What are you thinking about?” Nicholas asked. He must have guessed from the way I was holding my waist, and what with our conversation about Susie and Mark, exactly what I was thinking. It was kind of him to ask instead of just assuming.

I thought about beating around the bush. Maybe it wasn’t the time to talk about this, especially knowing that whatever love affair we were kindling was certain to end in heartbreak and separation. We’d never have a chance to have a family all our own.

But still, I said, “I want to have more children someday.”

Nicholas hummed in assent. “You would glow as a pregnant mother.” He smiled a little. “Although you already glow a fair bit in my eyes.”

A soft blush dusted my cheeks and I dipped my head to hide it.

“I want to have children too,” Nicholas said. “Lots of them.”

“A whole little pack all your own?” I asked, laughing.

“Why not? I have the means,” Nicholas said. “And if my Luna can’t or won’t be pregnant, I have no qualms against adopting. I’d probably want to anyway.”

Any woman should be happy to bear this man children. As many as they could manage. Or maybe I was just terribly biased because that was the life that I wanted. To give him children. To adopt some too. To have a lively and happy home full of love and laughter.

It was a nice little dream, albeit an impossible one.

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Nicholas and I would never be together. We’d never have a chance to have children, a family, a perfect little life.

When the competition was over, I would go home, and Nicholas would create that dream with someone else. That knowledge cut straight through me, like a thousand tiny razor blades straight through my chest. 1

Especially when I realized that someone else he might have children and a family with, was most likely Bridget.

“What’s wrong?” Nicholas asked. He could probably see the change in me now, the way gloom surrounded me. He was always pretty good at reading me. He probably knew me better than anyone else.

“It’s nothing that we can fix,” I said. “Best just to forget it for now.”

He stared at me hard, like he was trying to see inside of me. But then he looked away. Maybe

he could see the truth in my words.

Eventually, he dropped his gaze down to his watch. “I promised I’d meet with Bridget soon for a private rehearsal.”

I immediately frowned. A private rehearsal sounded a lot like a euphemism for sex.

Where?” I asked.

“In her rooms.”

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Now, my blood really began to boil. A private rehearsal in a woman’s private rooms? “You have to know how that sounds.”

“I assure you it’s entirely innocent,” Nicholas said, though then he cleared his throat. Though I had hoped Mark would accompany me as a chaperone, for propriety’s sake.”

Mark was definitely indisposed at the moment and would not be able to chaperone. And short of breaking down the door and chasing him out of there, I wasn't sure who else could play the part of a dutiful chaperone with Nicholas's best interests at heart.

"Bridget is worried that she and I lack chemistry, since I have been refusing to practice the love scenes," Nicholas said. "She was hoping that I would be more comfortable in private."

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"And would you?" I could feel my incredulity rise, right there alongside my righteous anger.

It could be innocent. Bridget really could just want to practice and be thinking of Nicholas's

best interests. 2

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But so many things about Bridget could be innocent. It seemed unlikely that they all were.

Fact. Bridget was crushing on Nicholas. Fact. Leaving them alone to practice love scenes was a dangerous prospect at best, an absolute nightmare at worse.

I didn't think Nicholas would purposefully mislead me. But if he were to attend this practice, if they were alone, and kissing and...

What would I do if he caught feelings for Bridget again?

"I'll go," I said at once.

Nicholas looked at me strangely. "You? You want to watch me and Bridget practice our love scenes?"

“Of course I don’t,” I said. I couldn’t think of a worse thing I could do right now. My stomach was already churning. “But I will make sure your honor remains intact.”

Nicholas didn’t seem totally sure, but I was insistent. “I’ll come with you,” I said. “I’ll be your chaperone.”

Chapter 423



When Bridget opened the door to her rooms, the first person she saw was Nicholas. A brilliant smile blossomed across her face. But then, in the next moment, she opened the door wider and saw me standing there too. That perfect smile wavered.

“Piper,” she said. “I wasn’t expecting you.”

“It seemed improper for me to be alone in your rooms,” Nicholas said. “For both our sakes, I thought it might be best to bring along a chaperone.”

“A chaperone?” Bridget scoffed. “Nicholas, what exactly do you think I intend to do?”

“It’s not like that, Bridget.”

“What is it like, then, Nicholas? Because it sounds a lot like you are accusing me of something.” She scrunches up her face like she’s offended. Like what Nicholas is doing is in the wrong, somehow questioning their friendship instead of trying to protect Bridget’s reputation

“I don’t want anyone to get the wrong idea about us,” Nicholas said. “This is for your sake.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m an actress. People expect me to live a bit on the edge.”

“Well, I’d prefer if we both stayed away from the edge,” Nicholas added. “Too much of that going on lately.”

Bridget sighed but eventually relented. “Fine. Come in, you two.”

She stepped back from the door, and Nicholas and I entered. I was immediately floored by the sheer size and space of Bridget’s rooms. She had a much bigger set of rooms than I did, bigger than Susie’s too. Bigger than any other candidate’s I’ve seen.

The decorations were lavish too. Crystal chandeliers and golden adornments. She had a canopy bed with bunches of lavender hanging on the four posters.

It was beautiful and excessive, a room fit for a visiting foreign princess or Queen. Or an ultra -famous actress the royal family was trying desperately to impress.

