

THE LUNA CHOOSING GAME

Chapter 451



“R–run?” I must have reached the point of my wild–temptation where I was beginning to hallucinate, because there was no way that Julian had actually just suggested to me that we go for a run, here, now, by the light of the moonlight.

“I’m serious,” he said.

“But... last time...” I didn’t need to remind him that last time I had let free my wolf, I had disappeared for three days. A search party had been sent out to find me. It was Julian himself who had finally caught up with me and convinced me to return to my human form.

Now, the same man was suggesting I do it again? 1

The temptation was pure and raw. It pulsed in the back of my mind loudly, like someone beating on a bass drum back behind my thoughts. The rhythm was alluring. My wolf had already fallen prey to the call. I was so close, I felt like I was holding on with my fingernails. “It’s dangerous,” I said. “I could

>>

Julian held

my upper arms in a tight grip. “You won’t. I won’t let you.” His gaze was steady, clear and confident in a way it hadn’t been since Bridget’s arrival. “I will be with you every step, and I will bring you back to yourself before it’s too late.”

I didn't want to argue, but, "The call is so strong. What if I don't listen to you?"

(C

"You will," Julian said, and his excess of confidence blossomed some within me as well. Listen to me, piper. I will be able to call your back. This thing you've been doing... Trying to fully ignore the call. It's not good for you. Or your wolf. Totally ignoring your wolf is not going to help you bond with it."

I tried to see through my own delirium to assess whether what he was saying made sense or not. It was difficult, but, yes. Yes, that could be true. My wolf and I were bonding slowly, but I almost felt a sense of resentment from it. Too long, I've been keeping it locked away inside of me as if in a cage. 2

One of the things I'd promised I wouldn't do when I reclaimed it, knowing what it had suffered at the hands of my sister Jane.

"We have wolves," Julian said. "We have to use them. It's natural."

I nodded at once. "Okay."

Maybe I was surrendering too quickly. Maybe I should have fought more. But I trusted

Julian, trusted his judgement, and I was so on-edge, I would have easily agreed to anything

at all.

"Okay," Julian replied. He released me, and together we looked out at the woods beyond the garden. "Ready?"

I shifted in wolf-form as my reply. A heartbeat later, he did the same, and together we rushed into the night, two wolves lost to the call of the wild and the pounding of their own paws against the forest bed.

For a time, I left myself to the mercy of my wolf, letting it guide me. Our natural instinct took over, though when we began to veer too far, Julian was quickly there, nipping and barking to bring us back onto the path he'd decided.

He was an Alpha, so my wolf immediately fell in line.

Julian was true to his word, guiding me along, never letting me disappear too far.

He led us down pathways I didn't know about, and eventually stopped at the side of a small, secluded lake I had never seen before. Well, me personally. My wolf might have seen it during those three days I lost myself. But I hadn't been mentally present to remember.

Julian shifts back into his human form. Then he begins taking off his clothes.

"What are you doing?" I asked, realizing suddenly that I had shifted too. When had I done that? I didn't even know. Perhaps Julian, the Alpha, had told my wolf to bring me back to the forefront. Or perhaps my wolf realized by itself that now was the time.

Chapter 452



Either way, I was now here, standing in my human form, watching Julian unbutton his shirt.

Julian glanced backwards at me and waggled his eyebrows. "I thought it would be nice to

go

for a swim."

“And you are going to get naked to do that?” I asked.

Last button unbuttoned, he shucked his shirt off down his arms. Then he folded it nicely and placed it over his suit coat. When he reached for his belt, I immediately swiveled. Blushing, I put my back to him.

I had seen enough already to be embarrassed. Julian had a slimmer physique than Nicholas, but he was still toned and handsome. That much bare skin nearly set my face aflame.

“You wouldn’t have me wet my clothes, would you?” Julian said, a laugh in his voice. “I could get sick!”

Even though I have my back to him, I still covered my eyes. “Julian!”

He laughed, loud and strong. “Fine. I’ll leave my boxers on.” Then his voice dropped lower, sultry and dangerous. “Why don’t you join me, Piper? A good moonlight swim always clears the head.”

I shouldn’t. I really shouldn’t.

But the moon was bright, and with all the wild freedom pulsing through my veins, I couldn’t really resist. Especially with the promise we would be keeping on our underwear.

A heard a splash behind me, and turned to look. Julian was already in the water.

“Come on, Piper!” he called. “Live a little! While we’re still alive!”

“Turn around!” I called back to him.

“What? Why?”

“I can’t undress with you watching!”

Even at this distance, and even with the darkness, I could still tell that he rolled his eyes at me. Yet, because he was a gentleman at heart, no matter how much he tried to convince others otherwise, he turned his back to me.

I hastily undressed and threw my clothes into a pile rather than folding them. Truthfully, I

knew he was a gentleman at heart, but I didn't fully trust that playboy to not at least sneak a peek.

I jumped into the water a moment later, making a splash that crashed down over Julian. He turned toward me, just as my head resurfaced above water.

"Holy shit! It's freezing!" I cried. God, it was like ice water prickling my skin.

"You're being dramatic," he said, but this close I could see his teeth chatter.

"You jerk! You tricked me to come in here!"

"All I did was suggest it! A little cold water does a world of good. Good for the heart."

