

The Luna Choosing Game #Chapter 531 - Read The Luna Choosing Game Chapter 531

() +15 BONUS Chapter 0531 Nicholas, Julian, and I walked to the base of the stairs. There, we stood calmly, while peering around, waiting for all the servants in sight to go elsewhere to attend to their duties.

Then, with Julian being the boldest and first of us, we sneaked through the servants' door and into the servants' quarters.

Unlike the main building, the servant's quarters were not as brightly decorated. Though the walls were painted and clean, they had no paintings or decorations of any kind.

The quarters were simply a long, barren hallway of doors on either side, with a potted plant at the very end.

My nerves itched. If someone were to come into this hallway, they would see us at once. He had to be quick and careful.

"Which door is hers?" T asked. None of the doors were marked.

rr 2) Oo +15 BONUS Julian sighed. "Guess we have to do this the hard way." Slowly, we tried each door one at a time, bracing ourselves each time for what might be inside. What we found, one after the next, were clean, sparse rooms, with made beds. Most had a desk or a chair and a few personal items. When we saw the room was empty, we didn't linger long enough to see more.

We tried so many doors with no luck that I was beginning to feel nervous.

Perhaps Charlotte wasn't here at all? But how could that be? Where else would they keep her? Nicholas wore a frowning, serious expression that did not change the longer this went on. Julian, however, seemed to grow more hopeful.

"We should have started in the back," he grumbled to himself, though he was smiling. "Of course they'd give the new person the worst room." The door on the left in the back of the

(_) +15 BONUS hallway led to an entirely bare room.

The bed was there, but it had no sheets. No personal items were I anywhere, and the desk had a thin layer of dust on top of it.

She wasn't there. That left one last room. We all turned around.

"This must be it," Julian said, his brightness unshakeable. He walked up to the door, grabbed the handle, and tried to turn. The doorknob rattled, but would not open. It was locked.

~~ Hope lifted my heart as much as dread pulled it down. Charlotte must be in there, but would they really lock her in? Why? Surely the quarantine restrictions wouldn't be that strict? I stepped closer to the door.

Charlotte?" I whisper-velled, then listen. Someone was moving around inside, but they hadn't said anything yet. I tried again, speaking up, "Charlotte?" "Piper?" came Charlotte's voice, right from the other side of the door.

(w) +15 BONUS She didn't sound sick. "What are you doing here?" "Looking for you. Are you okay? They said you had some kind of illness?" "What illness," Charlotte said. "I feel fine. Other than being locked in this room." "Not sick then," Nicholas said.

"Foul play," Julian replied.

The two brothers shared a dire look between them before Julian turned back to the door and dropped to his knees beside the doorknob. He took out his lockpicking tools from his pocket. I wondered if he always carried those around. Regardless, I was glad of it now.

"I woke up yesterday, dressed and went to the door only to find it locked," Charlotte said. "They bring me meals but don't open the door more than a crack. I've tried the window, but even that seems to be \ bolted down. I've thought about 4

() +15 BONUS breaking it, but... I don't know what's going on, Piper." "It's okay, Charlotte," I said. I could hear a hint of fear in her voice. "We'll figure it out together." Julian unlocked the door in a flash, and then the three of us sneaked inside. Julian closed the door silently behind us.

I immediately went to Charlotte and pulled her into a hug. She seemed okay, just a little shaken. Guilt speared through me. I should have looked for her sooner. But, no, I had to push those pointless thoughts to the side. I was here now, and we were going to figure this out.

"Who locked you in here?" I asked, feeling like I might already know the answer.

Charlotte confirmed that I did.

Selma. I asked her why, but she wouldn't answer. She's barely said anything to me, other than to tell me it's time to eat."

4 hd () +15 BONUS Nicholas made a thoughtful hum. "Selma is unfailingly loyal to the crown.

She wouldn't act out of turn like this." Charlotte was telling the truth, of that I was certain.

"Unless she was taking orders," Julian said.

The brothers looked at each other again. I didn't need to be part of it to know what they were thinking this time.

"Why would your parents want to lock up Charlotte?" I asked.

"The King ordered this?" Charlotte said, shock in her voice. She placed a hand to her heart.

"Charlotte doesn't know how you were sabotaged yesterday," Julian said, and then proceeded to fill Charlotte in on all from the missing swimsuits to the turned-off alarm.

