

THE LUNA CHOOSING GAME

Chapter 441



As Bridget finished her solo scene, it was time for Nicholas and me to head to the stage for our breakup scene.

“Break a leg,” Bridget said to us as we passed each other. I knew this was the traditional way of wishing someone good luck in a theater production, but my wolf still snarled inside of me like it was a threat. Fortunately, I held it back before the sound could audibly escape me.

Nicholas held out his arm for me as we reached the stairs to the stage. On the surface, it was a gesture of kindness. As a gentleman, Nicholas wanted to be sure I wouldn’t trip on my skirts on my way up the stairs.

Yet underneath, there was more to steady presence of his arm under mine. This was an apology for what was to come.

The apology wasn’t necessary. By now, we’d practiced this scene enough that I barely felt anything at all. Still, it warmed me from the inside out, knowing Nicholas cared so much.

With the stage covered in darkness, Nicholas and I released our gentle hold on each other and moved into our positions.

The lights clicked on, and the scene began.

Nicholas looked at me and said, “We have to end things between us...”

“Why?”

“There’s someone else.”

“Who?”

“It doesn’t matter who.”

“I think it does,” I said, then paused. I pushed all of my emotion into my voice.

“I love you.”

In all of our practices, Nicholas hesitated here, no matter how many times Nathan and Bridget tried to correct him. So it wasn’t shocking that he still hesitated now.

“Well, I don’t love you,” he eventually said.

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The crowd loudly gasped. One person even booed. Another cried out, “That’s just wrong!”

Nicholas and I glanced at the crowd in surprise, and then at each other. That reaction certainly had not been expected.

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I tried to regain my composure, but I needed a few seconds before I could remember my next line. “Why would you hurt me like this?”

Nicholas’s reply took even longer. This scene was quickly unraveling. “I love her.”

“Don’t do this!” someone in the audience shouted.

“Piper is the one!” another called.

Both were loudly shushed.

Thankfully, my final line was coming up and this horrible scene would soon be over.

“I never want to see either of you again!” I shouted. Then, I turned and fled from the stage.

Here, Nathan and Bridget both thought the crowd would cheer, happy to be rid of me, the last romantic obstacle standing between Nicholas’s character and Bridget’s. Instead, the crowd was deathly silent, like the grave.

Nicholas paused, as he had been instructed to, to let the applause play out. It never came. Eventually, he cleared his throat and continued with his monologue.

As the scene ended, the audience did finally react. They politely clapped.

Nicholas found me waiting in the backstage area, at the foot of the stairs. He walked to me then clutched both of my hands in his. Gently, he brought them up to his mouth to place soft kiss after soft kiss over my knuckles.

I didn’t need the reassurance that there was no hard feelings between us. But it was nice to have it all the same. I’d never turn down a bit of extra attention from Nicholas.

In a low voice, he said, “The audience was right. My character is a cad for turning away your character’s love for a woman he just met.

I smiled. “What about true love?”

Nicholas placed another kiss to the back of my palm. “Even they could tell where truly lies.”

my heart

“Nicholas...” My heart burst with affection for him. I wished I could fall into his arms and kiss him. What I would have given to be kissed senselessly in that moment. But, people were bustling around us. Even our present touch was dangerous, threatening to give us away.



Neither of us pulled away though.

At least, not until Bridget's voice sounded behind me. "Nicholas! It's time for our romance scene."

Nicholas released my hands and I pulled them back to my sides, just as Bridget came to a stop beside me.

If she had noticed our closeness, which she must have from her closeness, she was pretending she hadn't. She simply beamed her bright smile all for Nicholas.

My nerves prickled once again. Yes, Nicholas had told me that he would only kiss the people he wanted to, but in the shine of Bridget's presence and under the lights of the stage, who knew what would happen? The script called for a kiss. They were supposed to kiss.

Would Nicholas truly turn his back on the character? On the play itself? On Bridget?

She batted her eyelashes at him now. "Ready, lover?"

My thoughts fizzled into ash. I felt suddenly faint.

Bridget glanced at me and laughed. "Just getting into character, Piper." She winked at me.

Whatever my feelings were toward Bridget, I could openly admit that I absolutely detested her character for this play.

Bridget's character and Nicholas's were both in their own relationships at the start, only for them both to claim they never loved their partners and pursue

each other instead. It was painted as true love conquering all, but I wasn't so sure.

My character was painted as a villain for trying to save her relationship. And while some of her actions were underhanded she was by no means a saint her intentions are only to

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sustain the love she thought she had been cultivating for the past years.

