

The Luna Choosing Game #Chapter 0591 - Read The Luna Choosing Game Chapter 0591

Chapter 0591

Everyone, myself included stood there staring at Bridget with wide eyes. Did she... just slap the crown prince of the werewolf kingdom?

At least, I supposed, she didn't do so in front of the cameras, or in front of Ambassador Zale and his merfolk guards. But even so, to do so at all...

Nathan was as shocked as the rest of us, but he seemed to recover first among us, enough to rush forward toward Bridget and grab her arm.

*What in hells name do you think you are doing?" he said with barely concealed outrage. As much as Nathan liked Bridget, as much as he'd been ordered to make her look good, an assault on the prince could not be tolerated.

Whatever her offenses against me, this might have been the one that would land her in the most trouble.

"Did you just slap Prince Nicholas?" Nathan demanded, though he all saw it happen. We all already knew the truth. A vein was beginning to pulse in Nathan's forehead. I glanced nervously at Nicholas, half-hoping he would step in before Nathan had some kind of medical emergency.

"Nathan," Nicholas said, likely seeing as well as I was that he was about to explode.

Nathan stilled at once, but he didn't otherwise move. "Yes, my prince?"

*Calm down before you have a heart attack," Nicholas said.

Nathan lowered his head. He forced a breath. "Yes, my prince."

Nicholas motioned to his guard who stepped forward in Nathan's stead. The guard moved toward Bridget and grabbed her roughly by the arm.

Bridget seemed surprised for the first time. Had she not considered that she would be reprimanded for her actions. I supposed she hadn't thought through what she was doing at all, one way or another.

*Get your hand off of me," she snapped and tried to struggle herself free. The guard, trained for these situations, held onto her without much effort.

The guard looked back to Nicholas for more instruction.

*Bridget will be kept under supervision all night, and in the morning. Hell, even when we are on the airplane, I want her under watch and kept away from Piper and Elva," Nicholas said.

"Nicholas," I softly reminded him. "You are the one she slapped."

He looked back at me with fondness. "You are the one she almost killed. Let me protect you, Piper."

I couldn't argue with that so I nodded.

"This is ridiculous!" Bridget shouted. "You can't prove anything!"

*I want her under supervision until the King and Queen can be consulted about her behavior here." Nicholas looked at Nathan once more, who still kept his head lowered. "Is that agreeable, Nathan?"

"Most," Nathan said. He seemed slightly relieved now.

Regardless of my personal feelings toward Nathan, I could see now that he was a loyal man if nothing else. His first instincts will always be to the crown, the King primarily, but the princes soon following. I was pleased to see that violent actions against the princes would be taken seriously, even if done by someone with favor.

I couldn't help, however, the growing worry within me. That none of this had been taped, meant only that Nicholas, myself, Veronica, Nathan, Bridget, and the guard knew the truth of what happened here. Perhaps the King's judgement would differ from our own.

It was possible even this scenario could somehow be spun to benefit Bridget in the public's eyes.

The guard dragged Bridget inside the house. She didn't go easily or quietly. She kicked and she struggled. Her screaming likely woke the whole house.

"You can't do this to me! I'm the best shot this kingdom has at peace!"

Only when the door closed behind her and her voice became muffled, did the rest of us find a moment's peace.

I inhaled and exhaled. C6ntent from N6velDr6m6!!

What a night.

"I have to see Elva," I said. "I need to make sure she's alright."

"Wait a moment, here with me," Nicholas said. He slid a second arm around me and held me comfortably against him. "We don't want to run into Bridget in the hallway."

I agreed to that and so we waited.

A few moments later, we opened the door, listening for raised voices. By now, it seemed, Bridget had worn herself out.

Quickly, we took to the stairs. Inside my room, we found Elva seated on the foot of the bed between Julian and the nanny. She had tears in her eyes. When she looked up and spotted me, those tears came pouring down. "Mommy!"

She jumped off the bed, and I rushed to her. I fell to my knees as she ran into my arms. We held each other tightly. She was crying so hard that when she spoke, I didn't fully understand the words. "You are okay now. We both are," I told her. "The bad guy's been caught. He's going to jail okay? Zale is going to keep him locked up. Remember Zale? The Ambassador for the merfolk?"

Elva nodded.

"There's nothing to be afraid of anymore."

I didn't want to worry her by also mentioning Bridget's part in this. But that threat too has been neutralized for now. At least until we returned to the palace and the King said otherwise, Bridget would be kept under supervision.

*See, kid?" Julian said. "I told you there was nothing to worry about."

Eventually, after being offered calm words from me, Julian, Nicholas, and even the nanny, Elva cried herself to sleep.

Julian looked over at Nicholas and me. I don't know what kind of look Nicholas was giving me, maybe one fueled with his own fear of my demise. Julian recognized it, though.

*Go on, you two," he said. "Go talk it out or whatever. The nanny and I will keep an eye on things here."

It was a generous gift. My heart ached for Julian. How much he must have cared for me, to have feelings for me but still push me into the arms of the man he knows I adore.

I wished to give him a hug of my own, but I didn't want to conflate his feelings. He was being generous enough.

Then I looked at Nicholas and saw his eyes for myself. The gold was molten, the green flecks impossibly dark. He held out his hand for me, and I placed mine in his, entirely entranced by him.

We left the room quietly. I thought he might turn me toward his bedroom, but instead, he led me back down the stairs.

"What is this?" I asked, whispering. The rest of the house had gone quiet again. Only some nightlights guided our way. "Where are we going?"

Nicholas did not answer, choosing instead to let me see for myself. At the base of the stairs, we turned left toward the deck. But then we moved right into the kitchen. Nicholas clicked on the light. Then he locked the door behind us.

I lifted both brows at him. This is the very spot where Ronan had gotten the jump on me. It's not the fondest of memories.

Nicholas seemed to know that. He approached me, wrapped me in the safety of his arms and then kissed me soundly.

Immediately, I wasn't so worried about where we were anymore.