He was making that up entirely. I glared at him as I waded my way over to the edge of the water. He laughed as he followed me out.

Fortunately the night air was warm, so we were not in much danger of catching colds. Even so, Julian handed me his suit jacket.

"Use it as a towel," he said. So I did, patting myself gently down, then I handed it back to him so he could do the same. I avoided looking at him as much as I could.

After we dried, we changed back into our clothes. Then he laid down side by side at the bank of the lake and looked up at the starlight.

"It's a shame," he said.

I turned my head to the side, to look over at him. "What is?"

He didn't look back. "If we had met each other first, maybe we would have fallen in love with each other, and none of this heartbreak would have happened." (1

I looked away, back up to the stars. It didn't matter now, I supposed. Maybe he was right. Maybe he wasn't.

It would only hurt to think about what could have been.

Silence lingered between us. It was comfortable but a bit sad. Bittersweet, maybe.

"How do we move forward from this, Julian?" I asked. "How do I heal my heart?" Julian said, "If I knew that, Piper, I would have done it long ago."

Chapter 453



Julian and I stayed out in the woods until just before dawn, when we finally made our way back toward the palace. Just as we broke the tree lines and came into the field on the outside of the gardens, Julian stilled. I stopped beside him and looked at him curiously.

His gaze seemed to be fixed on something, so I followed the length of it to see Nicholas walking toward us. His hands were curled into fists. His shoulders were straight, tense. His jaw was locked and his mouth a hard line. His golden eyes were burning with anger, visible even in the dim light.

Sp

Mark followed along behind Nicholas, speaking to him but not touching him. Nicholas didn't acknowledge Mark at all.

“Julian...” I said, half in warning, half because I wasn’t sure what else to say.

“It will be fine,” Julian said. His gaze was fixed on his brother. His own body was beginning to tense. We’d been up all night. He must have been exhausted. But you would have never guessed it looking at him like this. His focus was intense.

As Nicholas approached, I saw the rage in him. His muscles were flexing wildly, visible even though his tight button-up shirt and slacks. He looked to be on the verge of shifting.

“Nick,” I began. His gaze slid to me for only a moment, yet in that moment, I could feel the heat of his anger. It didn’t feel like it was directed at me, however. Instead, as he looked again at Julian, that anger emerged as a deep, guttural growl.

“How dare you,” Nicholas growled.

“What do you care if Piper and I were out all night?” Julian scoffed. “I heard you spent the night with someone on your own.”

Nicholas growl amplified. “You defiled Piper.”

“Oh? Did I?” Julian smirked. It was sharp.

“Nick,” I said again, more forcefully. I wasn’t defiled. We only looked at the stars.

“Stay out of this, Piper,” Julian said, stopping me from explaining. “My brother and I are

due for a chat.” To Nicholas, he said, “On with it then.”

“Step back, Piper,” Nicholas said.

“But —”

“Do what he says, Piper,” Julian added in. He glanced at me. “It’s alright.”

“No, I refuse to stand by and let you two fight over —”

Suddenly, Mark was in front of me. He slowly ushered me back away from the two brothers.

I grabbed his arm to try to get him out of the way, but the man was an immovable wall. Even with my new werewolf strength, Mark wouldn't budge.

“They wouldn't want you hurt,” he said.

“But it's okay for them?” I asked.

He didn't get to answer because, behind him, Nicholas shifted and pounced at Julian. Julian shifted just in time to meet him, and they met each other with fur and claws and teeth.

“No!” I called and tried to lunge forward.

Mark grabbed me around the waist to yank me back.

“Getting between two enraged werewolves is a terrible idea, Piper,” he said.

“Just let them sort it out.”

“Like this?”

“It's the only way,” Mark said.

That made very little sense to me. If Julian had just told Nicholas that nothing had happened between him and me, then... well, Nicholas probably wouldn't believe him. Even if I said it, Nicholas wouldn't believe it. He was too far gone to his jealousy.

But right did he have to be jealous, anyway?

He had been with Bridget last night, and though I doubted they had sex, they would someday if she was to become his Luna.

A tightness wrapped around my stomach and squeezed. I tried to ignore it.

“Why would Nicholas think Julian and I had sex anyway?” I asked Mark.

Mark gave me a flat look. “You were out all night, which made Nicholas worry. But then when you returned, you reek of Julian.”

I still struggled to understand. Even if I smelled like Julian, Nicholas usually approached these things with either calmness or passionate kisses.

“I’ve never seen him jump into a fight,” I said.

Before us, Nicholas and Julian toppled over each other, then they back off to circle around. Their strong wolves healed quickly, so even the ugliest of wounds didn’t last. It still hurt my heart to see blood drawn on either of them.

“Nicholas has been pushed to the brink the past few days,” Mark said. “His calm façade is finally starting to crack. Even he can only take so much. I also suspect that —”

“Nicholas!” Bridget called from the gardens. Despite her loud shout, she seemed rather calm for the werewolf fight she walked into. She carried a cup of tea and a saucer as she casually made her way toward me. “Are those two fighting again?”

Obviously. But, “Again?” I asked.

Bridget shrugged. “They used to do this all the time when we were younger. Sibling rivalry, you know? Fighting helps them get it out of their system.”

She sipped from her tea.

I looked at Mark, urging him to continue what he was saying, but with Bridget’s presence now, he closed his mouth and did not open it again. I wondered if what he was going to say had anything to do with Bridget herself.