I was starting to see that the favors for Bridget were not limited to event—selection and management. Who knew what other boons she was granted behind the scenes?

Bridget walked to the center of the room, where she had arranged two plush chairs. She carelessly dragged over a much less comfortable—looking wooden stool from the corner of

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the room and placed it nearby.

“You can sit here, Piper,” she said. “You should be able to see everything from here. I hope you don’t mind but I intended to work on the love scenes with Nicholas tonight. We need to

get our chemistry in sync. You understand.”

Nicholas moved closer to one of the plush chairs. His eyes stayed on me.

“That’s probably not necessary, Bridget.”

Bridget, I noticed, was also eying me, but was being far more subtle about it.

“Piper being here might be a blessing actually, Nicholas. She can watch our scenes and see if our romance is believable.”

I would rather hurl myself into the fireplace, but I refrain, remembering my purpose. I must protect Nicholas’s reputation. As well as his person, if Bridget wanted to push too far. Nicholas was earnest, and he saw only the best in Bridget.

I was much less certain about her. So I would keep watching. Like a hawk

Bridget smirked at me a little, and I couldn’t help but feel like maybe she just wanted to flirt with Nicholas in front of me. Put me in my place?

No, I had to be overthinking this. Even if she had a lingering crush on Nicholas, why rub it in my face? She couldn’t possibly know that he and I were still harboring secret feelings for each other. We’d been pretty good at keeping a cap on that in public, I’d say. 3

Maybe she did though.

I shook my head, trying to clear away the circular thinking again. It was getting me nowhere

fast. 1

Bridget waved her arms around. “This open area can be the stage. Nicholas come here. Here. This is your spot. Now, let’s pick up from scene 17.”

I noticed that Bridget didn't have a script. Nicholas did, however, and flipped through the pages.

"You should learn your lines soon, Nicholas," she chided lightly.

"There are so many of them," Nicholas replied.

"I can teach you memorization methods," Bridget said, a bit of hope in her voice. Was she angling for another private meeting?

"Another time perhaps," Nicholas said, dismissing her without even looking up.

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Bridget continued to smile. "Ready?" she asked, and her voice was slightly tighter than before, the only indicator that Nicholas's words had upset her.

"Okay," Nicholas said and cleared his throat.

Bridget immediately switched into acting mode. One minute she was standing casually with a big smile, the next she was a wilting flower leaning into Nicholas, a bit of desperation in her gaze.

"Oh, darling," Bridget said. "You shouldn't be here. The guards will surely find you." She placed the back of her hand to her forehead. "I couldn't bear it if you were caught. If you were tortured!"

Nicholas cleared his throat again. "It would all be worth it, uh... to be with you."

He stopped.

Bridget waited.

I blinked, confused. I hadn't read this part.

Bridget whispered, "For one night."

Nicholas immediately corrected. "Oh, yes. Uh, for one night. Tonight. Er, tonight, I will make you mine under the... uh... stars... Doesn't that imply we'll be making love outside?"

Bridget straightened. "That's not in the script, Nicholas."

"I know, but then we move to the bed. It just doesn't make sense," Nicholas said.

Bridget took the script from Nicholas's hands and cast it aside. "Let's skip ahead then." She wrapped her arms around his neck. Tilting her face up, she looked like a seductive beauty from an old black and white movie. "Kiss me, lover."

Nicholas froze. "That's not a good idea."

Bridget pouted her bottom lip some. "No one will believe that we kiss all the time if our first kiss since my return is on the night of the show."

A mixture of feelings flooded through me. Glad, that they hadn't yet kissed since she'd been back. Not thrilled, that the distinction was necessary only because they had kissed in the past. And absolutely raging, that she wanted to kiss him right now in front of me and only

1. me.

"It will be fine," Nicholas said. He refused to as much as budge with her arms around him.

"But, Nicholas," Bridget began to insist.

But Nicholas stayed adamant. "No, Bridget."

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Slowly, Bridget lowered her hands away from him. “Well. I guess it’s just like riding a bicycle, right? We had a lot of practice in the old days. I’m sure it will come back to us.”

Nicholas didn’t say anything, though his jaw was a hard line. I could only guess what he was thinking. I hoped to God he wasn’t fondly remembering the past.

“That was a long time ago,” he said at last.

“Not all that long,” she said smiling. “But, you know I was only pushing for this with the best interest of the play in mind right? I want a story to be believable.”

Nicholas sighed. “I know you are a perfectionist about your work.”

“That’s how I’ve been so successful.”

Nicholas turned toward me then. Whatever he saw in my face gave him pause.

I could imagine what he saw, because I could feel it coursing through my veins.

Chapter 424



In my mind, my wolf was rampaging, storming back and forth, smashing against the walls I used to contain it. I wanted to run. I wanted to fight. I wanted to tackle Bridget to keep her away from my mate.

“Well, look at the time. We have to go,” Nicholas said at once. He never checked his watch. Who knew what the hell time it was? Nicholas held out his

hand for me. I didn't trust myself to take it without hurting him. My hands felt like they could shift to claws at any moment.

Bridget stepped closer, and a growl erupted from the back of my throat.

"Piper? Are you alright?" she seemed genuinely concerned, and I hated that that p i s s e d me off even more.

"She's fine," Nicholas answered for me. "It's just been a long day. Come on, Piper. I'll see you back to your room."