"You have had a difficult time in this beautiful place," he said against my lips as we parted. "I will replace each of

those memories one by one with fonder moments."

Then he kissed me again.

And I melted.

Nicholas reached up and cupped my face with both hands. He traced his thumbs across my cheekbones, before lowering his thumb to cross over my bottom lip. The pad of his thumb dragged over it. Feeling a little bold, I darted my tongue and licked him. He gasped, then pushed his thumb into my mouth.

He had set out to seduce me, I'm sure, but now I was feeling sexy and safe. I wanted to do some seduction of my own. I lapped at his thumb with my tongue and then sucked hard.

He hummed as he pulled his thumb from my mouth with a pop. I didn't even have time to smile in victory before he pushed forward, crashing his lips onto mine. He swept his tongue along the path his thumb had taken, thrusting into my mouth.

His kiss was dominating and demanding. I clung onto his shoulders and let all thoughts but him break away from my mind.

With his hands on my hips, he backed me up against the counter, farther and farther, until my butt was pressed up against the granite.

I thought he might lift me and put me on top of it. I wanted him to.

Instead, he broke the kiss. He panted as we looked at each other, breathing in the same broken air that filled the small space between us.

*Stay," he said. Like he had to tell me. I wasn't going anywhere.

I realized belatedly he meant right now, as he began to pull away from me. I held onto the counter with white knuckles to keep from chasing after him.

He stayed facing me, backing up across the room until he reached the fridge. He glanced at it, then back to me.

"Take your top off, Piper," he said, voice low and commanding. His Alpha voice. It was so sexy that it shivered through me.

*Here?" I asked, clinging to my last shred of sanity. I looked around the room. He'd locked the door but-

"Here," he said, firm. No room for argument.

I didn't want to argue anyway. I wanted whatever this was promising.

I grabbed the base of my shirt and pulled it up over my head and onto the floor. Nicholas's eyes fixed onto the swell of my breasts, confined in my bra.

*Bra too," he said.

I lifted a brow at him.

His lip twitched, an almost smile, as he turned toward the fridge. He pulled the door open, then looked away from me long enough to pull something off of one of the shelf.

I reached behind me and unhooked my bra. My breasts immediately spilled free. I pushed the straps down my shoulders, then cast the bra down onto the floor near my shirt. C6ntent from N6velDr6m6!!

I felt exposed like this, my breasts bare, nipples peaked in anticipation, in the bright lights of the kitchen.

But with Nicholas looking at me like it was me he wanted to eat, and not the container of whipped cream in his hand, I kind of liked being exposed.

I didn't mind if it was Nicholas. I would never mind with him.

"Where to you think you'd be more comfortable?" he asked me. His eyes darted from my exposed breasts to my face and back again.

*For what?" I asked.

He lifted the tub of whipped cream. "I'm going to cover you in this, and spend my time licking it all off."

Oh my God. My skin burned with sudden heat. My heart darted forward at record speed. If he'd wanted a sensible answer from me, he should have known better than to tell me his plans so straightforwardly.

His eyes crossed over the room. Near the far wall was a short padded bench. It kind of looked like somewhere someone might take a short break, or sit to tie their shoes.

*Stretch out on that," he said.

I nodded and hurried toward it. He caught me by the belt loop of my shorts as I tried to get by.

*Take these off too," he said.

My hands went to the fastener before my brain could catch up. "And panties?"

"Lose them," he commanded.

His wish was my command. I lost my shorts and my panties along the way. By the time I reclined on the long, short bench, I was totally naked.

Nicholas followed me at a much slower pace, taking in every bare in of my body with his careful studious gaze. "I don't know where to start," he said, his voice low, almost a growl. His dick was rock hard in his pants, tenting them.

"Maybe you should get naked too," I suggested.

His lip twitched higher, a proper grin this time. "Yes, ma'am," he teased. He came close enough to hand me the tub of whipped cream. I toyed with the lid as I watched him disrobe. His shirt over his head revealed rock hard abs. With his pants and boxer briefs gone, his long dick sprang free.

My mouth watered. I hoped he'd let me have my own fun tonight too. I couldn't wait to lick this whipped cream off his dick.

"Open it," Nicholas said. I obeyed, then tossed the lid aside. "Put some on your tits. Wherever you want me to suck."

I dipped my fingers into the cold whipped cream, then spread it lavishly over my breasts. I carefully added to most to my budding nipples, to make certain he spent the most time there.

Nicholas watched me. Just as I was about to lick my fingers clean, he closed the distance between us, grabbed my wrist as he lowered himself, and then put my fingers into his mouth. He lapped at them, giving careful attention to each long digit and the webbing between.

God, my core ached.

He smirked as he pulled my hand again.

"Now, then," he said. "Time for me to feast."

He lowered himself over me. I thought he might kiss me, from his trajectory, but at the last minute, he dipped down and dropped his open mouth onto my breasts.

He lapped at the whip cream, carefully licking my breast clean. Frustratingly he ignored my nipple for now and moved to my other breast to complete similar path as the first.

"Nick," I said, whimpering.

"If you wanted me to go for a certain place, you should have only chosen that place," he said. But then, blessedly, his mouth lowered onto my nipple and he sucked away the whipped cream.

The shift from cold to hot had my back bowing. I gasped and clung onto his shoulders. He suckled until I was a trembling mess beneath him. Then he did it a second time by moving to the second nipple and giving it as equal treatment as the first.

When he leaned back, he smiled down at me appreciating the sight I must have made. I was panting, blissed out yet still wanting more.

He looked so damn smug and I could even be mad.

"Where should I go next?" he asked.

I knew this time exactly what I wanted and I wasn't going to play around. I dipped my fingers into the whipped cream, spread my legs and dropped a dollop right on top of my clit.

Nicholas licked his lips.

He lowered himself and with his tongue, hands, and later his dick, carried me straight into a blissed out oblivion.

Chapter 0593

The next morning was the final of our time on the island, so I made sure to set a personal alarm to wake me up just before dawn. When it finally went off, I grumbled a minute, before remembering my plan and forcing myself out of bed.

