

The Luna Choosing Game

Chapter 0601

"I don't understand," I said. My thoughts were entirely addled. How could Nicholas's parents not only forgive Bridget for all that she had done but also continue to want her to be Queen? Hasn't she proven herself unsuitable? Unstable? At least, disrespectful?

They had to have known that she slapped Nicholas. Since they didn't care about me, I wasn't totally surprised that Bridget's actions against me had been thrown to the side. But surely, Bridget's attack on a prince wouldn't be ignored?

Nicholas frowned deeply. When he spoke, the words came out with disgust. "They said that her actions only prove that she has the mettle to survive in aggressive situations. They seem to think that she will do what needs to be done to protect the crown."

"But she's only looking out for herself," I said.

"I agree. Unfortunately my parents do not see it the same way. They think her actions will shift to protect all of the royalty once she and I are married."

I tried to understand their point of view, but it was difficult. Perhaps for the sake of self-preservation, Bridget might extend her defensiveness to include Nicholas. But I doubted it. Especially because of the way she had treated Nicholas already.

That behavior was unlikely to change.

"They know that she slapped you, don't they?" I asked.

"Yes," Nicholas said. "Nathan had given them a full report after it happened, which I then corroborated during my meeting with them." He shook his head, face twisted with obvious disgust. "They have forgiven the slap. They said she was just emotional for being called out."

I did not like this potential future, of Nicholas marrying Bridget and her continuing with her behavior. Nicholas was a strong Alpha. Bridget wouldn't be able to physically hurt him. But to be slapped and berated by the person he should be able to trust most in the world?

It was too sad. Forgetting all other elements of my dislike of them being together, including my jealousy, I didn't want Nicholas to be resigned to a life of such misery.

He was the kindest, bravest man I'd ever known. He deserved so much better than a life with Bridget would give him.

*They won't listen to reason," Nicholas said. "They made their choice, and they are doubling down now."

I didn't need for him to spell this out for me. I could read between the lines.

The King and Queen wanted Bridget to stay, which meant she would survive the next elimination ceremony well enough. But, as Bridget's biggest competition at the moment, I knew this likely meant the King and Queen would work as hard to keep Bridget, to get rid of me.

*Surely the public should have a say..." I said. "I know some of the footage has been twisted to present Bridget in the best light, but the editors couldn't have possibly hidden everything that she did."

Nicholas sighed. "I'm afraid they've done worse than that."

"Worse?"

*The editors, under my parents' orders, have been trying to twist the footage so that when it aired, Bridget looked entirely blameless. Instead, they made it seem as if you, Piper, shamelessly euded Ronan and then rejected him. They want the kingdom to believe that you are at fault for your own attack."

"That's ridiculous!"

"You and I know that, but I have no idea if the public was receptive to it."

No. They couldn't be. Even if the footage had been shifted to make me look like the vilest of seductresses, I still would not be deserving of being attacked like I was. I was almost killed! Surely the worst victim blaming wouldn't side with an attempted murderer over me.

But then, who knew the lengths the editors had gone to, at the behest of the King and Queen? Maybe they even doctored footage or dubbed my voice? There was no end to the bottomless well of the King and Queen's power.

Chapter 0602

Nicholas, meanwhile, looked down and to the side. He wouldn't meet my gaze even as I walked nearer to him.

"Nick?" I prompted, fear weighing heavy on my heart.

*Unfortunately, that isn't all of the bad news I have to share," he said.

I braced myself. "What else?"

*Joyce has somehow escaped."

I gasped, shocked. How could that be? The youngest prince had been given the nicest prison cell I had ever seen in my life, but it was still a prison cell, buried deep under the palace grounds. This place is crawling with guards. How in the world would he escape?

And why would he want to? Veronica had been working with him, helping him understand the depths of his brainwashing. Had he reversed to his previous thinking in Veronica's absence?

Oh, God. Veronica was going to be devastated. She'd been working so hard with him. She saw part of herself in him, and sought to save them both. She would undoubtedly see this as her own failing.

*There's no sign of tampering with the lock," Nicholas said. "No missing uniforms, no discrepancy among the guard, who are vetted beyond the norm to be assigned to such a post. I don't doubt them. Instead, it is simply as if he vanished into thin air."

Nicholas finally lifted his gaze to mine and I felt a pit open up in my stomach. I knew what he was saying with that look. My thoughts had traveled down a similar past.

Who else could appear and disappear in an instant but Hawk, leader of the underground organization? After all, he had done similar when he'd rescued Jane from her fall off the balcony.