He gripped me by the forearm and pulled me close to his chest. My nose rested near his collarbone and I inhaled long and steady. It helped calm me.

With my face buried in his chest, he led me to the door.

"Have a good night, Bridget," Nicholas said. His chest vibrated when he talked. I didn't like that he had said her name, but the rumble of his voice made me purr in delight. He was so s e x y, my mate. So strong and so good, and so s e x y.

I had thought Nicholas intended to take me back to my room, so I was surprised when he turned the other way and started leading me toward the royal family wing instead. While I was lost to the touch and smell of N i c h o l a s 's body, he led me directly into his room.

He closed the door behind us, then gently guided me to the bedroom.

"Is it the wolf?" he asked.

I hummed. It was, but it was more too. My emotions were out of control.

"She wanted to kiss you," I said.

"For the play," he replied.

Context mattered so little to me right now, all I could do was growl.

"Okay, okay," he said. "I understand. Hold on."

He slowly started to pry me away from him.

I whined and tried to hold on tighter.

“Just for a minute,” he said. “You’ll like what I’m about to do, I promise.”

With that promise, I leaned back to give him room. Immediately, he took off his jacket and ripped his shirt up and over his head. The second it hit the floor, I was right back where I had been, but without his annoying clothes in the way.

Nicholas was so hot. He smelled so good. He should never wear clothes.

Nicholas laughed, low and deep, and I realized I’d said all that out loud. “You wouldn’t like others to see me naked, would you?”

Another growl tore from my throat, this one even more dangerous than before.

His laughter slowly fell into a satisfied chuckle. “That’s what I thought.”

“Nick...” I felt like I was out of my head, barely holding on.

“I know, Piper. It’s okay. I know what will help.”

“What?”

“Scenting.”

It was true, he did smell too much like Bridget, and her perfume and the lavender. “How?”

“Mark me,” he said.

I shook my head. “That won’t work. You heal too quickly. My marks won’t last.”

“Do it anyway,” Nicholas said.

I trusted Nicholas, so I immediately latched onto the collarbone I’d been

nuzzling and sucked in a red mark. And then another right beside it. And another.

already healing.

But Nicholas was right, I did feel a bit more like myself. The mark itself healed but my scent remained. It brought me some ease.

“Better?”

“Yes,” I said with a sigh of relief. “Thank you.”

“Good,” Nicholas said. His hands dug into the back of my shirt. “Now it’s my turn.”

In a flash, he ripped his hands in opposite directions, tearing my shirt clean off my body.

His mouth descends at once to the juncture of my neck and shoulder, which had

been previously hidden away by my shirt, and he sucked in a mark.

His hands went to my backside and lifted. I instinctively wrapped my arms around his waist.

His mouth latched onto my collarbone as he carried me to his bed. As he gently lowered me down, his mouth moved to the swell of my breast.

I combed my fingers through his hair. I did feel more myself, but my jealousy was still seething. The only way I could think to quash it, other than what we were already doing, was to have what Bridget wanted and was denied.

“Nicholas,” I said.

He lifted his head to look at me. A bit of saliva clung to his red lips, making them

shine just a little.

“Kiss me,” I said.

He smirked, then surged forward and captured my lips with his own. Our tongues tangled, our limbs intertwined. And for a good long while, I lost track of where I ended and he began.

Later, when we were sated and sweaty and bliss had settled over me like a warm, blanket, I turned my head on the pillow to look at Nicholas beside me.

His hair was a mess from where I had dragged my fingers through again and again. The fresher marks on his chest were fading, though some were still bright. I treasured the sight of them, knowing they would be gone soon.

He turned his head on his pillow too, looking at me. “You are amazing, Piper.”

“So are you,” I said, smiling. “Though I do have a question...”

“What is it?” he asked.

“When we were together in the woods that time, I asked you to be inside of me. You said to wait until we were near a bed.” I patted gently on the mattress beneath us. “I understand if you wanted to wait before when I wasn’t quite myself. But I can assure you that I’m fully in control now.”

I was expecting a charming smile and a quip about our expected second, third,

or fourth round.

My desire to have Nicholas inside of me hadn’t quelled since that night in the woods. If anything, it had grown since then. I’d thought if we’d laid together like that, we might feel closer to each other.

And when I thought of finally losing my virginity, there was no one else in the whole world I could think of wanting to give it to. Even if we were doomed. I wanted Nicholas to be my first.

N i c h o l a s's actual reaction was a dimming smile as he turned his head away, facing the ceiling now.

My heart grew chill. I felt like he was closing a door in my face.

"I think we should wait," he said.

Okay. That wasn't so bad. Wanting to wait made sense. I wouldn't dream of pressuring him.

"After what happened with Susie," Nicholas said, "it got me thinking. I don't want to risk getting you pregnant."

And just like that my frozen heart shattered into pieces.

It wasn't that Nicholas didn't want to be inside of me.

It was that he didn't want to risk having a family with me.

Chapter 425



My wolf cowered inside of me, hurt crashing in on all sides. Rejection. It seeped into every pore and every bone.

I knew I shouldn't feel that way. Nicholas was pragmatic and cautious. He wouldn't want to have a baby out of wedlock with anyone, even me.

But my wolf's reaction is visceral, as if I had been directly rejected by my mate.