I hadn't given it much thought until now, but maybe the audience and Nicholas were right.. Maybe his character really was a cad.

No wonder Nicholas was so miserable to be playing him.

"It's our time to shine," Bridget said, turning her smile to Nicholas once again.

He nodded curtly at her and then looked at me. The green in his eyes was barely visible in the dark of the backstage, but the gold almost seemed to glow. And within that gold, I could

detect a swirl of emotion.

He was trying to tell me something, and while I didn't always understand the message behind his eyes, this time, I was fluent enough in Nicholas to read him.

My heart is with you.

I could feel the words as clearly as if he had just said them aloud to me.

Bridget patted Nicholas's arm. "Better get into position."

Nodding, Nicholas turned from me and headed up the stair. With our locked eyes broken, I released the breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding.

Oddly, Bridget remained. As I looked at her, I found her watching me with a truly unreadable expression.

With Nicholas, I had a chance of reading his face because of the depth of our knowing each other and because he was so terribly earnest.

Bridget was an actor by trade, her face could say anything, and there was no indication if that was what she truly felt. The fact that I didn't know her all that well didn't help matters either.

Yet when she looked at me now, I felt an uncomfortable chill run down the length of my spine, like I was staring into the eyes of a viper ready to strike. 1
Maybe that was an unfair comparison. I felt bad for thinking it. But I couldn't deny it. 1

Bridget's smile hadn't dimmed, but her eyes turned hard.

"Keep your eyes on the stage, Piper," Bridget said. "I'm about to show everyone what a real kiss of passion looks like."

Chapter 443



"Hi, Piper!" Susie said, suddenly rushing past me. "Bye, Piper!" She took the stairs of the stage.

Bridget's gaze never left mine. She didn't say anything more, just winked at me, then turned to follow Susie up the stairs.

I stared after her for a few long moments, shaken inside and out. Just what had Bridget meant by that? A true kiss of passion, she'd said. With Nicholas?

No. I couldn't believe it. Nicholas had said he won't kiss anyone he didn't want to, and I couldn't let Bridget's words shake my faith and trust in him.

But what if Bridget was someone he wanted to kiss. The lights of the stage could be intoxicating, and Bridget was a good actress. If anyone could convince a man to kiss her, it would be Bridget.

My stomach twisted into tight knots. Maybe I shouldn't watch at all. Maybe I should just return to the sitting room with Elva and wait for Susie to tell me what happened.

Yes, that was what I would do. Decided, I turned away from the stairs, only to notice a figure lingering at the other side of the backstage, half in shadow. No one really went to that side, since this side was far more convenient.

Yet I recognized that shadowy figure

Julian.

My worries dimmed a little under the wave of determination that rolled over me now. I still needed to talk to him, and here he was. We could speak privately there, and an escape would not be easy for him.

Resolved, I started toward him.

Onstage, the scene began, with Bridget talking to Susie. Susie delivered her one line. Her voice trembled with obvious fear, yet she still managed to say the words. I was proud of her. I would tell her later. But for now...

"Julian, we need to talk," I said.

Julian didn't even glance at me. His eyes were glued to the stage.

"Julian," I said, more forcefully.

"Shh." Did he just shush me?

I moved into his line of sight, blocking his view of the stage. Face blank, he simply leaned over to look around me.

Okay, I got it. He wanted to watch this scene as much as I wanted to avoid it. Was he some kind of masochist? Liked the pain? Or was this way of dealing with the potential rejection? Did he need to see Bridget and Nicholas interact like some kind of proof? Even if it was only an act.

Fine. I wouldn't stand in his way, if this was what he felt he needed.

Sighing, I moved to stand beside Julian instead. I was annoyed though, and wouldn't put it past him to try to sneak away again. So I reached out and clenched his wrist in a vice grip. If he wanted to escape me, he'd have to break my hold. That would be much harder to do now, since I had a wolf.

Onstage, Nicholas had climbed through the makeshift window and was sharing romantic words with Bridget. The scene made my stomach clench no matter how many times I witnessed it.

I glanced at Julian beside me. His blank expression had not changed. Suddenly, I began to worry about him even more than before. It wasn't like him to not be quick with a grin and a quip. Something was definitely going on with him.

I'd promised Nicholas I would speak with him, but I would want to anyway. Even if I didn't want the truth about what happened last night, I would still want to talk to him, to find out why he looked so broken.

"Julian..." I whispered.