"What could the underground organization want with Joyce?" I asked. "Hasn't he already served his purpose?"

"He is a prince," Nicholas said. "If anything were to happen to my father, and then Julian and myself, Joyce would have legal claim to the crown."

Oh, I really didn't like that. Were the underground planning on hurting Nicholas and Julian?

Or... were they expecting a war with the Bear People to do the job for them?

Shivering, I wrapped my arms around myself. "The war makes everything so much more complicated..."

Nicholas blinked, surprised. It cleared away from his face in the next instant, taking away some of the worry with it. "Don't worry about a war."

"But the Bear People...?"

*Julian is already investigating, searching for the lost princess. Even if she is dead, Julian will find her bones and return those."

I wanted to believe that. I trusted Julian. If anyone could find the lost princess, it was him.

But there were so many things to worry about, I was beginning to feel overwhelmed. I could carry all the burdens, I would to help Nicholas. I wouldn't shrink under their weight.

But it was a lot to think over, to consider, and to plan out what to do next.

Especially with knowing the King and Queen were working hard to turn public opinion on me. I could be gone with the next elimination ceremony, and then I wouldn't be able to help with any of these other problems.

"Nick, if I get eliminated -

"You won't," Nicholas said.

I met his eyes which burned with fierce determination. He believed his words so strongly, that belief was starting fires in my own chest.

"I don't care what my parents do or say," he said, "I am not picking Bridget in the next elimination ceremony." "But, Nick..."

*No, Piper. You are the one I want, and I won't be convinced to choose otherwise."

I adored him for his words, but worried the choice ultimately wouldn't be up to him.

He seemed determined to prove it to me though.

His arms wrapped around me, pulling me against the hard line of his body. Then he leaned down and kissed me.

Chapter 0603

At first, Nicholas simply pressed his lips to mine, non-demanding. It was sweet, and I cherished it. But it wasn't enough.

With all the bad news now weighing heavily upon us, threatening to drag us down, we both needed the affirmation of the other's presence and affections. My devotion to Nicholas was unparalleled, and I wanted to show him that. I could prove it to him.

Typically, he took the lead in these situations, but today, it was me who made the first step. Slowly, tenderly, I licked at the seam of his lips.

I was asking permission with my body. I would accept if he kept his mouth closed, as a polite denial. It wouldn't have meant anything harsh, I knew. There was a lot going on.

He might not be in the mood on top of all of the bad news he had received and delivered today.

Instead, his hands curled, gripping fistfuls at the back of my shirt. His mouth opened and his tongue slipped forward, welcoming mine with a titillating lick. He sighed contentedly against my lips.

Having been given the permission I sought, I wrapped my arms around his neck and tugged him down, leaning into me, for easier access. At the same time, I pressed myself up onto the tips of my toes.

Our tongues tangled, our lips melding against each other's in a kiss so deep and delectable, I couldn't be sure where he ended and I began.

We felt as one. Almost.

But the promise was there that we would soon be even further joined.

Eventually, we broke for air. Nicholas rested his forehead against mine and sighed.

"Of all that's happened," he began, breathless. "Almost losing you has haunted me the most. That ritual very nearly stole you from me."

My heart ached. I understood his concern, but... "I will always prioritize Elva's life over my own."

Nicholas nodded slightly, his face pressing closer to mine. "I understand. But my vow is this: I will keep you both safe so that a sacrifice like that from you is no longer necessary."

Where my heart cracked now filled with the warmth of affection. "Nick..." I didn't know what else to say. How could I properly convey the full depths of my gratitude and my devotion to him? Words seemed inadequate.

He must have agreed, because in the next moment, he surged forward and kissed me again.

Yes, I wasn't ready yet to express the depths of my feelings for him in words, but I could show him with my hands and my mouth and my body. I could love and please him and leave no room for doubt of the connection between

us.

We were for each other, even if our circumstances forced us apart eventually. There was no one I would ever want in my life as much as I wanted him.

Nicholas must have felt similarly. He gripped the bottom of my shirt and slowly lifted it up. I raised my arms to ease the way. We broke our kiss only long enough for him to slide the dress over my head and cast it to the side.

His hands returned to my back. Touching bare skin now, he caressed with open palms from my shoulders down to my waist. I arched into him, pressing my breasts more full against his hard chest. My nipples peaked and ached, straining in the confines of my bra.