Charlotte turned to me and bowed in Ee apology. "Forgive me, Piper. I was id

(#] +15 BONUS coming to check on you and Elva, but the door —" I waved off her apology. "There is no need to be sorry, Charlotte. This was not your fault. But I still don't understand..." Nicholas touched my shoulder, turning my attention to him. "Piper," he said, and I saw the certainty in his eyes. "For Selma to have done this, the King must have told her to. Which means..." Julian stepped closer to me. "The King's the one who wanted you sabotaged." "He's likely responsible for your initial ruined luggage, as well," Nicholas added.

The room seemed to close in around me, as the words took root. Why in the world would the King want to sabotage me, someone who clearly had no actual chance of winning? "Our parents love to pull all the 4

wr () +15 BONUS strings," Julian said. "You've always been a wildcard. They must be trying to bring you in line." That still didn't make sense. Ever since Bridget's arrival, I hadn't even been the public's favorite anymore.

I opened my mouth to argue my point, when the sound of footsteps echoed in the hallway just outside the door. I quickly snapped my mouth closed, afraid of making a sound. I The footsteps drew closer. All of our eyes searched around the room, but there weren't many places to hide.

Maybe we wouldn't have to. After all, Charlotte did say they only opened the door a crack to leave the food. Likely no one would come in. We just needed to stay out of sight.

Regardless, Julian dove, quickly and quietly, and quite acrobatically, pulled himself under Charlotte's bed.

A knock sounded on the door. A key slid into the lock.

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"Charlotte?" came Selma's voice from the other side of the door. gi) i 11] coming in. I have your breakfast and we need to discuss your travel plans." Nicholas grabbed me around he waist just as the door opened, and yanked me into the space behind the door. The door opened so widely it concealed us. RR With my face pressed up against Nicholas's chest, I closed my eyes and hoped to God that Selma didn't want to have this conversation with the door closed.

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Fortunately, Selma did not reach for the door once it was open. With it open, it concealed most of Nicholas and me, though if she looked back, and looked closely, she would certainly see our shoes or our sides.

The space behind the door was cramped. Nicholas's arms tightened around me, tugging me ever closer to his body until our fronts were fully aligned. With my adrenaline pumping, it took far longer than it should have for me to recognize the intimacy of our position.

I looked up at Nicholas and found him staring down at me. His golden eyes shone brightly, even in the dim light, with the flecks of green within them flickering.

God, he was so handsome. Every time I looked at it, he threatened to steal my breath away. I could have stared at him until my dying day and died happy. For now, I would stare for as long as I could.

He seemed content to stare right back.

"I brought you some waffles with whipped cream and fresh fruit this morning," Selma said. "I hope you like them." Selma's voice snapped me out of my lust-filled musings and I remembered where I was. I tilted my head a little, enough to catch sight of Selma and Charlotte through the crack between the door and the door jam.

Selma handed a tray of food to Charlotte, who turned and placed it down on the desk.

"I won't say thank you," Charlotte grumbled.

Selma crossed her hands over her waist. Her back was to me, I couldn't see her face, but her stature seemed turned in on itself. "I've already apologized for this."

"Apologies don't get me out of this locked room," Charlotte said.

"You'll be heading back to the palace today," Selma said. "The airplane will arrive after lunch to take you back."

*I want to see Piper before I go," Charlotte said.

"That's impossible."

"Why?"

Selma paused a moment. "The candidates have already left for today's event."

It's an obvious lie. Even if I hadn't been hiding behind the door, I doubted Charlotte would have believed it. Charlotte knew my itinerary in advance. Even with the last minute events, information passed through the servants first. She would know that nothing was scheduled for today.

Charlotte did not disappoint me. She lifted her head high and said, "There's no event today."

Selma's tough demeanor crumbled almost instantly. "You must simply take my word for it then. You cannot see her before you leave. When she returns to the palace, you may speak again."

"Those are not typical rules," Charlotte said. "I wasn't aware that you had the right to deny me from seeing my mistress."

"Typically I wouldn't," Selma admitted, "But these are special circumstances."

*Special circumstances?" Charlotte scoffed. "It sounds to me like you are attempting to sabotage Piper!"

Charlotte's raised voice seemed to breathe fresh life into Selma. She puffed up as well.

"We have an obligation to follow the royals' wishes," Selma said sharply.

*The royals? Why would they want to sabotage Piper?" Charlotte was playing dumb now, in an attempt to garner more information.

"It is not our place to try to understand them," Selma said, shutting down that attempt. "We simply do as they say. I trust you do not want word of your disagreement to make its way back to the King?"