"Later, Piper," he said, still not looking at me. "I'm watching the show now."

I closed my mouth again. He really did want to torture himself.

I guessed that meant I had to be tortured too.

When I returned my attention to the stage, it was time for the kiss. Beside me, Julian tensed. I tensed too, holding onto his arm for dear life.

I couldn't see Nicholas's face from here, only Bridget's. She looked up at him with such pure devotion in her eyes. She was a great actress, but I wondered if not all of that was fake.

Slowly, so slowly, they leaned in toward each other.

My breath caught in my throat.

Please, Nick. No. Don't.

At the last moment, Nicholas turned his head and kissed Bridget on the cheek.

A rush of relief pushed through me.

But then, Bridget, apparently having expected this, grabbed Nicholas's face to center him, pressed herself up onto her toes, and smashed their lips together.

The crowd began to wildly cheer. So much for being on my side.

Beside me, Julian sighed. He gently placed his hand over mine, and I realized how tightly I was holding him. Still, I couldn't force myself to let go.

Nicholas stilled for the length of the kiss. He looked like a statue, unmoving. When Bridget pulled back, smiling, he knocked away her hands then stormed off the stage.

Bridget watched after him, surprised for a moment. But then she corrected herself. She smiled as she turned toward the confused audience.

"My lover waits for me in the bedchamber!" she said, adlibbing. "He's so passionate! I must join him at once!"

The crowd hooted and hollered.

Bridget ran off the stage. She caught up with Nicholas halfway to the sitting room. Much slower, Susie came down the stairs. She gave the pair a large berth, inching around them.

“Nicholas!” Bridget hurried in front of him to stop his pace. He started to walk around her, but then she said, “Do you truly hate me so much?” Finally, he stopped.

“I made my position clear from the start, Bridget. No kissing,” Nicholas said. “You disrespect that and disrespected me.”

“I respect you,” Bridget said. “Of course I do. But you cannot think that a passionless kiss would have convinced that audience we are in love?”

“It is a play,” Nicholas said. “It does not need to be convincing.”

“It does if I am to have any chance in this competition!” Bridget said, voice raising. Then she cleared her throat and lowered her voice again. “Do you truly hate me so much that you want me gone? If we do not both play our parts, it makes me look bad.”

I could not imagine a universe in which Bridget, the professional actress, would receive less points in this event than anyone else. Especially not because Nicholas wouldn’t kiss her.

Perhaps it was professional hubris that drove her words now.

I suspected she just wanted a proper kiss from Nicholas. Jealousy rose like a growl in my throat. I bit it down. I bit it all down. To be fair, I couldn’t blame her. Nicholas’s kisses were hot and fiery. I would do so many things to be able to burn in him.

“I don’t hate you,” Nicholas said, sighing. “But the kiss was unnecessary.”

“I assure you it was very necessary. It’s the easiest way to convince the audience —”

“Easiest way, not the only way.”

“Nicholas.” Bridget placed her hands on her hips. “You are being purposefully difficult.”

“You are being difficult, Bridget,” Nicholas said. His voice was proud and sure, unwavering. It had been for the length of this conversation. “In this, you are in the wrong.”

Bridget suddenly looked taken aback, properly scolded.

“You’ve overstepped,” Nicholas said. “See that it doesn’t happen again.”

Chapter 444



Despite the argument between Bridget and Nicholas, the show needed to go on, which meant Nicholas and Bridget were called back to the stage. Bridget was silenced after Nicholas’s final words, so the air between them was obviously tense. They didn’t talk at all as they returned to the stage.

For the finale, Julian was needed on stage too. This was the final showdown between his character and Nicholas’s, where Nicholas would beat him in a duel and officially claim Bridget’s character’s hand in marriage.

I knew Julian had to go, but I was still holding onto his arm. I wasn’t ready to let him go yet. We still hadn’t talked and his face was still like that of a strangers, unsmiling and stern.

Julian glanced pointedly at where I gripped his upper arm.

“I have to go now, Piper,” he said.

“We still haven’t talked,” I replied.

“Later.”

I still didn’t let go. “Do you promise?”

He huffed a harsh breath. “Why does it matter?”

He was so dismissive, it hurt a little. Why did it matter? Because I cared about him. Because he was acting strangely. Because I wanted to know if he really said those terrible things about me to Bridget.

“It matters because it matters,” I said. It really was as simple as that. To put it into further detail only made it more needlessly complicated. It mattered because Julian mattered.

He looked at me a bit longer. His eyes were so detached, he truly looked like a different person. I missed the always smirking instigator that had become my friend.