It seemed likely.

“Piper,” Bridget said, reclaiming my attention. “You know how protective Nicholas is of

those he cares about.”

“I do,” I said.

“Then you knew how your disappearance would affect him,” Bridget said. She lifted her tea cup to her lips but did not drink from it. “That’s in very poor taste, Piper.”

Was I... being lectured by Bridget? What kind of bizarre world was this?

And how did either of them even know I was missing? Last I saw either of them, they were in Nicholas’s room together, and Nicholas had told me to leave. Dawn was only just now cresting over the trees, so they wouldn’t have noticed my absence at breakfast yet.

The only explanation was that if Nicholas came to my room to check on me. But that seemed too far– fetched. After his cool dismissal, I couldn’t imagine him making his way to my room. Perhaps he sent an apology letter through a messenger? But then, where was the message?

I shook my head. This was all too much, and I could barely focus as the fight continued to unfold in front of me.

Julian snapped at Nicholas’s throat, but Nicholas jumped out of the way at the last moment. Nicholas was a bigger wolf, likely stronger too, but Julian was faster, leaner, with no lack of his own strength.

They were both strong killing machines.

“I need to correct this misunderstanding,” I said.

Mark still had his arm out, physically blocking my path like he expected me to jump into the fray at any moment. He did not offer the same warning to Bridget, who continued to nonchalantly sip her tea.

“If

you want my opinion,” Bridget began.

.

Truthfully, her opinion was the very last thing that I cared to know, but I kept my mouth shut: Fighting with Bridget didn’t mean anything to me right now. My focus was primarily on Nicholas

Julian

Until she said, “Since Nicholas and I are together now, you should just leave Nicholas alone.”

Chapter 454



Julian and Nicholas continued to barrage each other with different attacks. Fur flew. Teeth chomped. Claws slashed, drawing blood.

At each overly–vicious blow, delivered by each of the two brothers, I flinched forward, wanting to stop the fighting. But Mark’s extended arm kept me from impulsively rushing forward, and in those few moments of hesitation, I remembered Mark’s warning.

Stepping between two fighting werewolves, Alphas no less, was a dangerous proposition. The two princes could quickly heal from each other’s inflicted wounds, but I wouldn’t be so lucky.

And, as I watch more closely, I noticed that even the bloody wounds given were not given purposefully deep. It was though, even as they lashed out at

each other in rage, they held themselves back as well, never giving wounds too serious to not immediately heal.

Beside me, Bridget was calmly sipping her tea. Maybe she had noticed that already, and that was why she was so calm. If she knew them both as children and young adults, and if she had borne witness to these fights in the past, she would know from experience that, even angry, the two brothers wouldn't seriously harm each other.

Again, I felt jealousy rise within me. I wished that I had known them when they were young. wished I could be as ingrained in their memories as Bridget was.

Eventually, Julian and Nicholas backed away from each other. They were huffing deep breaths from their efforts.

Nicholas shifted back to his human form first. His face and clothes were covered in dirt and grass— stains and dried blood, but there were no outward bruises or cuts. His face did, however, remain contorted in anger. He was still absolutely furious.

He didn't say a word, just glared at Julian. Then, he turned from all of us and stormed back toward the palace.

Every muscle in my body itched to follow him and set all misunderstandings straight, but I forcibly held myself back. I doubted I would be welcome.

Bridget looked at me. "Think about what I said, Piper. You really should be more responsible." Then she followed Nicholas, walking as casually as she had when she arrived.

Mark sighed. He nodded at me, then hurried after his master, giving Bridget a wide berth as he passed her.

—

Now alone with Julian, I looked over at him. He was still in wolf form until he sat down in the grass. Then, abruptly he shifted into human form. Like Nicholas, he was covered in dirt and grim, dried blood and some grass, but no bruises or cuts.

He laughed as he rubbed some of the dirt away from his cheek, where early Nicholas had struck him hard. "I forgot how jarring Nicholas's right hook is." He laughed. "I guess I deserved it."

Relieved they were both unharmed after such a vicious-looking fight, I flopped down onto my backside on the grass beside him.

I

"You didn't deserve it," I said.

"I kept you out all night," Julian said. "Made him worry. Made him think I took your virginity."

I looked away, toward the tree line. The rising sun hadn't yet reached high enough to break through the many limbs and leaves of the forest canopy. It was dark as night among the tree trunks.

"He has no right to be angry about that," I said.

"Sure," Julian snorted. "Forget that the man is in love with you."

I slouched my shoulders. "He's not in love with me."

"Piper," Julian began, but I didn't want to hear his reasoning. Not now, when it made so little difference.

"He's with Bridget," I said. "He can't be in love with me."

Julian rubbed his jaw next. "Guy doesn't fight like that if he's not pissed. And a guy doesn't get that pissed if he's not jealous as hell. And a guy doesn't get jealous as hell if he has no feelings for you."

I deep, full bodied sigh escaped me. I truly didn't know what to believe. But I knew for a fact that it really didn't matter. If Nicholas had feelings for me, as Julian suggested, then he had to bury them for the sake of the crown.

And if he had to hide his true feelings for a crown, then what use was it to think too much on whether his feelings were real or not.

"By the way," Julian said. "What did Bridget say to you? I saw her standing there next to you. I saw the two of you talking."