Charlotte fell silent. I couldn't blame her. Her livelihood was on the line. I only knew a small bit of Charlotte's personal life, she didn't talk of it much. But I knew that she survived on her work as a maid in the palace.

I knew what it was like to be one job away from the direst of straits.

"Have your bags packed by noon. We will forgo lunch for today. You can eat on the plane." Selma turned abruptly toward the door.

I stilled, not blinking or even breathing. Behind me, Nicholas was like a statue.

Only my heart moved within me, racing out of control. I didn't know what we would do if she saw us, or how we would explain our presence.

Fortunately, she grabbed the handle of the door and began to pull it closed as she walked through the doorway. But then, suddenly, she stopped again.

My heart leaped into my throat.

Selma turned around.

Had we been caught?

"Enjoy your waffles," Selma said, and then closed the door. She locked it once more with the key she must have carried.

I didn't move again until her footsteps disappeared down the corridor. Then, like a puppet with the strings cut, exhaled and all of the tension slipped from my body. I was entirely deflated, held upright mostly by the strength of Nicholas's arm around me.

I lowered my forehead to his chest and just breathed.

"That was close," I whispered.

Nicholas was my anchor. "You're safe now."

"You aren't alone here, don't forget," Julian said, teasing, and I began to blush.

Slowly, Nicholas loosened his hold and I slipped away from him. When I turned back toward the group, Julian was out from under the bed. His arms were crossed and he was smiling at me with a devilish expression.

Charlotte stood beside him, worry all over her face. "You have to be careful, Piper. If the King himself is out for you, there's nothing me or any other servant will be able to do to stop him. We are bound to his commands."

I couldn't quite imagine a world where Charlotte wouldn't stand against those who actively wanted to harm me. But the King must have known that too, choosing to lock her up rather than to bring her into his plans for sabotage.

"I understand," I said, and I did. "I'll be careful."

Yet I wasn't sure how much even being careful would save me against the will of the King.

"Why don't you stay with me?" I asked her. "Julian can bust us out of here, and once you are free, it will make a huge scene to try to lock you up again."

Charlotte gave me a soft, sad sort of smile, even as she shook her head. "I'm sorry, Piper. Selma was right about what thing. We as servants have an obligation to the power of the crown. I have been ordered to return to the palace, and I have to obey that order, as much as I'd like not to."

I nodded, signaling my understanding. How I wished everything was different. Even to know why the King was suddenly actively against me would help me to more fully prepare for the trials ahead. Right now, I didn't even know how to defend myself!

Charlotte looked first to Julian and then to Nicholas, as she said, "I am entrusting the two of you to keep Piper safe."

"Of course," Julian said.

Charlotte gave him a flat look. "No leading her into more trouble than she's already in."

Julian placed a hand over his heart, looking affronted - were it not for his growing smile. "Would I do that?"

No one said anything, because no one had to. He absolutely would lead me into more trouble. I didn't need a crystal ball to tell me that future.

Nicholas, meanwhile, was more steadfast. He stepped closer to my side, and said, "I will protect her, no matter what."

We sneaked out of Charlotte's room much in the same way we arrived it. Once we were back in the safety of the main building, Nicholas turns to Julian and I and said, "I'm going to contact the King immediately."

Julian snorted. "And say what?"

Nicholas was already frowning, but he frowned even deeper now, glaring at Julian. "I'll get them to tell me what's really going on."

*They'll just lie to you," Julian said.

"They'll try. But I'll be able to see through them."

"You think. You've bought their bullshit before." Julian smirked at Nicholas, though his eyes were no less hard than Nicholas's. They look hard at each other like they are in some kind of staring contest.

I hated to admit it, and I wasn't going to say it, but I thought Julian might be right in this case. Even with Nicholas's typically effective brand of persuasion, I doubted his parents would ever come clean about what they were doing to me - especially when they knew he cared about me so much.

Plus, the King and Queen hadn't exactly been pleased with Nicholas as of late. He was lectured for hours that morning after he saved me from the pit. Even if this didn't involve me, I was willing to bet he would still be on the outs with them.

"Asking them directly is the only possible option for us," Nicholas said. "They are the only ones who know the full extent of what is happening."

"That's not true," Julian said. "It would just be a waste of time."

They continued to argue, though their voices stopped abruptly as we were suddenly approached by Bridget. "Good morning," she said, glancing at each of us.

Julian stared back blankly. I dipped my head, looking away. Nicholas, ever cordial, replied with a curt, "Morning,"

The air between us instantly became awkward. Julian picked up on it right away, glancing from Nicholas to me to Bridget and back again.