“Piper...” he said, and it seemed like he was about to say something else. Maybe he’d give an explanation. Maybe he’d finally tell me what was going on.

Instead, he sighed. “I have to go.”,

I didn’t have any other choice. I couldn’t make him look bad and hold up the play for everyone else, just because I selfishly wanted answers from Julian. So I released his arm.

He nodded, then hurried up onto the stage to finish his scene.

I felt so cold inside. I didn’t want to believe the things Bridget said, but with Julian acting so distantly, what was I to think?

Maybe he really did say those things about me.

The rest of the play went by in a rush. I felt a bit like I was in a bit of a trance, woken only when, in the final scene, Elva had her big role as a flower girl.

She was absolutely adorable, in her puffy dress, her ribbons springing along behind her as she lightly skipped across the stage. The crowd oohed and aahed, and she earned the biggest applause of the night.

In the end, Bridget and Nicholas's characters were married, and they shared another kiss on the cheek. This time, Bridget did not push for more. Good. If she had tried, I might have run- onto the stage myself and yanked her away from him.

Nicholas could handle himself, but my jealous rage was still seething. My wolf was angrily pacing within me. It couldn't wait until we had Nicholas alone and could scent him again.

When the final scene was over, the entire cast was called to the stage for a bow. I held Elva's hand, and we bowed together. The crowd cheered and cheered, a standing ovation. When Nicholas and Bridget came out last, they cheered loudest. A few flowers were thrown onto the stage.

Nathan handed Bridget a bouquet of roses as he arrived onstage. "From the King and Queen," he said.

Favoritism, once again.

I tried not to let it bother me.

After the bows, the lights came on. We were supposed to descend the stage by the front stairs and mingle with the crowd. Take pictures. Sign playbooks. Most of us did. But immediately, I noticed Nathan pull Nicholas away. I was close enough to hear.

"The King requests an audience," Nathan said.

Requests. More like demands.

Following Nathan, Nicholas weaved through the crowd toward the royal family.

Across the room, I noticed Julian making his way out the doors onto the balcony.

I had no hope of speaking to Nicholas now. I couldn't save him from a royal summons. Even if I was dying, he'd still be required to speak with the King first, before he could even visit me. The King took precedence over all.

But I could speak to Julian.

So I made sure Elva was safe with Susie, I said a few polite hellos to guests who wished to greet me and give compliments to my performance, and then I made my way to the door to the balcony.

Outside, Julian was alone. He was leaning with his elbows on the railing of the balcony. His neck was bent back, his gaze up on the stars.

I walked to his side and took a spot beside him on the railing. I looked at him for a long moment. When he didn't turn to meet my gaze, I followed his up to the stars.

"You wanted to talk," he said.

"Are you okay?" I asked. Of all the questions I had, that seemed most important.

"No," he said, without any hesitation. "Was that your only question?"

Of course it wasn't. And his answer only added to the questions I had.

But I suspected his answer was tied to where he was last night, so I decided to start there.

"What happened last night?" I asked him.

"Which part?" Julian replied. His tone was emotionless, hollow. I hated it.

“Were you with Bridget?” I asked.

The silence stretched. Perhaps that was answer enough, but I still wanted to hear him say the words.

“Julian, you can talk to me,” I said.

“What is there to talk about? What does it matter if I was with Bridget?”

“What matters is you,” I snapped. His attitude was starting to get to me. I was losing patience. “You tell me you are not okay. You are acting like a zombie. You aren’t giving me any straight answers.”

Julian was quiet a moment more. I took a huffy breath, ready to really lay into him. I turned to face him. The stars were beautiful, but I wanted to see his face while he continued to try to bulls hit me.

Julian continued to look upward. “Yes, I was with Bridget last night.”

I waited for more. When it didn’t come, I opened my mouth. “Julian,” I pressed.

“It’s fine, Piper,” Julian said. “I’m handling it.” (1)

I crossed my arms. He was dismissing me again. I was on my last nerve. This was our one chance to talk, I wasn’t about to let him get out of it this easily. Especially because it seemed more and more likely that he actually did say those things about me last night.

For him to be such a jerk now, what else could I believe?

“Why would you tell Bridget that you are only with me because you feel bad for me? That I’m a terrible person? And all the other things you said?”

Now, finally, he did turn to look at me. And finally, there was an expression on his face. Confusion.

“What?”

“Bridget said you badmouthed me,” I said.

“She talked to you?”