Once his hands touched my waist, Nicholas brought them back upwards, stopping at the latch of my bra. He unhooked it with deft fingers and my breasts sprung free. I leaned away from him, only so far as to push the bra straps down my arms and throw the garment carelessly to the side.

Nicholas drew his hands to my front and immediately cupped my aching breasts. He flicked his thumbs over my

nipples, making me moan and sigh against his mouth, breaking our kiss.

God, I could just close his eyes and let him touch me forever. He was so attentive, so soft and then firm at precisely the correct intervals. But this wasn't all that I wanted. And it was hardly fair that I was topless while he still wore all of his clothes.

It was difficult while he was touching me like this, but I forced all of my thoughts away from my own pleasure and toward getting Nicholas as naked as me.

I dragged my hands up the front of his torso, appreciating every curve and dip of his hard muscles along my way to the base of his throat, where I began to open the buttons of his shirt. One by one, I popped the buttons free. When all were done, I pushed the shirt back, revealing his toned chest.

He removed his hands from my breasts only long enough to shuck the shirt off. Then his hands returned to their tender massage.

"Pants next," he growled against my mouth, right before he dove his tongue back into it.

"Mine or yours," I said, breathless, as I came up for air.

"Mine," he answered.

I dropped my hands to his waistband and unbuckled the belt. I pushed the button free, then pulled down his zipper. His erection strained against the back of my hand.

He removed his hands from my breasts again, this time to help shove his pants down to the ground. He kicked them, and his shoes and socks away.

He was naked and glorious. I couldn't take my eyes off of his perfection.

He watched me watch him, his eyes darkening. Then, he placed his hands on my hips and gently eased me to the side.

*Nick?"

His attention went to his desk. He considered it for only a moment, before he placed his arm down and swept all the contents from the desktop down onto the ground, entirely clearing it.

His dark gaze returned to me and my panties grew wet. Oh, I was definitely on board with this plan.

Immediately I started to undo my pants. I was taking too long, probably, because Nicholas grabbed them and yanked them down, freeing me from all constraints.

Then his hands went back to my hips. He lifted me up, away from the discarded clothes, and plopped me on top of his desk.

He leaned me down until my back was stretched out over the desk with my legs dangling over the edge.

In a moment, he had a condom wrapped over his rock-hard dick. Then he stepped into the space between my legs. He lifted them and draped them over the crux of his elbows.

He lined himself up and then slowly pushed himself inside of me.

I clawed at his desk, my fingernails uselessly scratching against the wood. There was nothing to hold onto. I lifted my hands above me instead, clasping onto the corner of the desk above my head.

Nicholas grabbed me firmly by the hips and started thrusting himself in and out of me with quickening speed. God, it felt so good. "Ah... Nick... Oh..."

As his pace picked up, so did the strength behind his thrusts. He grunted at each forward movement. Soon, as he pistoned in and out of me, his grunts were nearly as loud as much near-continuous moaning.

*Ah! Ah! Nick! Please - ah!"

I could only hold on as he plowed into me, my breasts bouncing at the force of his thrusts. Only his harsh grip on my hips kept me in place, else I would surely slide up and up the desk.

I was entirely at his mercy, and I wouldn't have had it any other way.

In this, as we chased bliss together, we were as one.

His eyes were on mine, and mine on his.

Maybe we couldn't share our love with words, but I felt it in every inch of my body.

"Nick... Ah, Nick!" I was close to the edge about to topple over.

I reached one of my hands out for his, desiring the connection.

He clasped it at once with one of his own.

And together, we crested the mountain of pleasure, and jumped straight into unrivaled bliss.

That night, despite the worries and the fears and the dark murmurs all around us, I was able to sleep soundly, feeling well and thoroughly loved.

I was also likely happy to be back in a familiar bed, surrounded by familiar faces.

And not everything was so dire. Elva was healthy for the first time in maybe her entire life. And we were reunited with Charlotte, who wanted a full report of everything that had happened after she had gone.

I had promised her that I would deliver a full account in the morning, but now that the morning was upon us, we were interrupted before we fully began by a messenger at the door.

"The candidates are to attend a meeting," the messenger said. "In the usual place, as soon as possible."

Charlotte and I looked at each other. I gave her an apologetic glance.

"Later, then," Charlotte said.

"I promise," I told her.

The nanny had arrived to watch Elva, so I gave Elva a quick hug and then followed the messenger out into the hallway.

Down in the usual room, I spotted Susie, Veronica, and Tiffany speaking with each other off to one side of the stage, while Lilliana and Olivia and... Bridget were having a conversation on the other side. Jessica was reading a book. Joyce's other choice was nowhere to be seen.