I turned toward Elva and shook her gently, rousing her.

"Mommy?" she asked, peeking open one eye.

"Would you like to watch the sunrise, honey?"

That woke her up right away. "Yeah!"

I shushed her gently. "Let's not wake Nicholas," I said.

"I'm already awake," he said from his air mattress on the ground.

I had tried to tell him late last night, after we had very diligently cleaned up after ourselves and finally came upstairs to sleep, that he didn't have to guard us now, with Ronan in jail and Bridget under supervision.

But Nicholas would not be talked out of it.

And now, thusly, he had been woken up before dawn.

I rolled over on the bed to peer down at him with an apologetic glance. "Sorry," I said.

He rubbed his eye with his forefinger. He huffed a small exhale as he shook his head. "I wouldn't want to have missed this," he said. "I'm glad I was here."

We all rolled out of bed. Since it was so early, we didn't bother changing out of our pajamas as we descended the staircase and made our way out onto the deck. We had to come around the house to face east.

Already the sky was lighting up in warm oranges, the sun near the horizon.

To my surprise, Veronica was already there, reading the book she had borrowed from the merfolk. She had a tiny book light clipped onto the top of the book. I marveled for a minute at how it could do so without bending the pages.

"Magic," Veronica said when I asked her. I had no idea if she was serious or not.

"Mommy, look!" I turned my head just in time to see a line of blinding white stretch out across the entire horizon. Then the top of the sun brought all of the sunshine back into itself.

It was amazing to watch, the brightness of the sun cresting above the waves, as the light painted the sky with a rainbow of colors.

I walked closer to Elva and Nicholas, coming to stand between them. I placed my hand on Elva's shoulder. Nicholas clutched my other hand in his.

"It's beautiful," I whispered.

Nicholas leaned close to my ear. "Not as beautiful as you," he whispered.

Smooth talker.

I gave him a soft smile. He returned it just as softly.

Too soon, we were unable to look at the sunrise any longer, not wanting to damage our eyes. By now, some of the others had awakened. Soon, Julian had found us and joined us out on the sand.

Elva sat in the shadow of the sandcastle Bridget had made for her. We'd thought of dismantling it, but... we didn't want to traumatize Elva any more than she already was.

*Come on," Julian said to her. "Let's make our own sandcastle."

"That could be fun," I told Elva, to encourage her. She hadn't shown as much interest in sandcastles since receiving Bridget's gift.

She sighed as she said, "Okay." She took Julian's hand and they went closer to the water to recover the wet sand needed for such an endeavor.

Meanwhile, Veronica called me closer. Nicholas seemed torn about whether to follow Elva or me, but he decided me rather quickly when Veronica added, "I want to tell you about what I found in here."

We both moved closer to her. Veronica didn't seem troubled that Nicholas had joined us.

She closed the book, then stood from the beach towel she had stretched out for herself. As I was closer now, I could see that she had made extreme progress on the book since the last time we'd talked about it. It seemed as if she was nearly done.

*The Oracle should be able to remove Elva's curse," Veronica said. I wanted to celebrate. That should have been good news, but her dire expression kept me from expressing my joy. "But she won't be able to do it alone."

"What does that mean?" I asked. "Do we need to find someone else?"

"Yes," she said. "And perhaps no."

"Please don't be cryptic with me about this, Veronica," I said. Usually I wouldn't have minded. I liked the unique way Veronica's mind seemed to work. But this time, I needed clarity. "This concerns Elva. Please."

*Forgive me," she said and cleared her throat. "I did not mean to undermine the importance of this, or keep it from you." He inhaled deeply. "The curse itself is tied and bound with life force, so it will take a considerable amount of life force to remove it."

*Life force?" I asked. "What are talking about? Like years off our life?"

"Most likely, yes," she said. "Or health, near the end. Or quality of life. And the more life force that is needed the more painful it would be for... the donor."

"So you need a donor?" Nicholas asked. Already I could sense he was about to volunteer. Well, he could get in line. Elva was my daughter. If anyone had to sacrifice anything to save her and give her a better life, it was going to be me.

It could only be me, really.

*The Oracle has the power to remove the curse, but not the means," Veronica confirmed. "She will need a donor. Or donors."

*I volunteer," I said at once, before Nicholas had a chance to.

"No," Nicholas said. "I'll do it. I'm an Alpha. It's the least I can do for my pack. It's my responsibility."

His... pack? But we didn't belong to the same pack.

And I wasn't going to let him off with that Alpha bullshit, on top of it.

*Elva is my daughter. As her mother, the responsibility is mine before all."

And you are - He seemed to cut himself off from saying something. He cleared his throat. "Special to me... As

is Elva. I won't let you do this."

"I did say 'donors'," Veronica reiterated. "As in plural. You did hear me, right?"

I did but... "Nick..."

*Let me, Piper," he said. "If anyone has to give up anything to protect that little girl, let it be both of us. Together."

I couldn't argue that. I didn't want to. Maybe the dream of us as a family was just that, a dream, but it felt very real in this moment. And as a family, as a couple, this would be something we would do together for our child. Content from NovelDrama!!

It warmed my heart to know that Nicholas would do this for Elva on his own. And now with the two of us...

"Very well," I said.

I turned to Veronica. "How soon until we can call for the Oracle? Should we delay our departure?"

"That won't be necessary," Veronica said.

I frowned at her.

She motioned out toward the ocean, where I saw movement just under the water. Three merfolk were there, just

beneath the surface. The one in the middle most ethereal of all.

She had told me, when my heart was free of fear, that she would come.

The Oracle, it seemed, was here to keep that promise.

Chapter 0594

The Oracle and her entourage stayed just off the shores of the beach. I didn't know what they were waiting for.

"She's giving you time," Veronica said. When she realized that could be cryptic, she added, "Likely to get your affairs in order. She wouldn't want to scare Elva."

I could appreciate that. I wanted to talk to Elva myself before the merfolk came onshore. "How will we call them to us?"