It took every sliver of willpower I had to keep from whimpering and pulling myself into the fetal position. I bury it all down deep, right there alongside dream I secretly held of making a family with Nicholas.

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When he glanced at me again, he found me just as closed off as he was.

Slowly, I began to slink out of bed.

“Piper? Where are you going?” He sat up in the bed, watching me as I gathered my clothing off the ground and shimmied back into them.

“I’m going to head back to my room.”

A bit of hurt flashed through his eyes. I tried to ignore it.

“You can stay here the night. Sneak back in the morning,” he said.

“It’s safer if I go now,” I said.

Safer for who? That was the question left unanswered. My heart was already cracking. If I stayed, it might implode into dust.

I slipped out of Nicholas’s room, thinking I might find comfort in the solitude of the hallway. Instead, I only felt emptier somehow.

The walk back to my room felt even longer than usual, and I wasn’t even particularly careful. It was by pure luck that I returned to my room without being seen.

At rehearsals the next day, I avoided Nicholas as much as possible. It was difficult to do with Elva in tow. I wouldn’t deny Elva from spending time with her Nick–lass, even when I’d rather not see him. So I wasn’t terribly shocked when five seconds into entering the ballroom, Elva made a B–line straight for Nicholas.

“Nick–lass!”

Nicholas smile was bright for my little girl. "Elva." He kneeled down to hug her. Over her head, he looked up at me. That smile dimmed by a large margin. "Piper."

"Prince Nicholas," I said, using his formal title. I hadn't done that in some time. His expression soured further.

He schooled it back into a warm smile, when Elva pulled away to look at him.

"Mommy says I can be in the play?" she asked.

Nicholas nodded critically. "It's a very special role, just for you."

"Can I do it now?"

"Sure, I think we can get Bridget to help show you. If that's okay with your mom?" Nicholas looked at me. Elva turned to look at me too, all doe eyes.

"Of course it's okay," I said, even though my insides were all twisted up. I'd rather keep Elva far, far away from Bridget. But that was unfair. Elva wanted a part and Bridget was the best one to help show her how it was done.

I was no actress. I wasn't even a movie buff. Elva deserved a chance to learn from a real life honest-to-goodness professional.

So I watched as Nicholas led my daughter away, up onto the stage that was fully completed now, to where Bridget waited. Bridget seemed so excited to see Elva, that they immediately hugged like old friends.

Watching them, my sad, lonely heart ached. They looked like a family up there. Bridget took Rhost's one hand while Nicholas held the other. Together, they led her to her starting spot, then walked with her across the stage, showing her the route she would take when she threw the flower petals.

I couldn't hear their words, but Bridget was bright and energetic and she was making Elva laugh and smile. Elva was entirely charmed.

My heart sunk down to my stomach.

"You shouldn't make that face," Julian said, suddenly appearing beside me. He could have sneaked up on me, or just walked up while I was so enamored with the others on the stage, I wasn't sure. Either way, I jumped and he laughed, "Careful, Piper. I didn't mean to give you a heart attack."

"It's my fault," I said, shaking it off. "I didn't sleep much last night."

"Ah, I don't need to hear about your exploits with my brother."

"It wasn't because of that," I said. Though, in hindsight, I really didn't need to clarify that. It wasn't any of Julian's business.

"Then why couldn't you sleep?" he asked.

I shook my head once, just a little. I didn't want to talk about it, not even with him. I wasn't ready. I didn't know if I'd ever be ready. The hurt was too deep. The rejection too raw.

Nicholas wanted a family. He just didn't want it with me.

No, that was the hurt talking. I tried to remind myself, Nicholas was just being careful. If I got pregnant, the entire royal house of cards could come tumbling down. It wasn't worth the risk.

Nicholas and I weren't like Mark and Susie. We couldn't just run away together. Nicholas would never turn away from the crown or his kingdom, not even for love. Or family.

Not even for me.

Watching Bridget, Nicholas, and Elva frolic across the stage again and again, I shifted my focus from one hurt to another.

If I couldn't have Nicholas's children, did I even want more? It was so difficult to think of wanting anyone else. My wolf was so sure Nicholas was my mate.

And well... it was easy to believe. When I so much as thought of being with anyone else, my stomach twisted into uncomfortable knots like I was going to be sick.

Julian was quiet beside me, respecting my wish not to talk about it.

And while that felt like the correct decision, I supposed I could talk about something, even if not the real cause of my heartsickness.

"Have you ever thought about having children, Julian?" I asked him.

"Me?" He seemed surprised to be asked. I had no idea why.

"Yes, you."

He considered it a moment. Looking at him, I noticed his attention too was drawn to the group of three on the stage. Though his eyes were drawn to one woman in particular.

"I guess I'll give my love whatever she wants," he said. "Many children? None? It wouldn't matter to me so long as she was happy."

I frowned a little. That didn't seem like a particularly healthy answer. I understood compromise in a relationship, but I felt like when it came to having kids, there should be a line whether you wanted them or not. Doing it or not doing it for someone other than yourself felt like a fast pass to resentment.

Maybe Julian thought it was romantic. Maybe to someone else it would be. And I understood special circumstances could exist.

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But... I also knew Julian was thinking of Bridget when he said those words, the woman who barely paid him any attention except for a flirt here and there as if to keep him on the hook romantically.