Oh, no. How could I tell him? But I guessed that I had to. His heart was as tangled in this mess as mine was. We had an unspoken pact between us to share what we discovered about Nicholas and Bridget together when we discovered it, no matter how much it might hurt. I couldn't go

back on that now.

"She gave me a bit of a warning, I'd say," I told him. "She said... Well..." I inhaled a great breath. It was painful even to repeat it. "She said that since she and Nicholas are together now, I should just leave him alone."

"Well, shit," Julian said, curtly. He turned his head from me. "Guess that's that then."

"T

guess so." Bridget's confirming the relationship eliminated any remaining sliver of hope that the relationship between her and Nicholas had been something in my imagination. At least, that hope was cut for Julian. Me, personally? I still wanted to hear it from Nicholas.

Though I knew I was likely kidding myself.

"What if we just avoided everyone else for the rest of eternity," Julian said. "Start over with new names, new faces. Or hide forever."

If it was just me, I might be tempted, but I had Elva to consider. As appealing as it was to run from my problems forever, I knew it wasn't possible. Julian likely did too. Sometimes he did things like this, talked just for the sake of it.

He loved his outrageous plans.

"Where would we go? Who would we be?" I asked, joining in on the fun. The idea of an escape, however impossible, was a fun change of mind. I'd rather talk about silly dreams than about things that continued to hurt us.

He laughed a little, though it sounded a tiny bit sad. "We could be whoever we want to be, Piper."

That seemed unlikely. How would we live without money? I tried to picture Julian attempting to work an everyday job, and couldn't quite picture it. A prince as a waiter? Or working in retail, getting hassled by costumers?

The vision made me laugh.

He looked at me. "What?"

and

—

"Nothing," I said, not wanting to offend him or worse. He might see my vision as a challenge go out to attempt to prove me wrong. "Though there are some obvious flaws in the plan."

"I suppose," he admitted. "It's nice to think about, though."

"It is," I said.

There were many reasons to stay where we were. Elva's health, for one. Less dramatically, we still needed to learn the results of the theater event. They'd likely be released soon.

"I have to stay and see this through," I said.

“Yeah,” Julian said, and some bitterness seeped into his voice. “Yeah, me too.”

Chapter 455



Not long after I parted with Julian and returned to my room to change, I was alerted that the candidates were to report to the foyer to receive the results of the theater event. I had expected the results to come quickly, but this seemed extra fast.

Though with Bridget the professional actress among the group, maybe the royal family and the producers didn't need all that much time to determine who deserved the highest ranking.

Running on zero sleep, I was tired as I changed into fresh clothes and moved a little slower than usual as I headed down to the foyer.

Mark must have told Susie about the fight between Nicholas and Julian because no sooner had I entered the room, then she came rushing up to me.

She looped her arm through one of mine and asked, “What happened?”

“I don't know what to say,” I said. “Nicholas saw Julian and me coming out of the woods and attacked Julian right away. He barely said anything, and he didn't listen to reason.”

“He must have been furious,” Susie said.

>>

“He was,” I agreed. “But if he would have just listened to me, I could have told him that nothing happened between Julian and me...”

Susie blinked, startled, like she hadn't been expecting that. "Nothing happened?"

Now I was startled and looked at her in shock. "You thought something had?"

Susie looked a little sheepish, like she was embarrassed by what she had thought. "That's what all the rumors are saying?"

"Rumors?" I gasped. Who the hell was going around talking about this? Julian wouldn't have said a word, and I doubted Nicholas would have.

"I didn't believe them at first," Susie said, "But after Mark told me about the fight this morning, I wasn't so sure they were false anymore. Nicholas isn't the type to fight over nothing, no matter how on edge Mark says he is."

I hummed. Mark had said something similar to me this morning, that Nicholas had been pushed too far and was starting to crack under the pressure. It wasn't any of my business anymore, Bridget had made that clear. Though I did still worry about him. Fighting was so out of character for him.

"Did Mark tell you about the rumors?" I asked.

"No, I heard it just from people talking. Everyone was saying it," Susie said. "I have no idea who started it."

I still wasn't sure of the timeline, but the only other person who knew I had been out with Julian all night was Bridget. I slid my gaze to her now, and found her looking back at me.

She had an air of innocence, and when our eyes met, she smiled kindly, as if greeting a friend. She even waved.

It was so surreal, especially after her words this morning. I didn't know what else to do but

raise one of my free hands and wave back.

“You don’t think...” Susie whispered. “Bridget started the rumor?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

Nathan appeared and took to the stage. He had cameras with him this time, even though Nicholas and Julian were noticeably absent.

Susie and I walked closer to the stage, where we met with Veronica, who was standing with Tiffany and Jessica, who seemed to have bonded over their shared stage experience. I wasn’t opposed to having more friends, so I greeted Jessica kindly. She said hello to me too.

Nathan stepped up to the microphone, then tapped on it to get our attention. We all quieted down to listen to his words.

“I have here in my hands the results of the event.” He held up a sheet of paper, while discreetly keeping the written side hidden from both us and the cameras. “There have been some shifts in the current rankings of our candidates. And of course, the addition of Bridget has added fresh excitement.”