"There's a few magic words," Veronica said. "An invitation. When you are ready, I will invite them onshore."

I nodded. I didn't want to keep them waiting for long.

Leaving Nicholas with Veronica, I walked over to where Julian and Elva were working on a new sandcastle. I arrived just as Elva was tearing down whatever she had built. From Julian's expression, I could tell this wasn't the first time she had done this.

*Elva, what was wrong with it this time?" Julian asked, voice gentle and soft.

I decided to stay back a moment. Julian and Elva by now had seemed to develop some kind of sandcastle building rapport. I didn't want to overstep onto that. Julian might be closer to the truth here, than I might be if I stepped in.

"It's not good enough," Elva pouted.

"What makes you think that?" he asked. "I thought it was turning out to be a fine sandcastle."

She shook her head. "It was just a pile of sand..." She glanced behind her to where Bridget's impressive sandcastle loomed.

I wasn't the only one to have noticed.

"Oh," Julian said. "You know, when Bridget first started making sandcastles, she couldn't even get the sand to stick together."

Elva looked at Julian. "Really?"

Julian crossed his heart. "She didn't realize you needed water. Everyone has to start somewhere."

Elva slouched somewhat. "I want to make a castle. But I'm not good enough."

"You need practice. That's all."

Elva shook her head. "I should just quit."

Julian gasped. "You shouldn't!"

Elva looked at him curiously. "Why?"

"Look at my castle," Julian motioned toward his much smaller lopsided castle. "Do you hate it?" *No..."

"Do you think I should quit?"

"No," she said stronger.

"Why?" Julian asked.

"You're getting better." Elva dug her fingers into the sand. "This one is better than that other one."

*The one I made yesterday?"

Elva nodded.

"Yeah, it is, isn't it?" Julian paused. "I bet, that if you keep practicing too, you'll get better and better. Someday, if you work hard enough, I bet you could even make a castle like that one." He nodded toward Bridget's gift. "Though honestly, I don't like that one very much."

I didn't either, mostly because it had led Elva to self-doubt. But also because I severely doubted that Bridget had even managed to make that herself. It truly did seem unlikely. When had she the time? I couldn't prove that though, so I didn't bother mentioning it.

There were enough fouler things to pin on Bridget. She didn't need this one as well.

"Why not?" Elva asked Julian.

Julian shrugged. "It's too perfect, you know? It doesn't seem real. Real castles have tons of flaws. There's chips in the walls, places that have been torn down and rebuilt. Water damage. Weather damage. Nothing in reality looks that perfect."

Elva looked at the castle now with narrow eyes, as if observing it more critically.

"There's more beauty in imperfect things," Julian said. "They show growth. Age. Challenge and acceptance. Perfect is boring. Imperfection..." He put his finger under Elva's chin and lifted her face up to face the sunlight. "Imperfection is life." Content from NovelDrama.org!!!

Elva smiled. Then she glanced at her sand mound. "I want to try again. For real this time."

"Okay," Julian said. He glanced over at me. He'd known I was here this whole time! "I think Mommy wants to talk to you about something first though."

Elva turned to follow Julian's line of sight and saw me waiting. "Mommy!" she shouted.

I moved closer to her and hugged her. "I'm so proud of you, honey," I tell her.

"I didn't do anything!" she giggled.

Over her head, Julian smiled at me. I smiled back. I was proud to have him as a friend, and so happy that Elva could have him in her life as well.

When our hug was broken, I sobered. As did Julian, sensing my mood.

"What's wrong, Mommy?" Elva asked.

I rubbed my hands up and down her arms.

"We're going to have some visitors soon," I said. "Some... merfolk. Good ones, this time. They want to help you. They want to cure you of what makes you sick all the time."

"Really?" Elva's eyes went wide as saucers.

"It might be a little scary," I told her. "But there's nothing to really be afraid of, okay? I'll be there, and Nicholas..."

"And me," Julian said, volunteering himself without even really knowing what I was talking about. I was once again grateful for his place in my and Elva's lives.

"And Julian. And Veronica too," I said. "We'll all be right there, keeping you safe."

Elva pressed her lips hard together. "It will make me feel better?"

"Yes," I said. Gone were my doubts. If Veronica was confident, then I was confident. I trusted my friends implicitly.

"And Mommy will be less sad?" With her head low, she looked up at me through her eyelashes.

My whole heart ached. I had never wanted her to know how sad her sickness made me. I had always thought I'd hidden that side of myself. Elva was such an observant child. So smart. I should have known better than to try and keep anything from her.

"Yes," I said, admitting it. "I will be less sad."

"Okay," she said. Then she shrugged. "Okay."

"You want to do it?" I asked, surprised by her sudden blasé attitude about it.

"Okay," she said again. No big deal.

God, I almost wished I could be her age again, to not truly have a care in the world. Or at least, to not have any

that linger.

As an adult, I was constantly worried about everything.

Julian gave me a curious look. "Well, let's do it then. Where do we go? Over to Veronica?" At my nod, he stood. "We'll build more sandcastles later, Elva.* Julian started to walk toward Veronica.

Elva hurried to follow in his shadow. "Promise?" she called to him.

"Of course!" he replied, all confidence.

I watched them a minute, happiness in my heart. Then, I followed them.

Veronica quickly gave Julian the abridged, PG version of what was going to happen.

"I'll be a donor too," he said as soon as he heard that part. Before Nicholas or I could say a word, he gave up both looks. "Don't think you can hog all the glory here."

We both closed our mouths.

If Nicholas was family to me and Elva, then so too, was Julian.

"I will also be a donor," Veronica said.

My eyes went wide. "Veronica... you don't have -"

"I want to," she said, cutting me off. She gave me a soft semblance of a smile, as much as she had ever seemed able. It warmed me as if she had just beamed at me.

"Thank you," I told her. And Julian too. And Nicholas.

I clutched Elva's hands, looked out at the water, and said, "Let's welcome our guests."