Bridget smiled brightly, looking directly at Nicholas. She seemed expectant, like she was waiting for him to say something. Nicholas kept his mouth tightly closed.

Nicholas and I hadn't really had a chance to talk about what happened yet. I was still trying to get my thoughts in order about everything. I knew we would have had to face Bridget eventually, but I really hoped I would have had more time.

There never seemed to be enough time to just think about things. Something was always happening.

"Nicholas," Bridget said. She must have gotten tired of waiting, though her bright smile hid away any annoyance. "Can I speak with you privately for a moment?"

A muscle ticked right near Nicholas's jaw. He didn't say anything for another moment, before he finally elicited a barely there, "Fine."

"Great," Bridget said with enough enthusiasm for them both.

Nicholas glanced at me, but then stepped forward. Bridget turned and they walked together down the hallway toward the deck.

As soon as they were out of earshot, Julian turned toward me. "What was that about?"

I typically admired Julian for his astuteness. Right now, I found it very annoying.

I didn't want to talk about it.

But Julian was also patient so he waited me out. And, I still realized, maybe it would be nice to actually talk to someone. Julian often confided his troubles in me. Here he was, offering to hear mine. I'd be a right fool not to take him up on it.

I dipped my head, motioning toward the living area with its wicker furniture. For whatever the reason, that area always seemed to be mostly empty. It seemed like a good place to talk.

We walked there together. When we sat, I realized exactly why these seats were usually empty. Yeah, this couch looked beautiful, but it was the hardest, most uncomfortable couch I had ever tried to sit upon.

Julian frowned a little too, sitting down, but he quickly schooled his face and looked at me. He wanted to get down to business then. Trying to distract him by discussing the comfortability of the furniture was likely to fail.

*Bridget walked in on Nicholas and me last night," I said.

Julian's eyes sparkled with mischief. "And just what were you and my dear brother up to at that time?"

*Julian, be serious," I said, only barely containing my eye roll.

"That means you were doing exactly what I suspect," he said.

*Julian," I chided.

His mischievousness fell away. "I am serious now. I'm just trying to gauge what Bridget saw exactly, if there's any way to spin it to convince her it wasn't what she thinks it was."

"There's no way to spin this," I said. "Trust me."

Julian hummed thoughtfully. "Well, shit."

"Yeah."

*Did she threaten to expose you?" he asked.

"Not exactly," I replied. "I'm not sure she would do that, for Nicholas's sake. But she said other stuff instead, like how disappointed she was." He exhaled slowly and lowered my head. The next thing was harder to say. "And how I was setting a bad example for Elva."

"Bullshit," Julian said.

While I appreciated his consideration of my feelings, I couldn't deny the subtle truth in those hurts hurt me deeply.

"She's right, though, isn't she?" I asked. "I wouldn't want my daughter to be secretly sneaking around with a man who will never marry her."

Julian's brow pulled together. "Who says he'll never marry you?"

It was cruel to give me hope, so I gave Julian a dubious look.

"I'm serious," he doubled down.

"Stop. Julian. Please. Just stop. We both know Bridget is right about this. Nicholas will never marry me, no matter what I do."

*He cares about you, Piper. He might even love -"

"It doesn't matter!" I said quickly. I didn't want to hear the rest. To consider the L-word with Nicholas was not something my heart was ready to face. I didn't know if I could ever face that, not when the end result was always going to be that he walked out on me.

"It doesn't matter," I say again, softer. I hadn't meant to shout. Julian looked at me with concern in his eyes, and that somehow made everything worse. "If he is to be king, he will need a woman beside him who can support him, whether he... cares deeply about her or not. We both know that I am not that person.*"

"I don't know that, actually. In fact I think you'd be a great Luna." God help me, he seemed so earnest saying that. But I still couldn't allow myself to believe it. Besides, Julian was a good actor. He could say nearly anything and I'd believe it.

Though... what reason did he have to lie to me about this?

No. The heartbreak from allowing myself to believe only to have that hope ripped away at the worst moment was too much to bear. I couldn't face it. I wouldn't.

I didn't reply to Julian this time. I didn't ask him to stop or tell him I didn't believe him.

I didn't have to.

He was always good at reading me. He could likely see the sadness in my features, the heartache in my eyes.

Julian sat back in his chair and sighed. "Nicholas should try to marry for love. Life is hard enough as it is. Why couple yourself with anyone but the person you desire?"

"For the crown," I replied.