Julian deserved better.

“Okay,” I said, pressing. “But your wants and needs are important too. So I’m asking, what do you want?”

Julian looked surprised again. This time, he turned from Bridget to look at
1. me.

“What I want doesn’t matter,” he said, and it was so hollow, so chilling, I shivered down to my bones.

Chapter 426



Vote (9.3x)

Since we needed special costumes for the event, the candidates, Julian, and Nicholas all attended a group fitting in one of the larger sitting rooms. This large room had several smaller rooms connected, where individuals could go to change or have more personal measurements taken.

My costume was a darker hue, since I was apparently a villain. The seamstress working with me also indicated that Bridget wanted me to wear a domino mask over my eyes. The seamstress said it would help me look mysterious, but I wondered if it was to help hide my terrible acting.

I could read lines okay, but I never could get my face to make the correct emotions. Except, of course, during the rejection scene with Nicholas. I

wouldn't be surprised if Bridget wanted me to remove the mask for that one scene alone.

Across the room, Bridget was personally helping Elva with her flower girl costume. Nicholas was there too. Elva would pick ribbons for her hair then hold them up for Nicholas to see. He smiled and nodded at each one.

At the same time, he was being fitted for a bright white cape that would be impossible to keep clean under normal circumstances.

Movement sounded to my right. I expected Veronica or Tiffany or even Julian to have made their way over to me, but I startle when I realize Susie is the one who stepped into the open space beside me.

She was calm, if not a bit curious looking around, taking in everything she missed.

I desperately wanted to talk to her, to find out everything going on with her, but with so many people around, I was afraid to open my mouth in case someone might overhear me.

Glancing at me, she must have caught the conflict on my face.

"We're keeping things private until we can figure out the best way forward," she said softly to me, giving me a kind smile. It was a relief to see her so happy, after the misery she'd been through the past few days.

Leaning closer, she whispered, "But we are going to stay together no matter what."

It would be difficult for them. They'd have lots of challenges. But I was so pleased for them. If they truly loved each other, they would make it through the hardship. They'd make it work, and they'd be a happy little family.

"I'm glad you're back," I told her.

Her smile grew wider. At least, it did, until she looked back over the rest of the group and her gaze snagged on Bridget helping Elva tie ribbons in her hair. With Nicholas so close and attentive beside them, they looked like their own little family.

It made my stomach twist into knots.

“That’s... new,” Susie said.

“Yes,” I replied.

Susie glanced at me sideways. “Are you’re okay with it?”

I shrugged. Of course not, but, “What choice do I have? Elva is enjoying herself. Nicholas says Bridget is trustworthy. How can I pull Elva away without being a complete and total asshole to all of them?”

Susie went quiet. I didn’t know what else to say either.

A tailor came over to help Susie with her costume. Since she had taken my place as the maid, her outfit was fairly straightforward, a simple maid outfit with an apron and a lace headband. They just needed her general size.

The pregnancy was still early. She wouldn’t show for some time. I wondered how long she and Mark could keep it a secret.

As long as they could, I imagined.

Just then, Elva came running over to us, her ribbons bouncing along behind her.

“Mommy! Susie! Look!”

Her dress was bouncy layers with lace and ribbons that matched the ones in her hair. She gave us a spin so we could see the full effect. The colors trailed along behind her.

She was absolutely adorable, a vision in pink and purples. And her bright smile was the best part. Nicholas had been right to want to include her in the play, and I was once again grateful to him for his insight and kindness.

“You look beautiful,” I said.

“Nick—lass helped pick the colors,” Elva said. She tugged at the ribbons in her hair a little, trying to pull them closer to her face to see them. “Auntie tied them.”

My thoughts skidded to an abrupt halt. Auntie?

The only person Elva called aunt was Anna. I would have been fine if she’d wanted to use the term for Susie, or Charlotte, or even Veronica. But... Bridget? They’d only just met.

Nicholas might have said that Bridget was trustworthy but... to already be so close to warrant such a nickname? It felt like too much, too soon, from someone I wasn’t sure had Elva’s best interest at heart, regardless of what Nicholas said.

Susie and I shared a quick look. Susie looked worried. Good. I was glad I wasn’t the only one, then.

I cleared my throat. None of this was Elva’s fault, and I didn’t want to come off too harshly and hurt her accidentally. She was such a sweet little girl, always looking to please people.

So, very gently, I asked her, “Auntie?”

Her bright smile faltered slightly, which made me see mega cinemas in my head. Was feeling confident about the theme, the world counter to the

“Bree just wanted me to call her that.”

"Piper!" Bridget said brightly as she rushed over. "What do you think of little Elva's outfit? Isn't she a perfect doll?"

She wasn't a doll, she was a girl. "Did you say that to call your butler asked. Elva's clear discomfort set off all my protective instincts. My impulse for politeness was firmly out the window.

Bridget laughed lightly, "Oh, yes I'm so sorry, Piper. I meant to ask you if it was okay first. But then I was helping her with Nicholas."

was

She turned around to point out Nicholas, who was cautiously watching us from a few feet away while he spoke with his own tailor. He took his new cape over her shoulders, and looked rather handsome in it. He'd cut quite the figure as a dashing hero in the play. The audience would be pleased

I'd be pleased to see him like that too. But not right now. Now I had problems that all began and ended with Bridget.