I bid farewell to the messenger, and thanked him for escorting me. Then I walked toward my friends.

I pointedly avoided looking at Bridget. I had known, from what Nicholas had said, that she would be returned to the competition without further fuss. But it was still uncomfortable to see her again after all that she had done and all that had happened.

My friends seemed to agree, especially Veronica, who openly glared at Bridget.

When I asked about Joyce's missing candidate, Tiffany said, "Her family called her back home. Last I heard, she became engaged to a duke. Prince Joyce's unrefined actions, I guessed, were so irreparable that her family called her back. Especially when she didn't get included on the island trip."

In a way, I was glad for her escape. She'd be even worse off now, with Joyce's actual disappearance and not just removal from the public eye. I only hoped that she cared for this duke in some measure.

I still felt bad for Jessica, however, who was kept waiting. She seemed okay for now, reading. I remembered how dedicated she was to Prince Joyce. I had hoped that with Veronica's help, Joyce would become well enough to see the good in the world and find affection for Jessica.

But God knew where he was now, or how he would be if and when he was found.

Soon, Nathan appeared and took to the stage. He was alone this time. Usually a prince or two might join him. I reasoned Julian and Nicholas were likely busy putting out all the metaphorical fires that seemed to have sprung up in their absence.

"Attention, please," Nathan said. He didn't use a microphone this time. He just spoke loudly enough for us all to hear. "Thank you," he said when we'd quieted to listen. "Let me offer a warm welcome back to those that had gone on the trip to the island. And a thank you for the patience of those who stayed behind."

Everyone murmured some kind of acknowledgement. Mine was, "Thank you."

"As you likely all know by now," Nathan continued, "the kingdom's relationship with the Bear People in the north has become strained."

That felt like an understatement, knowing I what I knew.

Nathan said, "There is much fear and tension among all the people of our kingdom. As such, we must perform our best to try to keep the people calm and happy. As such, many things are going to happen here in quick succession."

I held my breath. An elimination ceremony was bad enough. What else could there be?

Chapter 0606

*The King and Queen decided that, in a matter of fairness for those that did not have a chance to attend the island getaway, one more event will be held before the next elimination ceremony. This will ensure that all candidates will have a chance to showcase their merits before we must send more candidates home."

My stomach twisted uncomfortably. I wasn't afraid of another event. It was everything after that had me concerned.

*This event will actually be a homecoming of sorts," Nathan continued. "We will send you each back to your homes with a camera crew to follow you. This will give an insight to our people on the day-to-day of your usual lives."

Dread crept over me. I had some excitement, mostly to see Anna again, but they were secondary. My life before wasn't exactly glamorous.

Sure, the populace had some idea of me coming from nothing, but would the reality of how little I had help me in their eyes or hurt me? An idea could be romanticized. The truth was much harder. I wasn't certain I wouldn't be harshly judged.

Especially when compared, as I'm sure I would be, to Bridget. She was a movie star, with undoubtedly a sparkling, enviable lifestyle - or at least, I was certain that was how it would be portrayed. I couldn't blame the public's curiosity, either. I too kind of wanted to know more about the life celebrities led.

Compared to the bright-light spotlight and mega-million dollar mansion Bridget lived in, my apartment would look like absolute squalor.

I didn't want to be paranoid, but this felt intentional. With everything else going on, it didn't seem so farfetched to believe the King and Queen would purposefully arrange an event to cast Bridget in the best light, while showing me in the worst.

I wasn't ashamed of my past, exactly. But compared to everyone else's... I knew mine wouldn't be judged so favorably.

Beside me, Susie curled her fingers nervously together. She frowned, but lowered her face low as if in an attempt to hide it.

"Are you okay?" I whispered to her.

She gave me a worried look. "If my parents find out that I'm..." She didn't say 'pregnant', but I knew that was what she meant. "It could ruin everything for me."

*You aren't.." I pitched my voice lower. "Showing yet. It should be fine."

We both knew at some point, she would be unable to hide it, and the truth would come out. I couldn't disparage her for wanting to keep the secret as long as she could, however.

At the end of the meeting, Nicholas appeared at the back of the room. He rushed closer to me and then motioned for me to join him for a private conversation at the side of the room.

He looked worried, so I hurried to join him.

What could possibly be so urgent?

"Piper, I -"

"Excuse me, Your Highness. Miss Piper." A servant, decorated in the colors of the King's personal attendants, interrupted us. He bowed low in apology, but it was clear that whatever message he brought was important. Important enough even to interrupt a prince.