“Julian.” I needed him to focus. “Why would you say those things?”

He shook his head. “Piper. I swear to God, I have no idea what you are talking about.”

Chapter 445



“I didn’t say any of those things,” Julian said, after I explained exactly what Bridget had told me. “And I have no idea why Bridget would say I did.”

I didn’t either, though I had some guesses, none of them very favorable to Bridget.

“I guess I should tell you what actually happened, or you might not believe me,” he said with a self-deprecating kind of chuckle.

He didn’t have to, exactly. I could see now, just from the way he was talking about it with me, that whatever Bridget had said happened was mostly untrue. At least, the parts where he had said those terrible things about me.

It was much easier to believe that Julian had confessed his love and Bridget rejected it. I wouldn’t assume though. Julian could tell me the truth, if and when he was ready.

“I’m just worried about you,” I said. “You’ve acted so strangely today. I don’t even recognize you.”

“I guess there’s a reason for that.” Julian looked down as if ashamed. “It happened again.”

I blinked, confused. “What happened again?”

He glanced to the side now, unable to meet my gaze. “I confessed my feelings for Bridget. I told her she is the only woman I’ve ever loved. I thought if I told her the truth, she might come clean with her own feelings, one way or another.”

“You thought she might reciprocate?” I asked.

“I’ve been so confused since her arrival. Yes, she’s given Nicholas more attention, but she hasn’t ignored me. Nicholas clearly doesn’t feel for her as I do. I thought if I told her my feelings, as well as made clear that Nicholas wouldn’t care for her as I do, that she would see the light.”

That didn’t seem like a very good plan to me, an outsider. But as an objective third party, I didn’t have my feelings tangled as Julian did. My heart wasn’t on the line like his was.

I could see the writing on the wall from a mile away, but that didn’t diminish the heartache I felt for Julian now. While I wasn’t certain their love was genuine, whatever Julian felt hurt him. And I’m sorry that he couldn’t have the dream he wanted.

“She rejected you,” I said. “You’ll need time, but –”

“No,” Julian said. “That’s the thing. She didn’t.”

My thoughts came to an abrupt halt. Of all the things I had expected him to say, that hadn’t been one of them. It took a long time for my brain to restart, like I was a computer that

needed rebooted.

“She... Wait.” Even with my brain coming back online, I remained confused for a few minutes longer. “She didn’t?”

“She reciprocated,” Julian said. He pushed a hand through his hair. His face crinkled in his own uncertainty. “It was just like it was all those years ago. She told me she felt the same. She was glad that I came forward. We spent all night together, kissing and talking.”

“But...” Why was she acting that way with Nicholas today if she had spent all night kissing Julian? If she returned Julian’s long-lasting love? None of this made sense. But then I realized what Julian had said, It happened again.

Oh. Oh, no. “She didn’t,” I said.

“She did,” Julian said. His eyes met mine again, and there was a hint of sadness within them.

He didn’t usually show his emotions this blatantly. To show them here, to me, meant one of two things, or a combination of them. One, that he trusted me. Two, Bridget had totally

broken him inside.

“In the morning, with the light of the rising sun, her entire story changed,” Julian said. ” She told me that she was mistaken, or that I had heard her wrong. She said last night was fun, but that was all it was.”

He cleared his throat. I knew his next words would be particularly painful. Nothing left

Julian speechless.

Chapter 446



“She told me Nicholas was the only one for her.”

My heart cracked down the middle, just as my stomach churned. I ached for Julian's pain, while my wolf stirred within me, jealousy raging.

"I'm sorry," I told him.

"I shouldn't feel so surprised," Julian said. Both sets of fingers combed through his hair this time. "It was so similar to last time, I thought perhaps for a moment that I was trapped in some kind of curse."

The curse had a name: Bridget.

"I feel so uncertain. So... confused. Heartbroken. I don't understand." Julian began to ramble his words, another action so unlike him. "I hate feeling this way. I'm always so sure. But I don't understand. Piper, help me understand."

He looked at me and the intensity in his gaze gave me pause.

"Why would she change her mind so quickly?" he asked.

He wanted an honest answer, but I held myself back. To tell him what I honestly thought would be to blatantly badmouth the woman he loved. And though I certainly thought her deserving of it, I wasn't so certain that Julian was ready to hear the words.

The truth of it was, I thought Bridget knew from the start which of the two brothers she had desired, and merely strung Julian along. What I didn't know was why?