We stood in front of the ocean in a line parallel with the water. First Veronica. Then Julian. Nicholas. Elva, and myself.

Veronica raised her book. The book light was no longer needed now and turned off. Veronica read the invitation spell by the bright light of the morning sun.

The words were foreign. Merfolk, probably. When she finished, I held my breath. Waited.

In the distance, I continued to see the Oracle and her entourage bob under the surface of the water. They made no movement closer, nor did they move away.

I leaned forward to look at Veronica. She had a look of confusion on her face.

*Maybe your pronunciation was wrong," Julian suggested.

*I asked Ambassador Zale on one of his visits," Veronica said. "The pronunciation is correct."

Nicholas glanced at me. "Do you feel fear in your heart?"

"No," I said, confident. "I trust Veronica, as I trust all of you."

Elva tilted her head. "She can't hear."

"Huh?" I asked.

Elva looked up at me. "How can she hear what we say up here, when she is down there?"

I looked at Veronica. Veronica frowned down at the text.

"I'll show you." Elva tugged at my hand.

"Elva," I said, trying to hold her back, but she was insistent. Together, we walked right up to the water. Elva stuck her toes in the water. She leaned down toward the waves and shouted, "Please come ashore!"

It was adorable, if not ridiculous. I started to tug Elva gently back toward the shore.

We'd only taken one step back when The Oracle herself broke the surface of the water. Her seashells looked radiant, sparkling and glistening under the morning sun. Her scales shimmered as she approached us, with two of her followers at her flank. They wore matching colors, though not nearly so glamorous.

"Hello, little Elva," she said to my girl, coupled with a kind smile.

"Hi," Elva said. She was shy now. She clung onto my hand with both of hers.

"Please," I said and gestured for the merfolk to come ashore. "Join us."

"Thank you," the Oracle said. The others dipped their heads in acknowledgement. Yet she didn't move yet. Instead, she looked at me closely. I felt a tiny bit unnerved. With her sole focus on me, I felt like she could see straight through me.

But then she smiled so warmly, that the heat filled the uncertainty in my chest.

*I am pleased to see you have removed the fear from your heart," she said. "I am very eager to help young Elva. I assume you have decided on volunteers."

I motioned her toward the shore once more. This time, fortunately, she started moving.

"Yes," I said as we approached my friends. "Us four will be your volunteers."

The Oracle had no eyebrows to lift, but her eyes still opened wide in obvious surprise. "All four of you?"

Each nodded in turn.

The Oracle's kind smile lowered to Elva. "You are blessed, child, to have so many who love you."

If we had been back home, she would have had more still, of that I was certain. Susie, for one. Mark, another. The wolves, perhaps. And Anna, if she had been permitted to join us at the palace.

I was so pleased. Elva seemed to gather good faith and friends wherever she went. It was an ability I hoped would stay with her into adulthood.

"It will," the Oracle said, looking straight at me.

"..." Did she read my mind just now? What was I supposed to say to that? How was I to ask?

The Oracle didn't wait for me to figure it out. Instead, she looked toward Veronica.

"You've studied the book. You know what is to come."

Veronica nodded.

*Then I will tell the rest what you have withheld. I do not judge you. I know you seek to protect the girl, and do not question the will of your friends. They should know however."

Veronica hung her head.

She left something out? Nicholas and I glanced at each other, before the Oracle spoke up once more, reclaiming our attention.

*For the volunteers it will be painful. Perhaps you've guessed as much. The sacrifice of life force, even that freely given, leaves it's toll. Knowing this, do you wish to persist?"

"Yes," I said at once. "This changes nothing for me." I realized as soon as I said it, that I shouldn't speak for my friends. Though I was willing to do whatever it took to save Elva, that didn't mean the same for others.

Yet, one by one, they spoke up.

"I will stay a donor," Nicholas said, voice strong and proud.

"Me, too," Julian said, laughing. "I can handle whatever comes if it helps out our princess."

Veronica lifted her head again. "You already know my answer."

The Oracle nodded, seeming pleased. "Gather in a circle then. Hold hands. Elva, you stand between them, in the middle of the circle."

We moved into positions. I held Nicholas and Julian's hands. After setting aside her book, Veronica, on the opposite of me, did the same but in reverse. Elva moved into the space between us.

The Oracle nodded at her companions, and they spread themselves at equal distance around our circle.

Then they all lifted their hands.

At once, a strong, pulsing magic flew from the Oracle's hands. It stretched outwards, moving like waves as it circled all of us in a bluish-purple light.

Elva began to glow, just as she had done during Veronica's experiment.

"Mommy?" she said.

"It will be okay, honey," I told her. A zap rushed through me like a bolt of electricity. The pain quickly followed.

I clamped my teeth and held on. I didn't care how painful it was. I wasn't going to let go. I'd hold on and free Elva from this curse even if it killed me.

Nicholas looked at me. His face was stricken but his grip was strong.

"Piper?"

"I'm okay," I growled out through the pain. "Keep going."

"I don't like this," he said.

"Don't you dare end it before she is healed," I said to him. "I can handle it! I swear!"

The pain was worsening by the second. I whoosh of air and water sounded in my ears. I felt as if I was in a whirlpool being lashed around in the water.

But my feet were firm on the sand. It was the magic. I had to hold on.

Miracle, help me! I won't let this end before Elva is saved!

I felt Miracle's strength fill me in answer, but it still didn't feel like enough. The pain was near overwhelming. Tears filled my eyes.

Piper!

"Don't give up!" I begged. Nicholas was stronger than me. As was Julian and Veronica. I was the weak link here.

I knew it hurt Nicholas to see me like this, to hear the strain in my voice, to feel my body shaking. But I needed him to hold on. To believe in me.

I could do this. For Elva, I could do this.

Then, just when I thought I had reached the outer limits of my pain, a new wave crushed over me. I felt as if my soul was being sucked straight from my body.

This was worse than when I had lost my wolf.

It hurt so bad, I felt like I was being turned inside out.