Nathan began clapping, then indicated that the rest of us should join him. Some did, politely. I did, a little. As did Susie, Tiffany, and Jessica. Veronica abstained, as well as Olivia and Lilliana. Bridget smiled brightly.

“Thank you, everyone,” she said, likely pretending she didn’t notice those not clapping.

Nathan continued, “Bridget’s performance, of course, stole the show. Absolutely wonderful, Bridget. You are a truly talented artisan, and a gift to the kingdom.”

“Thank you, Nathan,” Bridget said. The camera zoomed in on her face. She blew it a kiss.

“You are very welcome.” Nathan cleared his throat as he consulted his paper. “This, of course, brings Bridget straight to the top of the rankings, and bumps down Olivia from the lead, as well as dropping everyone else down one point. Now, for the other changes.”

One by one, he named a candidate and then gave a brief critique of their performance during the event and how it now effected their placement in the rankings.

Susie received credit for her one line and her ability to appear nervous as the scene dictated. But since her scene was so brief, she received a medium amount of points. This, fortunately, moved her up closer to center in the rankings.

Tiffany, who never could seem to manage her voice on the stage, dropped down to the bottom. She seemed visibly upset. Jessica, who did much better, patted her shoulder in comfort.

When it came to be my turn, Nathan sighed.

“Piper, your commitment to the role was unreliable. Your character on stage seemed more

like

you than the actual character you were supposed to have played. It seemed as if you were constantly distracted. The royal family feels that you did not put your all into this event.”

))

My heart dropped down to the ground. How could that be? I did the best I could! And I had such a large role, that surely they would give more leniency?

But no

it seemed not. And I didn't know how I could ever argue with the royal family.

As I stood there confused, the meeting ended. The others began to fan out, which was when Nathan stepped down from the stage and approached me. I expected that he might give me further insight into why the royal family would think so poorly about my performance.

For not being a professional actress, for having no experience at all, I thought I did quite well. Even Bridget had once complimented me, especially during the breakup scene between Nicholas's character and mine.

"Piper," Nathan said. His face had fallen since the cameras had turned off. He looked so serious now. I braced myself. Maybe this wasn't an explanation after all. Maybe he wanted to summon me in front of the King again.

My heartbeat sped up. I really didn't want to face the King and Queen alone again anytime soon. That almost always ended in disaster for me. And if Nicholas wouldn't be there to save

me...

I really didn't want to think about it.

"I have a message from the King and Queen for you," he said.

I swallowed hard. "Yes?"

"They do not care what you and Julian get up to in secret," he said. He sneered a little in obvious disgust. "But you must have more discretion."

"It's not like —"

"I did not ask for an explanation," Nathan snapped.

I shut my mouth.

"And one last message, from the Luna herself," he continued.

I nodded, wordlessly telling him I was ready to hear the message.

“She said to ask you, ‘Have you no sense of self-respect?’ She does not expect an answer.”

Chapter 456



“I didn’t sleep with Julian,” I said quickly, before Nathan could talk over me again. It felt imperative to say so now, knowing that even the Luna was out here believing the gossip. ”

That was a rumor that })

“Do not lie to my face, Piper,” Nathan snapped. “I am a respected Beta of the King of this land.”

“I’m not lying

“The Luna does not include deception among her characteristics,” Nathan continued. “That you are continuing to persist with this blatant lying insults us both.”

He was insulted? How? I was the one being accused of being a liar, and some kind of harlot who was so blasé as to through her conquest in everyone’s face. None of these people know me at all! I would never do something like that! If I had slept with Julian, I would have been discreet. (1

Like how Nicholas and I were...

Before.

I sunk into myself standing there, being berated by Nathan, and by extension the King and Queen. The accusations were hurtful, but nothing hurt worse than knowing that Nicholas believed them too.

As I stood there, swallowed by grief, something else began to fester inside of me. What had Mark said about Nicholas? That he was tired of being pushed around?

Well, I was tired of being pushed around too. (2)

So I straightened my shoulders once more, swallowed down my fear, looked Nathan right in

eye and said, "I am not lying."

the

His brow twitched. His frown deepened. It seemed the only thing my statement had accomplished was to make him even angrier. But I didn't care. If he didn't believe me, that was on him. Not on me. I wouldn't go down placidly. I would fight for everyone to know the truth. 1

"You little, deceitful –"Nathan began, so angry his face was turning red.

"Nathan."

Nathan and I both turned in time to see Bridget walk toward us. She wasn't all that far away, close enough to hear, especially with our raised voices. I wondered how much she had listened to. Maybe she heard everything.

"Allow me to say a few words on Piper's behalf," she said.

I blinked, surprised. Why in the world would she want to defend me?

Nathan crossed his arms. He seemed to actually be considering listening to her, in a gesture he wouldn't offer to me.

I wasn't surprised. The royal family's favoritism to Bridget knew no limits. Meanwhile, their dislike of me had been well-expressed since the beginning. I tried not to let it bother me, but I couldn't help but feel a certain level of jealousy.

If they had liked me at all, maybe I wouldn't be in this position at all. Maybe I could have been with Nicholas from the start without any issue.

But maybe didn't mean anything. There was no changing what was. And what was, was that the royal family hated me and loved Bridget. And I didn't see any way that would change.

Nathan nodded, and that was all the permission Bridget needed to start talking.

"You mustn't forget that Piper is not like us. She is not from our class, so she likely doesn't understand the need for discretion and subtlety like we do."