It could be something simple. Julian was a handsome man, and very charismatic. He was so clearly in love with Bridget, or what he thought was love. It would be so easy to pretend for a while, simply to make out with someone handsome.

But. She was an ultra-beautiful movie star. She could have anyone she wanted: movie actors, musicians... anyone. Why mess around with Julian at all?

A dark voice whispered in my mind, she's doing it to mess with you. But how could that be true? I wasn't even around when they were younger.

"I don't know, Julian," I said. I wouldn't badmouth Bridget for his sake, but I would tell him the truth of what I felt for him. That felt safer, and maybe was more of what he needed to hear anyway. "But I do know that you deserve better. True love doesn't play these games."

"I don't know. I don't know anymore. For it to happen twice..."

"I don't know what she told you last night, and I don't want to know. It's none of my business. But she's not treating you right, Julian. That I promise you."

Julian sighed loud and low. "I know that, Piper. You think I don't know that? But I'm in love with her! What am I supposed to do?"

"Have you tried not being in love with her?" I asked. His defeated tone was triggering my own impatience. "You know she treats you bad, and you are allowing it. You are enabling it, Julian! How can you continue to love her?"

"I don't know, okay? I don't know..."

I didn't know what else to do or say, and he didn't know either. We both turned back to the railing and looked up at the stars.

"I'm sorry," I said again, in the quiet of the night.

"Me, too," he said.

And though Julian's heart was breaking, things between us felt whole again.

After leaving Julian, I couldn't wait to see Nicholas, so I rushed to his room. I walked so quickly, I was nearly running, but it was midnight now. Most everyone had retired. I didn't want to draw attention to myself so I had to move slowly.

At his door, I knocked lightly. I heard shuffling within.

After a moment, the door opened slightly, and Nicholas's face appeared.

His face was drawn, seeing me.

"Go back to your room, Piper," he said, and closed the door in my

Chapter 447



Nicholas POV

"You should have kissed Bridget, Nicholas," my father said to me.

We were standing in the private rooms he shared with my mother. The King was glaring at me. The Luna was sitting at the table, busying herself with needlepoint and paying us little attention. I knew my father had her full support, however. Talks like these were usually part of a two-pronged attack.

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In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if this entire conversation hadn't been mainly my mother's

idea.

"I didn't think the play needed it," I said.

"To hell with what the play needed," the King said. His blood pressure was rising. His face was turning red. "You should have kissed her to kiss her."

"You aren't giving Bridget enough of a chance," the Luna said from the table.

I nearly sighed but held back. Like I had guessed, my mother was more involved than she pretended to be.

“Bridget and I are just friends,” I said to her, because I knew she was the one I was talking to, and that my father was just a mouthpiece to her wishes.

The Luna lowered her needlepoint down to the tabletop, then turned in her chair to face me. “This is a competition to find your Luna, Nicholas. You have no friends here.”

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Ah. There it was. My mother already chose my bride for me, now she intended to guide me into selecting the woman she’d already chosen.

The only one I really wanted, Piper, was off-limits. They had made that clear plenty of times.

Piper herself had made it clear she didn’t particularly want the job. And even I worried about bringing her and Elva into the dangerous and precarious situations such a role would require. 1

But to have the choice taken entirely

from me rankled my nerves like no other.

These competitions were such a farce. Most of these girls could go home right now and it wouldn’t make any difference. Keeping up the ruse felt dishonest.

“I thought Lilliana was the one you wanted me to pair up with,” I said.

“Don’t be smart, boy,” the King snapped.

I dipped my head a little. It wasn’t like me to speak out of turn to my parents, but this entire day had been one event after the next of people not listening to my wants and making decisions for me.

I was an Alpha. I had not just an urge, but a need to be in charge of my own life. My instinct was to protect those around me. To shield them. Not to cower behind my aging mother’s skirts and have her pick things for me.

The imagined vision made me furious. I respected my parents. Respected Bridget. I was so tired of being disrespected in turn.

The only person in the entire palace who seemed to actually respect me, other than Mark, was Piper. God, I wished I could talk to her now. She had a way of putting things in

perspective. If I only had her beside me...

But I couldn't.

I could roar in frustration. I was just going in circles, around and around again.. 2


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"Nicholas," my mother said and she was my mother now, so much softer when she acted that part, instead of that of a Queen. "Even if you only see Bridget as a friend. Who better than a friend to be your wife? She is not a stranger. You trust her. Your heart could melt for her over time."

I couldn't believe that. Bridget had always been my friend, and though I could admit her beauty, I never truly desired her, not once I realized what desire truly looked like. When I had been young, I had thought myself in love. But then I met Piper, and I learned what love truly was.