I tried not to. I tried to hold back as long as I could. I didn't want Nicholas to end it. I didn't want to scare Elva.

But the pain was too much.

I screamed.

"Stop!" Nicholas shouted. He let go of my hand.

At once, the pain vanished, and I collapsed into the sweet release of total darkness.

Chapter 0597

When I blinked my eyes open again, I was reclining on a leather seat with the back dropped way down. The ceiling seemed to be curved. There were other seats beside my own, similar in shape and style. Nicholas was sitting in one of them.

The ritual was over, then. I didn't feel much pain anymore, though exhaustion did weigh down heavily onto me. But where was I? And where was Elva?

I wanted to ask Nicholas, but my thoughts felt sluggish. My mouth wasn't totally working just yet.

Nicholas was talking, but not to me. He had his phone to his ear.

"I want a medical helicopter ready and waiting at the airport the moment we land," Nicholas said.

Airport? Oh, we were in an airplane. That would explain the curved ceiling and matching chairs. And we were set to return home the day of the ritual. I must have been passed out all of this time.

But wait... medical helicopter? Had something happened to Elva?!

At once, my sluggishness dissipated and I sprung upright in a panicked rush. My thoughts went from too few, too slow to so many at once that I was having trouble organizing them.

My heart raced out of control. I needed to see Elva. Where was she? Was she okay? What happened with the ritual?

Nicholas immediately noticed my distress with a look of concern crossing his face. "I have to go," he said into the phone and hung up. He turned toward me in his seat. "Piper? How are you feeling?"

"What happened to E-Elva?" I said so quickly and with so much emotion that my voice cracked. I reached out and gripped his sleeve with both hands.

Nicholas looked down at where I was holding him. He placed his hand over both of mine.

"Everything's okay," he said. "Elva is fine. Better than fine, really. It's you that we are worried about."

"But the medical helicopter...?"

*Is for you, Piper. You've been out for hours."

I could see now the exhaustion in his face. The concern I had earlier perceived was not as new as I thought. Worry seemed etched into his features. Was it fear for me that had him looking this haggard?

My chest warmed slightly in affection for him. He truly cared for me so much.

"What happened?" I asked. "With the ritual? And the Oracle? After I passed out."

Nicholas's hand squeezed mine. "You were in so much pain, more than the rest of us combined. Afterwards, not even the Oracle could explain why, though she suspected it was because of your blood relation to Elva. I held out as long as I could, listening to your agony."

*I remember you letting go of my hand," I said. "Did that ruin the spell?"

"Not ruined," Nicholas said. "Just as I was ready to stop it, the spell ended. Then, immediately after, you passed out."

I considered his words. I couldn't fault him for wanting to protect me, I supposed I would have done the same in his position. But saving Elva was and would always be my top priority.

"I want to see Elva." I wanted to make sure with my own eyes that she was healthy and safe.

"Do you think you can walk?" Nicholas asked. "She's just nearer the front of the plane.*

I would have crawled to see her if I had to, but I didn't want Nicholas to worry more. So, even though I wasn't

totally sure if it was true, I told Nicholas, "I can walk."

Nicholas looked at me with suspicion, but didn't argue. Instead, he rose from his seat and stepped into the aisle. He waited there, giving me enough room to get by while also being close enough to catch me if the worst happened.

I gathered my strength, letting my strong desire to make sure Elva was okay drive me forward. Seeing Elva was a powerful motivator. Even though my legs wobbled, I still placed them beneath me soundly enough and was able to step into the aisle.

Nicholas stayed close behind me as we walked toward the front of the plane.

Immediately I spotted my little girl, bouncing around the plane like she had rubber for bones. It was as if she couldn't sit still. When she crawled over some empty seats and stepped into the aisle again, Elva spotted me.

*Mommy!" she called and ran toward me to give me a hug. I wanted to lean down and hold her, but I wasn't certain I'd be able to stand back up again. Instead, I gently patted her on the top of her head.

Elva leaned back to look up at me with wide, bright eyes. "Are you up from your nap? You were sleeping a long time."

Not wanting her to worry, I gave her my softest smile. "I was just resting, but I feel better now."

Just as I was starting to relax, the plane hit some turbulence and began to shake. I was no less a nervous flier than the last time we'd been in this airplane, so I quickly ushered

Elva into one of the seats. She moved into the window seat. I took the middle seat beside her. Nicholas sat in the aisle seat.

We all fastened our seatbelts.

I gripped onto the armrests with white-knuckled grips, holding on for dear life as the plane rattled around. Elva didn't seem alarmed; she just looked out the window. Nicholas was calm as can be as well, sitting patiently with his arms crossed.

Glancing around the plane, I recognized the tops of my friends' heads. Veronica, Julian, and Jessica were sitting near the front chatting with each other. Veronica said something lightly, I couldn't hear what, but it made Julian laugh and laugh.

There was no sign of Nathan or Bridget.

I didn't want Elva to overhear me, so I leaned nearer to Nicholas and kept my voice soft. "Where is Bridget?"

Nicholas grunted in clear displeasure. "I didn't think it was appropriate for her to be on the same flight as you and Elva, so I made arrangements for her to wait and travel on a second plane. Nathan is with her, to make certain she doesn't get into any more trouble."

Even with Nathan's watchful eye, I wasn't certain Bridget could manage not getting up to something. She always seemed to have some kind of scheme working. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if she wasn't using this time right now to try to win Nathan back to her side.

She seemed to have lost favor with him when she had slapped Nicholas.

I thought about all that had happened, from falling into the pit to Ronan's attempts at hurting me to Bridget deflecting blame and slapping Nicholas. Even though I had lived through all of it, it still hardly seemed real.

"Nicholas," I began.

He hummed in acknowledgement.

I gathered my courage and asked, "Are you serious about trying to get Bridget kicked from the competition?"

It wasn't that I didn't believe him, exactly, but he and Bridget were very old friends. I knew he had a friendly almost familial affection for her based on their shared youth. Even if she had become someone else as an adult, sometimes it was difficult to let go of the past.