Nathan nodded like that made sense.

Meanwhile, I was seething. What kind of defense was this? One built on tearing me down?

I wanted to speak up on my own behalf, if only to defend myself from this defense, but looking at Nathan, I could see that this tactic was fully working on him. Bridget was entirely convincing him that I was some foolish girl who just didn't know any better.

"If it would make you and the royal family feel better," she said, "I will speak to her on your behalf. I will emphasize our values."

"That would be the best avenue forward," Nathan said. He shot me a look.

"You would do well to learn from Bridget."

I bit back a sharper replay, recognizing it would get me nowhere. Like most political games, you have to play nice to get ahead.

So I said, "Yes, sir," while I seethed inside.

Nathan nodded to each of us, then bid Bridget a good day, and walked good day, and walked away from us.

With Nathan gone, Bridget looked at me and sighed.

"I didn't sleep with Julian," I said. I felt like I was a broken record now, on a loop.

Bridget shrugged. "It really doesn't matter if you did or not.

Watching her

open indifference made a pit open up in my stomach

not out of care for

myself, but for Julian. If he knew how little she cared about the prospect of he and I being intimate, it would break his heart.

So in its place, mine broke for him.

"What matters," she continued, "is that everyone thinks you did. The rumors can be more harmful than the truth, especially depending on how you handle them." 1

I supposed she would know. As a famous actress, she likely had experiences I never would have dreamed of having. Likely all kinds of strangers had made all kinds of accusations about her.

Yet, this 'advice' of hers didn't feel like it was given out of the goodness of her heart. Instead, it felt like she was being critical.

I was mishandling my own defense, apparently. To her, truth wasn't the answer.

Since I wasn't entirely sure if she wasn't the one who started the rumors, I wasn't going to sit around and listen to her opinions.

However, she did save me from Nathan, one way or another. I had to be grateful for that.

"Thank you

for your help, just now," I said. I nodded toward the door Nathan had disappeared through.

"Yes," she said, and that was the only warning I had that a thank you would not be enough." Favors should be repaid with favors, don't you agree?"

I swallowed hard. "What exactly do you want?"

Bridget's smile slipped. She seemed more serious now than I had ever seen her before as she stared straight into my eyes. "Avoid Nicholas at all costs."

I froze.

"We're a couple now, moving toward a hopeful future," Bridget said. "Your presence seems to consistently muck things up. So return the favor, and leave him alone. For his future, and for the sake of the kingdom."

She was deathly serious. There was no counter I could offer. My desire to be near Nicholas was one of total selfishness. I knew I was never going to be his Luna. His future didn't include me.

I'd fought it for so long, wanting to hold on to Nicholas as long as possible. But maybe Bridget was right. Maybe it was past time for me to let go.

We were always set to say goodbye eventually.

Despite my mixed feelings about Bridget personally, and my confusion over all the mind- games she seemed to like playing, she and Nicholas would make a

good pair. She was well- liked and crafty. She could survive in a world of cut-throat double-faces. She already existed there.

Yet even as I opened my mouth, I couldn't make it form the words that would have Nicholas leave my life forever.

"I'll think about it," I said. It was the best I could do.

Bridget's eyes narrowed.

"See that you do," she said, and made it sound like a threat.

Chapter 457



After receiving Bridget's warning, I didn't know what to do. I couldn't risk running into Nicholas, which meant avoiding the places we usually went together. Instead, I ended up in the library with Veronica.

Veronica didn't seem surprised to see me when I joined her. She didn't even really greet me.

As I sat down across from her at the table, the books piled high around her, she lifted her head, looked at me, and said, "I've made progress with teleportation."

"You have?"

"I understand enough that I have been making attempts at it."

She'd been researching so hard for so long, I was beginning to wonder if the secret to Hawk's teleportation would never be uncovered. Yet here Veronica was, telling me that she had been trying it? I was stunned.

On top of the books stacked beside Veronica sat an apple. She reached for it now and then placed it on the desktop in front of her.

“Hold open your hands,” she said.

I lifted my hands and kept them palms up and close together.

Veronica put her own hands around the apple. She was concentrating hard. A line appeared between her brows. Her mouth was a hard line.

Then, without a sound or a warning, the apple disappeared from Veronica’s hands and reappeared on top of my own.

It had taken but a moment. In one blink, it had moved from there to here.

This distance was only a few inches. A foot or two, at most. Yet to see it even happen at all was a difficult thing to wrap my mind around. Objects didn’t move like this. Yet this one did.

Veronica exhaled, winded. She leaned back in the chair, clearly tired from the ordeal. But after a moment, she straightened once more and held out her hand for the apple. When I gave it to her, she placed it on the table again and sliced it in half with a knife. She sighed in relief when she saw the inside.

I leaned over the table to get a better look. It seemed like a perfectly normal apple to me. Red skin, yellow inside, with the seeds in the middle.

“Were you expecting something different?” I asked.

“The first few attempts... scrambled things,” she said.

I was afraid to ask what she meant by that, but I had enough of an understanding to know she shouldn’t try transporting any living thing, including herself, for a good long while.

“For Hawk to be able to transport himself and Jane in that moment.” She sighed. “He must be very strong at magic. I’ve exhausted my reserves just doing this.”