Yet, I couldn't fully deny the logic behind her words. If I excluded Piper from the running, most of the women here, even those I had dated, remained strangers to me. Lilliana never allowed me to see her true self. And Olivia's true self was to meld herself into the moment. I hadn't seen beyond her hard shell.





Bridget was my friend. She had my trust. Though I didn't think love would form from it, couldn't deny it would be a good match. Bridget would be a good Luna.

I

However, I did not think she would be a good wife. And that kept me from agreeing to the match.

That, and my desire for Piper. I knew we needed to end things, but how could I? If I could keep her by my side longer, simply by turning all others away, I would.

"There's no secret that Bridget's presence has helped quell some of the unrest in the kingdom," the King said. "Her continued presence in the palace could only help us moving forward."

He was right. I fucking hated it but he was right.

"Speak to her," the Luna said. Her cold, queenly exterior had returned.

"Perhaps she can

convince

where we could not."

"I will speak to her in the morning," I said. I really needed to rest tonight and clear my head. I didn't want to jump into something while my head felt so muddled.

"Speak to her now," the Luna commanded. "She is waiting in your rooms."

It was against the rules for the candidates to be in the princes' rooms without their express permission. It seemed my mother had trumped that rule without my consent.

Another choice ripped from my hands. Another disrespect.

I dipped my head low, because I didn't trust my voice anymore. A growl was brewing in the back of my throat. For anyone, even a prince, to growl at the Luna would not go unpunished.

I left their room without another word. I didn't want to speak with Bridget, but I reasoned I could talk to her and tell her to come back in the morning.

I opened the door to my rooms and walked in. Bridget was waiting in a chair and immediately jumped up at my arrival. I closed the door behind me.

"I know this can't be what you had planned," she began. She must have been prepped for this conversation, likely by my mother. Not letting me get a word in, even to say hello, was likely part of their strategy. "It's not what I had in mind either."

"Bridget..." (1

She walked to me, closing the distance faster than I would have liked. I held my ground though, and stood taller. I would be defiant in whatever small ways I could be.

"Your friendship is important to me, Nicholas. So I want to stay by your side. And who knows?" She lifted a hand and traced it down the length of my forearm. "Maybe someday it could be love."

No. It wouldn't.

Not while Piper was a person that existed in the world. Even if she and I could never be together, she was the only one I wanted in my heart. Even if that made me lonely. Even if Piper eventually moved on.

Piper was my heart.

I opened my mouth, ready to turn Bridget down as gently as I could – or at least, set the record straight.

But then there was a knock on the door. I went to it, drew it open, and there stood Piper. 1

For her to find me in here, this late, with Bridget, made my heart sink, coated in black ink. Piper would be hurt, and she would have right to be.

Especially with the careless things I had said to her before.

Here she was, ready to give me another chance, and I had to turn her down flat.

“Go back to your room, Piper,” I said, and closed the door.

Chapter 449



“Nicholas? Who is it?” came a voice from within Nicholas’s room. A female voice. One I recognized.

Bridget.

My stomach shot into my throat so quickly, I thought I might be sick.

Suddenly, before I could even think to react, the door opened, and Bridget was standing there. Nicholas was behind her, hand on the door like he had tried to stop her, but she dipped under his arm.

“Oh. Piper! What a surprise! What are you doing so late?” Bridget’s tone was friendly enough, but there was a sharpness in her eyes that I was learning only appeared when she was particularly irritated. She must have been tired, as well, to let it show through so obviously.

—

"I... uh..." I hadn't been expecting to run into Bridget or anyone other than Nicholas tonight, so I didn't have an excuse prepared. I wracked my brain. "I just wanted to... congratulate Nicholas... on his performance tonight."

—

The lie was weak, and I hated saying it. What did I even need an excuse for? Bridget was the one who needed an excuse!

"Why, uh... Might I ask why you are here so late?" I asked.

"Oh, that's easy," Bridget said. "Nicholas and I were just talking about the nuances of our new relationship."

"Bridget," Nicholas said, none too gently. There was a growl in his voice.

"She should know," Bridget told him. "Or did you mean to keep it a secret longer?" Then she looked at me and winked. "You won't tell anyone about this, right, Piper?"

"I..." I had no idea what to say. To have too big of a reaction would be to give myself away. But I was not a good actress. I didn't know how to properly hide the horror and heartbreak

from my face.