I wouldn't fault him for feeling that way, though I would be disappointed.

Nicholas however did not disappoint me. His face hardened and his eyes flashed fiercely.

"I will have her removed before she tries to hurt you again."

Chapter 0598

During the rest of the flight, I was able to convince Nicholas that I did not need to be emergency lifted to the hospital. He didn't seem pleased at first, but we compromised with allowing the doctor to look me over once we were back at the palace. If she wanted more tests done, I would concede to her judgement.

After we land, we got into cars which drove us the rest of the way back to the palace.

"Mommy!" Elva said, tapping on the window. "Look, its Susie!"

Through the window, standing at the front of the house, stood Susie with Mark standing beside her. Tiffany was also there. Lilliana and Olivia had been with them, but were now walking away, reentering the house. Those two didn't seem as pleased to see us as the others.

When the car pulled to a stop, Nicholas squeezed my hand and then let me go. "I'll see to the bags," he said.

I gave him a soft smile and then jumped out of the car. Elva and I dashed across the driveway and we both pulled Susie into a hug.

We'd only been apart a few days, but with everything that happened, it felt like an eternity. I was so grateful to be near my friend again.

Susie eagerly returned the hug to both me and Elva. When she pulled back, she gave me a sad sort of smile.

"You've been through a lot," she said. "I wasn't allowed to watch the coverage of course, but Mark told me some."

Beside her, Mark gave me and Elva a bow. "It is a pleasure to have you both home. If you will excuse me, I must attend to my Alpha."

Home. What a kind way of welcoming us back. In many ways, returning to the palace did feel like returning home.

After Mark walked away, approaching Nicholas at the back of the car where he was unloading the suitcases, Susie leaned forward and said, "You must tell me everything."

I agreed, but side-eyed Elva for now. "Later," I said.

Susie nodded with understanding.

Tiffany approached us then, as did Veronica. With all of our friends reunited, I felt more at peace than I had since the start of the trip. I didn't begrudge Veronica and Julian for inviting me. They had no reason to think it would be anything other than a relaxing getaway and a chance to get closer to Nicholas.

How could they have known that Bridget would terrorize all of us?

"I notice Bridget isn't with you," Tiffany asked bluntly. "She did something, didn't see? We all know they chop the heck out of all the footage for television."

"Jessica," Susie said lightly. "She said she will tell us what happened later."

"I will explain to Jessica, if you'd like?" Veronica asked me.

I nodded. Though I liked Tiffany and considered her a friend, the version of events I would impart to her would be much different - more censored - than the full version I intended to give Susie. I was grateful for Veronica's intervention.

Veronica's lip twitched, an almost smile. She knew I was appreciative.

Just then, a soldier from the King's personal guard hurried forward toward where Nicholas, Mark, and Julian had gathered near the luggage.

The King's guard must have been standing in for Nathan. He looked haggard, even in his full regalia. Heavy bags hung under his eyes and even the feathers in his cap seemed wilted.

"The King is likely anxious to speak with his sons," Tiffany said. I imagined she was correct. Though we didn't

hear the King's guard's exact words, the message seemed clear when Nicholas and Julian both looked at each other. Nicholas straightened. Julian sighed.

Mark took over with the luggage, as the princes followed the King's guard toward the house.

Chapter 0599

Just as they were about to enter the house, Nicholas turned to look at me. We didn't truly say goodbye and already we were pulled apart from each other once more.

Despite all the trauma that occurred at the island, good things happened too. Nicholas and I being able to spend so much time together was one of the good things for sure. But now, we were back to reality. Nicholas would always be called away.

Our gazes lingered on one another, but all too soon, he had to turn and go into the palace. I already missed him.

Later, Susie, Elva, and I went out to the edge of the gardens to talk more privately. Elva played with the two wolves while Susie and I sat on a bench, watching. The two wolves were fond of Elva and licked at her face until she loudly giggled.

Elva's smile made me smile. It kept me strong, even as I revealed to Susie some of the darker events that occurred on the island.

Susie was sympathetic over my hardships, and shocked over Bridget's actions. But a different detail seemed to stick out for her more than any other.

"You and Nicholas finally had sex!" she whisper-yelled. She was careful to keep her voice low even as the excitement was obviously bubbling up within her.

"Shh!" I still hushed her, though it was more out of personal embarrassment than fear that anyone would overhear her.

Susie lowered her voice further, but it raised with each word as if she was simply unable to contain her excitement. "Don't you see? This is a sign that Prince Nicholas is going to choose you as his Luna!"

"It doesn't mean that," I said, even as my heart thundered wildly, driven by hope.

"It could," Susie insisted.

I gently shook my head. "I'll admit that my heart does... yearn for that relationship. And sometimes, in the quiet moments, I let myself believe that maybe it could be possible. But then I wake up to reality. Susie, I'm not fit to be a Queen."

Susie's face scrunched up in annoyance. "Says who?"

"Everyone," I insisted. "Maybe I can do something things, but a Queen needs to be able to rule. I don't know how to do that."

"You are simultaneously being too hard on yourself while overestimating everyone else," Susie said. "You think Lilliana or Olivia are more capable to be a Queen than you? You think I am?"

My answer is, "Yes."

Susie's annoyance flattened out into a look of pity instead. "Piper. You have proven yourself time and time again during this competition. Who always brings a down to earth attitude to every competition? Who puts others first? Who so easily makes friends with everyone, even those that should be enemies?"

"Not everyone," I tried to argue, but it sounded weak even to my own ears.

Susie gave me a small smile. "You think these other girls would make a better queen, but their selfish attitudes would always hold them back."

"You are not selfish," I told her.

She placed her hand on her stomach. She wasn't showing yet but we both knew the life she was growing there. "If I wasn't selfish, I wouldn't be having this baby with the man I love."

I would argue to the death that choosing her baby and her love over a life of loveless misery did not make her selfish.

But she lifted her hand stopping me before I even began. She must have known what I was going to say.