“He’s had more practice,” I said in encouragement.

“Yes. And he’s likely had a tutor.”

“Someone helped him?”

“They would have had to,” Veronica said. “Not everything is written in the books. The scrambling...” She rubbed at her forehead. “I succeeded with something as simple as an apple, but two entire people? I cannot imagine the concentration required, nor the skill...”

I shook my head. “You are amazing, Veronica. Look at what you’ve accomplished through your own efforts. I don’t think you should start teleporting people anytime soon, but I won’t let you diminish what you’ve actually accomplished here.”

Veronica smiled just a little, a secret little thing she likely meant to keep to herself. “Thank you, Piper.”

Veronica continued to slice the apple. Then she lifted one of the slices and bit into it.

“Testing?” I asked.

“Lunch,” she replied.

I laughed a little. She offered me a slice and I took it. It tasted like an everyday apple to me.

“Now,” Veronica began, once she had finished chewing. “While I always appreciate your company, I doubted you came up here to watch me move an apple.”

I sunk my head low. I wished I could say that I had come up here just for that. I was starting to feel like I only ever came to see Veronica when I was trying to hide. That was unfair, and something I needed to rectify in the future.

Chapter 458



“I’m sorry...” I began.

She shook her head minutely, wordlessly telling me that my reasons didn’t bother her. “ This is your chance to vent before I return to my studies.”

I wouldn’t let this opportunity pass me by. “I assume you have heard the rumors about Julian and me...”

“That you had sex in the woods, yes.”

Her bluntness made me blush.

I cleared my throat. “Yes, well... They aren’t true.” Then, I told her the rest. That, after running into Bridget in Nicholas’s room, I needed an escape and Julian had offered one. I told her exactly what happened, some light flirting and some fun but no sex.

Veronica listened quietly. When I had finished, she said, “Have you considered dating Julian for real?”

The suggestion surprised me, since by nature of the competition, Veronica was ultimately here to win Julian’s hand.

I stared at her for a beat. “I thought you’d be relieved to know the rumors weren’t true.”

Veronica hummed again. "I will admit that I have affection for Julian that could turn romantic if nurtured that way, but... if I must lose this competition to someone, I wouldn't; mind as much if it was you, Piper."

The admission warmed me. Veronica was a true friend.

With this encouragement, I reflected inward and more thoroughly evaluated my feelings for Julian.

"There is... temptation," I said.

Julian was handsome and funny, his smile was infectious, and he always kept me on my toes. Things were exciting with Julian, but he was also a bit wild and unpredictable. Sometimes hanging out with him felt like trying to hold onto a shooting star.

"But." I placed a hand to my chest. "My heart is with Nicholas, and Julian's heart with Bridget. We've both admitted that we're heartbroken, and not sure how to move forward. I don't even know if it's possible."

Veronica finished her apple quietly, and then placed the knife to the side. She took some time, as if carefully considering her words, and then looked back to me.

"Sometimes broken hearts need each other to heal," she said.

I tried to imagine it: holding Julian's hand, cuddling beside him, kissing him...

The thoughts weren't... terrible. But each one left a certain hollowness in my chest.

As much as I liked Julian, I would rather be holding Nicholas's hand, or cuddling Nicholas, or kissing Nicholas.

While I appreciated Veronica's words, I wasn't so convinced by them.

Later, after leaving Veronica in search of Elva and her nanny, I peeked out into the gardens and saw Nicholas there.

He still looked angry, his hands clenched into fists. The hard set of his jaw seemed permanently fixed. His mouth was curved down into a frown. 1

A bit of pain stabbed

My heart. I hated seeing him this way.

Maybe I should speak to him. Bridget said to stay away, and I knew I should. But if any of this anger was because of me

or because of the misunderstanding of what happened

between Julian and me last night, then I really should clear the air.

I'd let him want to keep his distance from me, if that was what he wished. But I wouldn't have it be because of a lie.

Resolved, I stepped forward.

Yet, at that same moment, Bridget stepped to his side from the other side of the brush. She placed her hand on his shoulder, and I had suddenly seen enough and turned away.

It wasn't my place to comfort Nicholas anymore.

Please bookmark the .net website to access chapters of novels early and in the highest quality.

Chapter 459



That evening, after preparing for dinner, I stopped to chat with the guards at my door. By now, they had all become friendly, familiar faces, and though I wouldn't consider us friends exactly, it was always a pleasure to stop and say hello.

It was also a relief knowing the people in charge of mine and Elva's protection actually, genuinely liked us.

Today, however, they seemed stressed. Their smiles were tighter than usual. Their eyes, worried.

"Is everything alright?" I asked them.

"Oh, nothing to do with your safety, miss," said Carl on the left. He'd been with Nicholas's guard the longest, and had a long graying mustache.

"But something is worrying you," I said.

Carl glanced at his partner at the door, William. William was much younger, newer to the guard, and likely because of that, his heart seemed purer. He had yet to be jaded by the things around him.

"We're worried about Prince Nicholas," William said.

Carl shushed him. "It isn't any of our concern. And certainly not something we should be bothering the young miss with."

"But they are close," William said to Carl. "Maybe she can help him?"

"You need to learn to mind your business," Carl said, though not unkindly. He was gently chiding. "The royals deserve their privacy."

While I could appreciate Carl's position, I desperately wanted to know more about Nicholas. Was he okay? What was wrong?