"Nicholas was helping too," Bridget continued. "Did you notice us? It was such a sweet little moment. It felt so familiar, like we were a family or something." She laughed again, light and airy as a twinkle of a bell. "Could you imagine? Oh, what a beautiful possibility."

"Elva is my daughter," I reminded her.

"Oh, I know," she said smoothly. "That's why I asked her to call me Auntie. I thought she could call Nicholas Uncle, but we're still working on that." Uncle?

"Nick-nam is Nick-nam," Elva said, and crossed her arms.

"I'll convince you someday," she said with a wink.

"I don't think so," I said. I crossed my arms too, mimicking my daughter

Bridget just smiled wider. “Oh, Piper. Elva is so cute, I couldn’t help but want to be her Auntie. You must understand, since she is your daughter. Surely it’s okay, right?”

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Chapter 427



Chapte

I wanted to say no with every fiber of my being. But when I look at Elva, I noticed she was watching me with doe eyes, taking in my every expression. Did she actually want to call Bridget Auntie? Was she simply reading my negative energy, and that was what had been making her uncomfortable?

I tried to remember Elva’s face as she had interacted with Bridget and Nicholas. She had been having fun. Was it genuine? It could have been.

Maybe I was the stick in the mud here. My distrust of Bridget was hindering my daughter and dictating the people she could grow closer to.

Bridget had given me no real reasons to distrust her. A handful of confusing things mixed with more feelings than facts. Maybe I was simply being jealous.

If Elva likes Bridget, and Bridget has shown only kindness to Elva, maybe I was the asshole here.

Nicholas began to walk closer. He was in earshot now.

He trusted Bridget with his life with Elva’s life. Since I trusted him, that should make her trustworthy by proxy.

At the end of the day, this was just a title. A nickname. It wasn't christening Bridget as Elva's actual aunt. It wasn't even saying they had to spend all that much more time together.

Again, I looked down to Elva. "Elva, you should do whatever you are comfortable with, okay? If you want to call Bridget Auntie, it's up to you."

I loved my daughter with an undying ferocity, but even I did not know the innermost workings of her heart. If she liked Bridget enough to want her to be Auntie, I wouldn't stand in the way of that. Though I would be watching hawk-like from a near distance.

As a mother, I couldn't help but be protective. Especially with all the dangers we've faced, and with all the dangers still out there, haunting us

Elva listened to my words closely. She continued to watch me long after I'd finished speaking. I worked hard to keep my face a blank slate, so as not to influence her decision.

"What would you like, sweetie?" Bridget asked, voice like cotton candy. "Wouldn't you like to call me Auntie?"

Elva shifted her gaze to Bridget instead. Then she frowned.

"I want to think about it," Elva said.

Her words surprised all of us. I nearly laughed. Susie did, though she hid it behind her hand. She wasn't really a part of the conversation, so she easily passed it off as something else.

Bridget, meanwhile, had the smile startled straight off of her face. She clearly hadn't been expecting that. As a celebrity, she was likely used to being admired and adored. Who knew the last time someone had actually turned down one of her requests?

Yet, here Elva was, entranced by Bridget but not so much that she would throw away her entire character. I loved this little girl with the entirety of my heart, but every day I was surprised when there seemed to somehow, impossibly, be even more love inside of me for her.

“Oh, Elva. You don’t want to make Auntie Bridget sad, do you?” Bridget said. She wore an over– exaggerated frown that rankled all of my nerves at once. Was she trying to manipulate my daughter? “It would make me so happy if you would call me Auntie. Do you know how many kids wish they had that chance?”

I reached out and, placing my hand on Elva’s shoulder, tugged her a little closer to me to support her.

“Elva’s made her decision,” I said..

“You said it was up to her, Piper,” Bridget said, cutting me as

“It is,” I said. “And she said she needs time to think about it. She should have that, without outside influence.”

Bridget’s face went through a series of different expressions, like she couldn’t quite decide which to land on.

I wondered what her own feelings were underneath. She was a good actress, there was no denying that. But maybe she lost herself somewhere on the way. Did she even recognize her own true feelings anymore?

Bridget eventually landed on her usual bright smile, just in time for Nicholas to join us.

“What’s going on?” he asked, likely noticing the tension.

Elva turned into me, half–hiding in the skirts of my costume.

“I’m trying to convince Elva to call me Auntie,” Bridget said to him. “I almost have her!”

“Elva said she wanted to think about it,” I said, filling in that key detail that Bridget was leaving out.

Nicholas looked between us. Then, to Bridget, he said, “Elva isn’t obligated to you, or to anyone, Bridget, except her mother. If she’s not comfortable with it, you need to let it go.”

The wattage of Bridget’s smile dimmed for a moment, but she quickly cranked it right back up to how high it was before. Higher even, somehow. “Of course, you are right, Nicholas,” she said. “I suppose I did get carried away there.” She laughed as she looked to me. “I’m sorry for my overstep, Piper.” And then to Elva. “I’m sorry to have pressured you, Elva. You can call me Bridget. It’s okay.”

Elva nodded but didn’t say anything.

Bridget glanced back at the room. “Oh, I see Nathan waving for me. producer’s work is never done!” She laughed again as she walked away.