"Oh, dear, don't worry," Bridget said. "The competition will go on as before. No one will know that the end is already fixed." Another wink.

"That's enough, Bridget," Nicholas said, some of his Alpha tone seeped out.

Bridget's smile never wavered, though she did stop speaking. I doubted it was because of the Alpha command. It was more likely because of the complete one-two punch of her words. What was there left to say that hadn't been said?

In a few brief sentences, she'd indicated she was going to be the one to become Luna, that Nicholas was on board, and that I would be strung along the rest of the competition and eventually kicked out. 1

And each of those words stabbed into me like a sharp object between my ribs, tearing at my heart.

I looked to Nicholas, hoping he would deny her declarations. He stared back at me, a hard expression in his eyes. Typically, I could read Nicholas, at least enough to have some base idea what he was thinking. Now, though, he was entirely shut off.

Behind his golden gaze, there was a wall. Even the forest green flecks in his irises seemed grim.

For him to stand there and not deny it meant either it was true, or that he wanted Bridget to

believe it was true. The difference didn't seem to matter much in the moment.

For my part, there was nothing I could say that would make much difference one way or the other. Bridget seemed sure. And I could break down and ask Nicholas the questions I wanted to in her presence.

Questions like, what about us? What about those things you said? What changed? Why now?

Maybe the answers would have only served to break my heart further.

So I did the only option that I felt was open to me in that moment. I turned. And I ran away before my tears could fall.

I didn't know where I was going. I hated that I kept finding myself in this situation. Heartbroken as I was, I couldn't return to my room. I didn't want to

worry Elva, or alarm her that anything was wrong. But I did need a few minutes to pull myself together.

Chapter 450



My wolf was rampaging in my mind, begging me to run, to be free, to give myself over to my natural side and forget myself and my worries for a while.

I was on the edge, so close to giving over. I needed to go to someone, but I didn't know how. Nicholas had made me promise that I would go to him when I was feeling like this, but that wasn't possible now.

Susie was always an option, but she had her own troubles to worry about. And likely Mark was with her, especially since I didn't see him with Nicholas and I knew he wasn't watching my room tonight.

Veronica was another choice. She was likely locked up in the library for another long night of research. The thought of joining her there was usually a soothing nothing. But right now it made my skin crawl. I wanted to be free, not confined to a box.

It was that notion that drove me out into the gardens, where I knew Julian was lurking. Before I had earlier left him, he had expressed his own desire not to return to his room tonight. He said he had a lot of thinking to do.

I didn't blame him. What I hadn't expected was that I would end up with a lot of thinking to do too, now.

Letting my feet guide me, and maybe my heart guide my feet, I flew down the staircase.

At the doorway leading outside, Brian stood guard. When he saw me coming, he wordlessly stood to the side and pushed open the door for me. He didn't even ask me what I wanted or why I was crying. Nor did he ask Julian if I was allowed into his space at such a late hour.

Brian, somehow, seemed to have an innate ability to know everything, like he had eyes and ears everywhere. Maybe he knew about Bridget and Nicholas. Maybe he knew I would come looking for Julian.

Maybe he didn't know, and was simply letting me speak to Julian anyway. I didn't know.

I nodded my head in thanks as I passed him and entered the gardens. This late, only the string lights woven through the foliage lit the pathways. The moonlight above cast a soft glow, illuminating the edges of the otherwise imperceptible edges of night.

The shadowy visage of Julian stood out from the darkened flowers and trees because of this

moonlight.

His back was to me. As I approached, his gaze was up at the moon. He didn't look at me

approaching, though he must have sensed my presence by now.

I wished I was calm, so that I could appreciate the view better. The stars were so much brighter here than back home in the city. But my heart was recently shattered, and I was barely holding together the agony swelling within me. As well as the wild.

So I do what I had wanted to do in Nicholas's doorway. I covered my face with my hands and I sobbed so loudly that my lungs hurt.

Julian, alarmed, immediately turned to me. "Piper? What's wrong?"

"I didn't... I don't..." My thoughts were a mess. I struggled to hold myself together long enough to speak. "I went to see Nicholas... Bridget was there."

He stiffened.

"I want to run. Nick said to go to him... when this happened. But... But... what do I do when he's the cause?"

Julian gripped me by the shoulders.

I looked up into his eyes.

I wouldn't. F—For Elva."

"I want to run, Julian. But I promised you and I promised Nick that

It was only thoughts of Elva now that kept me gripping to the edge of my humanity. But Julian looked down into my eyes and told me, "Let's run."