He turned on his chair. When I met his eyes, he looked deep into mine. I felt revealed, exposed, as if he could see straight down into the heart of me.

"If Nicholas doesn't marry you, Piper, he's the biggest fool in the kingdom."

Julian's words rendered me speechless, and for a long moment, I didn't say anything. He seemed content himself to let the words linger, and they did, hanging heavy in the air.

It meant the world to me, for Julian to feel that way. I only wished Nicholas felt the same. As it was, while the words were sweet and comforting, they changed absolutely nothing.

At the end of the day, Nicholas would still choose someone more fitting to be his Luna, and I would be alone.

When enough time had passed, Julian blissfully changed the subject. "Nicholas won't find any answers from the King and Queen." He'd already said that to Nicholas's face.

"He's determined to learn something," I said. "He believes that to be his only option."

"Then he's not looking close enough." Julian turned his head. I followed the length of his gaze up the hallway to where Selma was flitting about here and there, cleaning up and giving orders to the other staff.

Did he mean to talk to her?

"She's not any more likely to tell you what's going on than the King and Queen are," I said.

Julian didn't seem so sure. "She's a good person. She's exceedingly loyal to the crown, obviously, but don't forget, like you so often seem to, that I am a part of the royal family. If I can speak to her alone, I should be able to uncover at least a few more pieces to the puzzle." I still wasn't entirely convinced. The King's orders ranked higher than those of the princes. If he said not to tell anyone, she probably wouldn't tell even Julian.

But, if she truly was a good person, perhaps she harbored some guilt about what was happening here, with the King's sabotage of me. I couldn't imagine anyone being happy about having to lock some of her staff away in their room.

"It's worth a try," I said. What harm could it do? Either she told him what was going on, or part of it. Or she refused to say a word and nothing was lost. There really was no downside to the attempt.

"Okay, great," he said. "Come with me." I was confused. "Shouldn't I stay out of this? I'm sure she'd be more willing to talk to you if I wasn't there."

"She won't know you're there," he said.

I followed him farther down the hallway, until we reached a door I hadn't seen opened before. Julian grabbed it and opened it. Oh. It was a hallway closet filled with various cleaning supplies.

Julian motioned his arm as if I was to enter. There was enough room but it would be a tight squeeze.

My stomach twisted.

Since having fallen into that pit, the thought of being in an enclosed space made my nerves prickle. But... I had to be strong. Maybe if I continued to remind myself that the door was not being locked. I could get out at any time. I was stepping into this willingly and I wasn't going to be trapped.

"Piper?" Julian's features softened into question and concern. Original content from NôvelDrama.Org.

I didn't want him to ask questions I wasn't ready to answer, so I sucked in a big breath and stepped into the closet. When I turned back to face Julian, he seemed hesitant to close the door.

We didn't have time to waste. The longer he waited to close the door, the more likely we would be caught in this hallway.

I reached out, grabbed the door handle, and closed myself into the closet.

The door had slats in it, on a diagonal facing downwards. I was confident that I was fully hidden in the dark, but I could see outwards okay enough.

Mostly, because of the downward slant to the slats, I saw Julian's shirt and his legs and feet, but it was comforting that I could see even that much.

"Selma!" Julian called.

“Can you come here a minute? There’s something I want to talk to you about.”

“Of course, Prince Julian,” Selma said and she came near. I couldn’t see her with Julian in the way, but I could hear her well enough when she said, “How can I help you?”

“Selma, listen, I’ve been hearing some rumors...” Julian said. “I’m not sure what to believe.”

“you shouldn’t believe every rumor,” Selma said. Compared to her previous greeting, these words seemed to dip lower in tone. If we hadn’t have known for sure that she was hiding something, we would have known by now. She was practically a stranger to me, but even I could tell.

I worried a moment that she might clamp up and not tell Julian everything.

Julian inched closer to her. “I’m y concerned for you,” he said. “If mom and dad are asking you to do things outside your moral range...”

“Qh, Julian,” Selma said. “You don’t know what you are asking of me.” julian shook his head a little.

“Just tell me what’s going on, Selma. Please. Maybe I can help.” God, he was smooth. I’d want to pour my heart out to him too if he talked to me like that.

Selma sighed. “The orders came from the King himself. At first, I didn’t mind so terribly much. It was a vague request: anything I could do to lift Bridget while making Piper look bad.” “I see,” Julian said. He sounded understanding. Meanwhile my insides were all tangled up with anger.

“But after... the incident... on the island, everything became more pressing, and more specific,” Selma continued.