Producer? Was that official? Although whether official or not, the term seemed to fit. Bridget had more or less taken over the entire production. It was kind of her to let Nathan keep his title as director.

Bridget’s departure left Nicholas alone with Elva and me, with Susie not so subtly eavesdropping nearby.

I wasn’t ready to talk to Nicholas yet. I could understand the practicality of him not wanting to have penetrative sex with me, but it still hurt. Whether it was warranted or not, my wolf and I felt the keen sting of rejection.

Someday I’d get over it. I’d accept the inevitability of our situation enough that I’d be able to accept what we had as enough.

But right now, it hurt too much to even think about it.

“Piper,” he said, stepping closer to me.

"Prince Nicholas," I said. "How are you today?"

It was a question borne in politeness, not at all reflective of the intimacy we've cultivated since our reunion.

He seemed startled by it, but his own curtesy forced his reply. "I'm well. And you?"

"Fine," I said, and didn't say anything else.

His face twisted in a flash of confusion, but he recovered quickly. "Well, I should return to the tailor."

"Yes," I said. "Busy day, today."

"Yes," he replied. "If you'll excuse me."

I bowed my head a little, gesturing my consent. He gave me one last worried look, before turning and returning to his original spot.

HIS SONUS

At my skirts, Elva had taken to playing with her ribbons again. One was starting to come loose, falling down in her hair.

Susie inched closer to us. She worried her hands together. With her gaze darting between Nicholas and me, she clearly had questions. I tried to brace myself.

"What happened between you and Prince Nicholas?" she asked.

God, I didn't even know where to begin.



While Elva was skipping around nearby, I explained to Susie everything that had happened the past few days with Nicholas and me, up to and including the most recent incident of him telling me he wanted to avoid having penetrative sex so I wouldn't get pregnant.

Of course, I said all of this very quietly, careful of eavesdroppers.

"I can't imagine he meant it as a rejection," Susie said. She subtly placed a hand to her own stomach. "It's smart to be careful. Things sometimes just... happen."

"I know," I said. "And I know he probably didn't mean it badly, but it still hurts."

"No probably about it," Susie said. "He's trying to protect you."

I shook my head. I just couldn't believe that, as much as I wanted to. Maybe that was part of it, but it wasn't all of it. If he truly wanted me, wouldn't we be able to face the whole world to be together?

"Look," Susie said. "Why not just talk to him? Like I did with Mark. He probably doesn't even realize what he did or how he sounded. Just now, he looked more confused than I'd ever seen anyone look. At least if you told him what he did wrong, he might be able to fix it."

She was right, but I still hesitated. "Maybe this is a chance for a clean break," I said.

Susie gasped. "What?"

"We're going to have to say goodbye anyway. That's been clear from the start. I've been avoiding it, and he has too. But I'm never going to be picked to be Luna. The royal family hates me. I'm his secret. There will come a day, sooner than later, where he will have to choose someone else to be his

Queen and leave me behind."

"piper..."

“So shouldn’t I hold onto this hurt now, while I have it? Let it fester so the it easier to walk away from him when the time comes that I have to?”

“Do you think that will actually work?” she asked, “Or are you just kidding yourself?”

I couldn’t answer that.

“I could tell you what I think, but you won’t like it,” she said.

“Tell me,” I pressed.

“It will hurt either way,” Susie said. “So why hurt now when you don’t have to?”

1

I shook my head a little.

Across the room, Bridget and Nicholas had made their way back together. It was almost time to break for lunch. Bridget was telling Nicholas something, animatedly moving her hands. Nicholas stepped closer to her, presumably to hear her better. Much of the chatter in the room was growing louder, this close to lunch.

“They really do make a good-looking couple,” I said, hating myself for it.

But it was true.

The beautiful movie-star and the handsome prince who had been childhood sweethearts, someday side-by-side on the throne. They’d probably turn it into a movie. Maybe I’d be written as the villain who tried to keep them apart, just like my part in the play.

“Don’t say that,” Susie said. “You are being far too self-sacrificing.”

“I agree,” said Julian, suddenly at my other side. “Besides it’s a total lie. They make for a terribly-looking couple.”

I glanced at him in surprise. “They are both very attractive.”

“Their terribleness is worse than appearances,” Julian clarified. “They are boring.”

“I agree,” Susie said, just as Elva ran up to her, curls and ribbons bouncing. She held up the ribbon that had earlier been loose, that had now totally fallen out.

“Susie! My ribbon. Can you help?” Elva asked, turning on her doe eyes.

Susie was not immune. “Of course, Elva. Let’s go find a brush.” She gave me a look with a small smile, and I smiled back, grateful she was so eager and willing to help Elva.

Chapter 429



I was blessed to have actual friends here. People who loved and cared for Elva for real.

Meanwhile, Julian, still watching Bridget and Nicholas interact, continued, “Bridget is a movie star. We can’t think she’d be happy sitting around all day in the palace while Nicholas deals with kingly duties. She’s going to need adventure. Excitement.”

“And you are the one who can deliver that?” I asked, lifting a brow at him.

He flashed me a grin. “A life with me would never be boring.”

I couldn’t deny that. Julian was certainly a force of chaos, even standing near him was like being caught in a hurricane. I could only imagine what it would feel like to be the one he was fully focused on, or the one he loved.