“Why are you worried about Prince Nicholas?” I asked. A direct question wouldn’t be refused, not by William or Carl.

Carl sighed.

William answered, “He’s been overworking himself in the gym. He’s there all of the time, except to take meals. I’m not even sure he sleeps anymore.”

“He’s been polite,” Carl said. “As always.”

“Polite, sure. But tense as a coiled spring,” William added. “He’s already broken five different punching bags. New ones arrive daily now. He’ll likely break those too.”

“William,” Carl scolded.

William shot him a glance. “Tell me I’m lying.”

Carl sighed again, louder. To me, he said, “It’s nothing you should worry about, miss. Whatever he’s working through, I’m sure he’ll reach the other side of it soon.”

I tried to process this new information, but I didn’t know what to think. It tracked with how

I personally knew Nicholas to be acting: the fight with Julian, the way his fists clenched as he stood in the garden.

I couldn’t help but be worried about him, more now than I even was before.

“Thank you for telling me,” I said.

They both nodded in reply.

I really should keep my distance. Bridget had made clear that my closeness to Nicholas only served to make things difficult for him, and it was well past time for me to let him go. 1

But if he was clearly hurting, clearly dealing with something that made him this full of rage, I really needed to talk to him.

So after bidding good evening to the guards, I hurried down the hallway, down the stairs, and out the door, eager to reach the barracks containing the gym where I knew Nicholas worked out. It was the same place where we had practiced our self-defense lessons.

I was nearly there, when I spotted Bridget holding a basket of food. She laughed with the guard at the door.

“Don’t worry,” Bridget said. “I’m sure a full meal will help him to relax.”

The last thing I wanted to do was walk in on Bridget and Nicholas having a moment, so I turned on my heels and retreated back toward the palace in defeat.

I still worried for Nicholas, but...

I couldn’t approach him with Bridget so near.

And she always seemed to be near.

The next morning, the candidates were called down into the foyer for another meeting with Nathan. He seemed bright as he took to the stage. It had to be an act, knowing how rude he

had been to me the moment the cameras were turned off.

Chapter 460



I tried to smile as well, at least when the cameras were facing me. Constantly being filmed was beginning to be exhausting.

“I recently announced the results of the theater event,” Nathan said. “Well, today, I am excited to announce the rewards.”

Suddenly, everyone perked up, like our coffee had all kicked in at once. Rewards hadn’t been discussed beforehand, so this was all new to us. What would it be this time? Another private date with a prince?

“I’m happy to announce that the top ranking candidates, one for each prince –

”

Sighs sounded throughout the room.

Nathan continued, unperturbed. “–will accompany Nicholas and Julian on a special trip to the royal family’s private island along our southern coast.”

Jessica spoke up in the silence. “Prince Joyce will not be there?”

Nathan, nervide-eyeing the cameras, cleared his throat. He knew then, as well as I did, that Joyce was locked down in the dungeons for being a brainwashed traitor. Veronica had been working with Joyce, but unlike with teleportation, I don’t think she had made any progress yet.

“Unfortunately, Prince Joyce is still under the weather,” Nathan said.

Jessica frowned, but didn’t press further. We all knew better than to question the King’s Beta in front of the cameras.

L

7

#

Nathan consulted the paper he held. “Now. As this trip is only extended to the top candidate for each prince, only three individuals will be invited.”

This was a lavish reward. Glancing at Bridget, I wondered if the royal family had designed it exclusively to impress her. Or to get her and Nicholas alone in

a romantic place, so as to help develop their bond. The other two candidates were likely an after-thought.

Misery bubbled up inside of me. I was not high on the rankings. I had no shot of going on this trip. Instead, I'd have to stay here and drive myself wild thinking about all the romantic things Nicholas could be up to without me.

Poor Julian would have to go, though. He'd have to endure every terrible moment. I tried to think about the rankings, wondering which of us three would join him. Tiffany and I scored

poorly in the event. That meant that –

“Congratulations to Bridget, Veronica, and Jessica,” Nathan announced, and then hammed for the cameras.

Jessica lowered her head. To herself, she muttered, “What am I supposed to do there

without Prince Joyce?”

“Enjoy yourself,” I said to her. A free vacation to the beach? “Get a tan, swim in the ocean, have boat drinks with the umbrellas.”

My words seemed to lift her and she laughed. “Maybe a curly straw?” she asked.

“And fruit slices hanging on the glass,” I added.

Bridget watched our exchange. She laughed. At first, I thought it was in union with Jessica and me, but then she began to talk. “It must be hard staying behind, Piper. Why don't you help me pack my bags tonight? That might help lift your spirits.” 1

I had no idea in what universe helping someone else pack their bags for a trip would make me feel better about not going on it, especially when that person

was Bridget, who was actively in a relationship with the man I cared for more than any other.

That sounded more in line with my worst nightmare.

“She can’t help you tonight,” Veronica said, suddenly appearing beside me. Her cool gaze sliced into Bridget. “She has other plans.”

Bridget shrugged and walked away.

I looked at Veronica. “I do?”

“Trust me,” she said.

I did. But I didn’t understand what she meant...

Until later that evening, when I opened my door after a knock to find Veronica and Julian chatting lightly with the guards.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Julian turned his smile on me. “Come on vacation with us.”