“Did they have something to do with what happened on the island?” Julian asked.

“That I don’t know,” Selma said.

They didn’t say a word about it to me, but then, I was never the one going to the island. I only ever stay here.” Julian nodded.

“But the missing swimsuits, and the alarms being turned off, and Charlotte’s disappearance...”

“Charlotte is fine and well,” Selma said.

“I made sure she’s had food to eat. I know she’s unhappy down that. And I know Miss Piper is concerned...” Selma exhaled again, louder.

"You must think I'm some kind of monster. I don't like what's being asked of me. I like Piper, from when I watch the events on television."

"I don't think that," Julian said, voice soft and comforting.

"I think you are simply a woman trying to serve her kingdom and her king." Stronger, he asked, "Do you have any idea why the king would want to take such drastic Bebihha measures to bring up Bridget and lower Piper in the public's eye?"

"I don't, and it would be wrong of me to speculate..." The words lingered.

She clearly wanted to say more.

"But...?" Julian prompted.

It didn't take much convincing to get Selma to continue. "But... the incident on the island changed everyone's favorite back to Piper. When Bridget arrived, we wanted to root for her, but after seeing how Prince Nicholas rushed to rescue her, it's difficult not to root for those two."

She paused a moment. "My apologies."

"I'm not offended," Julian said, Nicholas and I may be competing for Piper's attentions, but even I can admit he bested me there. Has it really changed so many minds?"

"I can't speak for the entire kingdom, but the minds of the staff here on the island? Most definitely." A While I was honored to have gained

favoritism over the other competitors among the staff, I was shaken. My blood ran cold.

If I was pulling ahead of popularity enough to make the king and queen nervous, who knew to what depths they would go through now, to lower me back down again? Selma had said the orders were getting more specific.

How much farther would they go? Was I in danger?

Chapter 0537 Whether I was in danger or not, I was still likely to be eliminated at the next elimination ceremony. Being more popular than Bridget was not something I ever expected to happen, but now that it had, and now that Selma was confirming it had caused me to draw ire from the King and Queen, I knew the end was near for me in this competition.

Julian finished his conversation with Selma by trying to lift her spirits somewhat. He patted her arm and gave her soft encouragement. Even though I had been the one wronged, I also couldn't help but feel for her a little.

She was simply trying to obey her king and queen. When they gave her morally questionable orders, she had no choice but to follow them, whether or not she agreed with them.

I wasn't angry. The most she had done to me so far was to sabotage me into making a poor impression in front

of the merfolk. Well, my ruined suitcase might have also been her.

But she wasn't the one who had dug that pit on the island. She wasn't the reason I had nearly died out in the rain.

I was mad for Charlotte, but she was being fed.

Selma wasn't a saint, but she didn't deserve my hatred.

"If they ask you to do anything else that makes you uncomfortable, please come to me," Julian said. "I swear I won't let you get in trouble. I might be able to find a way out of it for you." "Okay," Selma said, her voice was low and sad. "I will. Thank you." They said their goodbyes. Julian didn't move as Selma walked away.

When her footsteps disappeared down the hall, Julian turned toward the closet door, opened it, and I surged out of the small space so quickly, I very nearly walked right into Julian's chest.

He caught me around the waist and held me steady.

"Careful," he said and offered me a slanted grin.

"I don't like small spaces," I said by way of an explanation. My cheeks heated up.

Julian nodded. He understood. Slowly, he lowered his arm and I stepped backwards.

"Let's get away from this spot," he said, and I was relieved for it.

We went out onto the deck. A servant asked our drink order. After we gave it, he disappeared inside while we found a more private corner of the deck. We dropped down onto comfortable floral chairs. Julian slouched, relaxing. I continued to sit on the edge, tense and nervous.

"So..." Julian said, watching me.

You're the most popular candidate again. Congrats." 9 7

"It's nothing to be happy about. It puts me right back in the aim of the king and queen."
"Like hell you shouldn't be happy about it!" Julian leaned forward. He bumped his

shoulder against mine. "Don't forget, my folks wanted you out at the first elimination ceremony. It was your popularity with the public that saved you. It could do so again." "I was lucky then," I said.

"You're lucky now," Julian said. "Trust me. We can spin this for sure." I shook my head. I didn't want to be a pessimist, but if the royal family really thought I was in the way, they could simply have me removed, one way or another. - I didn't know if they were responsible for the pit and my falling into it. I wasn't sure how they would even plan that. But, if anyone could have managed it, it was the royal family.