But... a hint of worry sat in the back of my heart. Julian could undoubtedly promise a life of excitement to whoever his chosen partner was. But what would that person do to deserve it?

"So you give her all of your passion, give her an adventure of a lifetime," I said. "But what does she do for you?"

Julian's brow pulled together ever so slightly. "What do you mean?"

"Relationships are give and take," I said. "You would give her everything. Shouldn't she bring something to your life as well?"

"She wouldn't have to," Julian said. "She's perfect just as she is. It's an honor simply to be around her."

That, to me, sounded very dull. If what he said was true, then what was the difference between Bridget and something like a nice-looking statue?

Maybe Julian would be better off adopting a cat.

"You deserve better," I said.

"There isn't anything or anyone better than Bridget," Julian said.

I snorted a harsh laugh. At his sharp look, I tried to turn it into a cough to cover. His eyes narrowed with suspicion.

"Have you even tried looking?" I said, "You've been a playboy since I've known you. Did you ever look at even one of those girls seriously?"

I already knew he hadn't. His heart had always been so set on Bridget, that he treated those other girls like temporary playthings. Maybe they were in on it, maybe they weren't. But he was never serious with any of them.

If he had given someone else a chance, maybe she could have shown him what a romance was supposed to look like. Waiting for true love was fine, but this, to me, didn't seem like true love.

It seemed like obsession.

"I don't need anyone but her," he said.

Sadness bloomed in my heart. Julian, for all his flaws, was a nice guy and incredibly handsome. He could have any woman in the kingdom, except for this one.

Then, all of a sudden, an idea flashed in my mind. Maybe what Julian needed wasn't to find someone serious, but to simply realize what a relationship was supposed to be like.

To have someone like you for you. For that person to be so excited to see you that they go through anything. For them to bring joy and excitement to the person's life they cared about, as much as they received it from them.

And who better to show Julian than the woman he was already in a fake relationship with?

Me.

"Julian", I said, turning to him.

He turned to me, too, watching me with caution. "Piper?"

You deserve to know what being in a real relationship is like," I said You should know what having an actual girlfriend should feel like **

"What are you saying?" he asked.


I pointed at myself. "I'm going to show you."

Now he was surprised. "You?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm going to show you what love is supposed to look like."

Chapter 430





I set out to show Julian what having a real girlfriend should be like as soon as I could, so early the next morning, I dressed in my cutest sundress and showed up to his door with a basket of fresh bread I plucked straight from the kitchen. It was still warm.

I knocked on his door. Brian opened it, and his eye twitched in what I assumed was surprise. It was the most emotion I had ever seen out of him.

“Is Julian awake yet?” I asked.

“He’s getting dressed,” Brian said. Before I could ask to come in, Brian stepped back and let me inside the room.

I stood just inside the door in Julian’s sitting room. Brian glanced at me again, before disappearing into what must have been the bedroom. A moment later, Julian himself came bursting out.

“Piper? To what do I owe the pleasure?”

I held out the basket. “I thought we could spend some time together today.”

He walked closer, glanced into the basket, and then snatched a handful of the bread. He bit into it, chewed, and swallowed.

The show was in two days, and with our final dress—rehearsal tomorrow, Bridget personally requested that everyone take it easy today. It had been some time since we had a day without practice or some other event, so it seemed the perfect time to have a date with Julian.

“Is this part of your elaborate plan to prove something to me?” Julian asked.

“Yes,” I said. There was no reason to hide it. I’d been upfront from the

start. Might as well continue to be, I reasoned.

Julian tilted his head. "You don't have to do this."

"No, I'm definitely doing this," I said. "We're friends, and I won't rest until you recognize how important you are and how much you deserve."

Julian huffed out a laugh as he rolled his eyes. "You are stubborn."

And just like that he was convinced to spend time with me.

"Let's take a walk in the garden," I said. "It's a beautiful day."

Since Bridget had been brought into the competition, a lot of the protesting had dwindled. There were still a few hardy regulars, but for the most part, the biggest danger had passed. At least from what I could tell.

I was sure some tension still simmered under the surface, but everyone seemed distracted now. The competition was once again serving its true purpose, captivating the kingdom.

"Alright," Julian said. I took his hand in mine. He smirked a little and squeezed my fingers.

Together, we walked down the hallway to the stairs, then down the stairs to the doorway to the gardens. Since it was our day off, there were other girls out there taking walks, though no one seemed to pay Julian and I any attention. We wouldn't stand out. After all, we were supposed to be dating.

As we walked, we talked about this and that. Julian and I already got along very well, so it didn't take much for us to have an enjoyable time in each other's company.

We stopped to smell some of the flowers. When I leaned closer, I inhaled a nose full of pollen and sneezed so loudly, I drew everyone's attention from the rest of the garden.

—
Julian tried his hardest not to laugh for all of two seconds. Then he burst out laughing.

Eventually, we stopped at a small rod-iron table to rest. Julian produced a deck of cards. “How about a game?” he asked, and proceeded to try to teach

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me how to play poker.

I started off strong, winning by just sheer luck, yet the longer the game continued, the worse I became. No matter how many tricks Julian showed me, I still couldn’t make the cards talk like he could. I didn’t have it in me to be embarrassed though, not with the boisterous way Julian was laughing.