*This is what I'm talking about, Piper. You are so inherently... good. And that good nature is what will be needed to help rally the spirits of those home and abroad in the coming war."

I... Wait. What?

I blinked a few times as I tried to process her words. "What war?"

Chapter 0600

"Oh." Susie's eyes widened. "I suppose you wouldn't have known." She hung her head a little. "Tensions with the Bear People have more or less exploded. Mark says more and more soldiers are being sent to the northern border. War seems imminent."

I didn't want to believe that. "Surely there's something to be done to keep the peace?"

*The Bear People have made demands but those demands are impossible to fulfill."

"What are they?" I asked.

Before us, out on the lawn, Elva sat on the grass with the two wolves, Night and Silver, in sitting in front of her. They were all looking so intently at each other, it was like they were having a conversation. I wondered what they were saying.

Focusing on that was less heartbreaking than thinking of the reality of war.

*They want their princess back," Susie said. She made it sound like I should know what she's talking about.

My brow drew together. "We have their princess?"

Susie tilted her head. "You don't know the story of the lost bear princess?"

I shook my head.

Susie hummed thoughtfully. She tapped her chin with a finger. "Oh. It was something like twenty years ago, I suppose. One of their princesses was stolen away as an infant and believed to be brought across the border into werewolf territory."

I couldn't believe my ears. A stolen princess? "Why haven't I heard of this?"

"I'm not sure," Susie said. "Though I imagine the royals wanted to keep a lid on the whole thing. I don't remember ever seeing anything about it on television. It was only ever discussed in gossip groups. I remember my mom talking about it sometimes."

I supposed news like this would be hot topics among royalty, but not bothered with by commoners. A missing foreign princess did not affect the day to day life of anyone I knew about back in my regular life. And if it made the werewolf royalty look bad, I could understand why they would try to hide it.

*Our King and Queen back then denied any wrongdoing." Susie continued. "They said that the princess had been kidnapped by rebels among the bears own people. They couldn't deny that the princess had been brought into the werewolf kingdom, but they do deny involvement."

*If the Bear People never believed them, why wait twenty years to start a war?" I asked.

"I don't know," Susie admitted. "There might be more going on behind the scenes in their own nation. But whatever the reason for it, the bears want their princess back. They said that if she isn't returned, they would come into our country and retrieve her themselves."

The Bear People entering the werewolf kingdom without permission sounded like an invasion, even if their intentions were only to rescue their princess.

"It's common belief among the nobles that the bear rebels likely killed the princess. Even if they hadn't, surely her bear would have manifested by now, given how long it's been," Susie said.

True. The girl would be old enough to understand that she's different. She would have likely spoken up by now, or had someone speak for her. Bears were powerful. There would be no reason to hide it.

Surely, if she was still alive, she would come forward now if not before, to stop the needless violence and death that a war would bring.

My heart weighed heavy, and my thoughts were filled with grief. They'd taught us something about war at the Academy. They wanted us to be ready to fight, physically and mentally. War was brutal. It would take its toll on

an entire generation.

Parents would lose their children. Children, their parents. Families would be broken apart. Babies would learn to fear the world far sooner than they should be ought to.

"There," Susie said, looking at me.

"What?" I asked, returning to the present.

"That look you have... the empathy... not just for royals, or even the soldiers, but for every person that will be affected by the war. That is why you would be a good Queen."

I gave her a sad kind of smile. I never really considered feeling so much for so many to be one of my finer qualities. At least to me, it was a constant source of heartache.

Didn't the Queen need to be of stemmer stuff? Able to make the hard choices no matter who it hurt? So long as it was best for the kingdom?

I didn't want to hope too much, afraid of how my heart my break when it all inevitably came crashing down around me.

Susie stayed quiet beside me, and together we looked back to where Elva was now laying down with the wolves. She was resting her head on Night's back, while Silver was resting her head on Elva's lap.

They looked so peaceful. I wished that I could keep them safe, away from the hardships of war.

"Miss Piper," Mark said, suddenly appearing beside us. Susie smiled at him, but I jumped. I had forgotten how quickly and quietly he could move.

"Yes, Mark?" I asked when I recovered enough.

*Prince Nicholas is waiting for you in his personal office," Mark said. "He has finished his meeting with his parents and wishes to speak with you at once."

"Of course," I said, rising.

"I'll take you there," Mark said.

"Oh. Let me get Elva." I hated to disturb her. She was resting so peacefully with the wolves she'd missed so much.

"I'll keep an eye on her," Susie said. "Between the wolves and me, I think she's well protected."

"Thank you," I told her, and made a mental note to let the usual nanny know we were back in town and that her services would be needed once more.

Susie and I exchanged smiles, and then I followed Mark into the palace. I had a pretty good feeling that I remembered where Nicholas's office was, but I was grateful to have an escort nonetheless. The last thing I needed was to get lost and end up facing someone I wasn't yet ready to see.

Like Lilliana. Or Olivia. Or the King and Queen.

Mark led me on a course that avoided most of the others. I only once saw Jessica, at a distance, but she was reading a book and did not notice me.

When we arrived in front of a closed door, Mark knocked.

"Who is it?" Nicholas asked through the door.

"Your Beta," Mark said. "With Piper."

"Come in," came Nicholas's immediate reply.

Mark opened the door and gestured me inside. He did not enter with me. Instead, he grabbed the handle of the door and closed it behind me.

With the door closed, I turned my attention to Nicholas. He was facing away from me, his arms crossed over his chest. The way he was standing, shoulders taunt, I could tell he was filled with tension.

I stepped closer to him. "Nicholas? What's wrong?"

Slowly he turned to face me, and the abject fury on his face made me gasp. I wasn't afraid of him, I never would be. I trusted him implicitly. But that look still froze me in place.

"Nick?" I asked.

"I might as well tell you straight," Nicholas said. He inhaled through his nose, exhaled through his mouth. "Not only do my parents refuse to remove Bridget from the competition, but they still want her to win."

They... want her to win? After everything she's done?

*They want Bridget to be my Luna."