"Don't give up, Piper," Julian said. 4

I glanced over at him, surprised. He gave me an earnest, caring look in return.

"Nicholas needs you. Hell, the whole kingdom does," Julian said. "I don't want to see someone like Bridget become the Luna. She only cares about herself. She'd never put the good of the kingdom above herself. Not like you would."

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"I don't know anything about running a nation," I said.

"You are learning, and you're learning quickly. Think of all the events, Piper. You've done so well. And the times that you hadn't were because there were plots set against you."

*Plots against me are part of the competition. I should be able to weather them with grace, not let them tear me down like I do."

*No, Piper. There are advisors who should worry about that. Or people like me. All you would have to do as Luna is care about the Kingdom's people, which you already do, and about Nicholas. He would be a better king with you at his side."

I blinked, startled. Here Julian was, talking about Nicholas as if the line of succession had already been decided. *Don't you want a chance at the throne?" I asked him.

Julian laughed a little. I didn't like how hollow it sounded, though it didn't last long. "My father has only ever looked in my direction long enough to scold me. His first choice has always been Nicholas. I'm not sure my father would ever see enough redeeming qualities in me to think I'm a good enough son, let alone a man fit to be king."

I didn't like when he talked about himself like this, as if he didn't carry the makings of a good king, or a good person.

"I think you would be a fine king," I said.

Julian's smile turned genuine again, quirking higher on one side. "Thank you, Piper. Truly. But we both know, even if I would be an okay king, I'd never be as good a leader as Nicholas. Am I wrong?"

I wanted to argue with him, to continue to help lift his spirits. But the fact of the matter was, he wasn't totally wrong.

Julian would be a fine king. But Nicholas would make for a great one.

I absolutely refused to say so aloud. Julian still knew the answer. My refusal to say anything was affirmation enough.

"I'm not mad," he said. "I know my shortcomings and Nicholas's many virtues. If you think Nicholas would rule better than me, you're right."

"I'm sorry," I said again, because I felt like I needed to say something. Julian deserved so much better than to feel second best, but this wasn't a topic I could argue.

"I told you I'm not mad," he said again. "Don't worry about it."

A hint of awkwardness fell over us then. We both turned our attention away from each other and looked out toward the water.

There, Nicholas and Bridget were talking, their bare feet standing in the soft wet sand as the waves gently washed over their feet.

Nearby, Nathan directed the cameramen. One came super close to the pair, practically sticking the camera straight in Nicholas's face.

Bridget, used to cameras and attention, didn't so much as bat an eyelash at their presence. Nicholas, however, seemed immensely uncomfortable and only getting worse.

When the camera man stepped even closer, Nicholas's stern features finally revealed his annoyance. His brow pulled together and he frowned.

Usually he tried to hide all emotions in front of the cameras, but it seemed they were finally cracking through.

"Forget it," Nicholas snapped loudly enough for even Julian and me to hear. "I'm fine."

Then, Nicholas turned away and stormed down the beach, rushing away from Bridget and the cameras.

One tried to follow him, and Nicholas cried out, "Please don't follow me."

Nathan called for the offending cameraman, who stopped. Nicholas continued on alone.

"I wonder what happened," I said to Julian.

"I'll tell you what happened," Julian replied. "They're finally pushing Nicholas past his limits."

Chapter 0539

"They're pushing him past his limits," Julian said again, "And it's about time too." I looked at him sharply. Surely he couldn't be happy that his brother was being harassed into uncharacteristic outbursts.

He shrugged at my look. "He's finally acting like a living breathing human in front of the camera. Yeah, it's probably not the side he wants people to see, but even you have to admit, Piper, that it was unnerving as hell watching him pretend to be that i oh IE perfect emotionless statue." I couldn't deny that exactly, but it wasn't great that Nicholas's walls were crumbling without his consent.

He should be able to raise and lower his walls at his own will, not because

I others pushed him into it.

"If he wants to be the statue, he should be able to be the statue" I said.

Julian shook his head. "We know Nicholas would be a great king because we know him. He know how much he cares about everything, including the people. He's always at that orphanage, for instance. But you know who doesn't know any of that, even about the orphanage?" "The people," I said, realizing.

"The people," Julian replied. "This competition wasn't just about finding Lunas for us. You know already that a big part was about raising the popularity of the royal family. Well, to do that, we were supposed to show pieces of ourselves to the public, so they could know our faces. We hid away from them for too long." VI 2/6 i

"If he hides who he really is, they have no reason to believe he would be the best king." Julian pointed at me. "Bingo." "But if the only time they see him break is when he loses his temper..."

won't the public think he's being too volatile to be king?" I "They'll think he's human," Julian said. "They'll find him relatable. They'll trust him, more than they'd trust a statue." h I supposed I could see the reason in that, and for Julian to believe it so strongly meant that he had given it a lot of thought. Julian might have given the outward appearance of being carefree, but the truth was that he was a massive over thinker.

He knew more about this than me, I a, or I could admit that. So he was probably right.

But, more than I was worried about the public perception of the Nicholas, I was worried about Nicholas himself.

I stood.

"Follow the beach down to the group of trees," Julian said. "It's in a bit of an alcove, hid away from the house.

It's private. If he wanted to be alone, that's where he would have gone." It was sweet of Julian to give me this information. The knowing smirk he gave me wasn't so sweet.

As I looked at him, he wagged his eyebrows. I rolled my eyes.

Of course, I was still going to go. I fully intended on following his direction and I wasn't going to even feel bad about it. But he was so ridiculous, I couldn't leave him without saying something.

"Mind your own business," I said.

He laughed, and the sound helped heal some of the more fragile pieces of my heart.

I followed Julian's directions, walking down off the deck and then following the water line. All of the cameras, in Nicolas's absence had turned their attention onto Bridget.

Nathan was even asking her questions, which she was answering with the brightest of smiles and dispositions.

I ignored them just as they ignored me.

The waves licked at my feet as I walked along the shoreline, following the coast up and around into where the trees began to block the house.

The beach dipped inward there, like a letter C, with the water filling in a small pool.

Chapter 0540

Palm trees zig-zagged around, some of them bent at odd angles. One even looked like it had grown sideways for a while before bending back upwards.

Sitting there on the sideways part of the tree, was Nicholas. Just where Julian had said he would be.

"Piper?" he called.

I smiled a little as I walked toward him. When I was close enough, he reached down and offered me a hand. I accepted it, and he pulled me up onto the tree beside him.

From this height, three or four feet off the ground, the view was beautiful. More of the ocean stretched out before me. The light flickered on the rippling water, the rising and falling waves.

We sat in comfortable, companionable silence for a moment. His hand placed flat at his side, resting on the palm tree. Mine was placed directly beside his. We weren't touching, but I could feel the heat of him. I was so attuned to him, I swear our breathing matched just from being so close.

"You saw my outburst," he said. It wasn't a question.

*Julian thinks it's good for you, to look more human in front of the public."

Nicholas rubbed his forehead. "Julian saw my outburst."

"Yeah," I said. "Sorry."

Silence fell over us again, and we watched the waves.

*Julian spoke with Selma," I said.

Nicholas's gaze snapped to me. "He what?"

I filled Nicholas in, explaining how I hid in the closet, and then what I could remember from Julian and Selma's conversation. I was clear about the main takeaway: the King and Queen wanted to lift Bridget while knocking me down.

"You're popular again," Nicholas said. "Good. That will make it easier to protect you." He sighed in clear aggravation. "I'm getting tired of this. I want so hard to be a good leader for my people. I also want to be a perfect son. But... my parents seem to be succumbing to their darkest impulses lately. It's a path I don't know if I can or want to follow anymore."

His words surprised me. "Nick." I didn't know where to even start to try to help him feel better.

"Their acts are becoming more and more despicable. And when I think about how they might have been behind you being trapped in that pit...". Nicholas's hands curled into fists. "I get so angry..."

I reached out and placed my hand over his fist on the tree. "I'm not in that pit anymore," I reminded him. Maybe reminded us both.

Nicholas turned his head and looked at me. There was a fire burning in his eyes, kindled with anger, but in short time, it developed into something else.

Nicholas loosened his fist, then turned his hand palm up so our fingers could slide together.

"I'm exhausted with doing everything that is required of me and never stepping one foot out of line, even for the things I so desperate want," he said. "I want to do something for myself for a change. And something for you, as well."

I looked at him. I had a sneaking suspicion that I knew what he meant, but I refused to allow myself to think it, afraid that I would be wrong and hurt again.

But then he spoke once more, "Piper, if I asked you, would you still want to make love?"

My heart clenched. It was as I thought. But that was a vague statement. It still might not have meant what I had hoped it to mean. So I pressed, "When you say 'make love'..."

His eyes were a wildfire, and I was trapped in its path, burning.

"Piper. I want to give us both the ultimate pleasure."

My throat went dry. My heart raced.

He continued, "I want to be inside of you."