"Forgive me," he continued, "but the King requests an audience with Miss Piper immediately."

I looked at Nicholas. He had closed his mouth into a hard-pressed line.

Had he been about to warn me of this meeting?

What could the King possibly want to speak with me about? I couldn't imagine he wanted to apologize for the way I'd been treated.

"I'm coming as well," Nicholas said.

The servant straightened. "Forgive me, Your Highness, but the King said -"

"I will face the wrath of the King myself. You will not be blamed," Nicholas said. "But I will eat hot coals before I let Piper face him alone."

The servant reluctantly nodded.

My stomach curled into knots.

Chapter 0607

The servant led Nicholas and I to a sitting room where the King stood behind the chair his wife was sitting on. A table had been arranged in front of her, with two teacups and an extravagant silver teapot.

The Queen stirred a sugar cube into her tea. The gentle chime of the spoon hitting porcelain was the only sound in the room as we entered.

The both looked up as we entered, though it wasn't until they spotted Nicholas, that their blank faces shifted to ones filled with annoyance.

I was nervous at their looks. The King and Queen could demand whatever they want, but Nicholas simply stood at my side with his head held high.

"Your presence is neither requested nor required for this meeting, Nicholas," the King said.

Nicholas lifted his chin even higher. "I'm not going anywhere, Father. Save time and don't waste your breath."

The King narrowed his eyes. I imagined he wasn't often spoken to this way, let alone by his own children. Or Nicholas, at least. Joyce had been brainwashed, who knew how he acted? And Julian had always been somewhat blasé.

Nicholas, though, had been the most diligent of sons. Well, at least until I came around, I supposed. Now he was always standing up to his family for my sake.

The King sighed, and with that sigh, some of his proper, icy façade slipped away. Without it, he looked so much more like the exhausted older man he truly was. The Queen seemed frailer as well, even though her face remained tight.

Stress was clearly weighing on them all. With everything going on, I could at least understand that. I could be sympathetic, while still believing they were making the wrong choices regarding Bridget and me.

At least, I supposed, they seemed to be taking everything else very seriously.

"Very well," the King said. "I suppose it won't matter whether you are here or not, and the girl might need some comfort after she hears my words."

The King was rarely kind to me. This was what really set me on edge. After all that had happened, the King was resigned to allowing me comfort in this moment? What was he about to say?

"We are going to be truthful with you, Piper," the King said. "You don't seem an unreasonable woman. If you are given all of the facts, I'm sure you will make the correct choice."

Choice? What choice? Trepidation began to prickle under my skin, but I stayed silent, waiting. Whatever was to come, I knew I would hate it. Better to put it off for as long as physically possible.

*Despite our best efforts to properly steer the narrative how we would like it, you and Bridget have split the popular vote 50/50. We acknowledge some competition is healthy. The closer the race, the more people become invested, rooting for their favorite. It's the inevitable outcome that concerns us."

"Only one can win," I said, following.

*Correct," the King said. "And when one wins over the other, it will lead to half of the kingdom becoming very, very angry. You understand."

I supposed I did though I didn't acknowledge it. He didn't bring me here to tell me just this. There had to be more.

"There's no secret now that the tensions with the Bear People are boiling over. The war is already unpopular and it has not begun yet." The King rubbed his forehead. "The competition provides distraction for now, but if the competition ends and the war begins at the same moment.."

*The losing side could revolt," the Queen finished for him. She lifted her teacup to her mouth but did not drink from it. "At the very least, they could cause unrest."

*We need to be united to face the Bear People," the King said. "The Bear People are physically strong and hardy, and their armies would push ours to our limits. They might even exceed them."

Was this why the King was so stressed? Did he truly believe we might lose this war?

Chapter 0608

*For the sake of providing a united front," the King said, "I am making a request of you. It is not a command, because I believe you to be a good person. You must be for my sons to both think so fondly of you. I trust you will do the right thing."

Oh, I really didn't like where this was going. I had a sneaking, dreadful suspicion that I knew what he was going to ask before he did so. But I kept it to myself, hoping I was wrong.

*To stand a chance in this war, we need all of our people to rally behind a single, strong Luna contender," the King said. "I'm sorry to say this, Piper, but that is not you. Bridget is the pinnacle of strength and refinement. She is the only one who can unite our nation."

I opened my mouth, not necessarily to argue, but simply to point out all the terrible, self-serving things Bridget had done.

The King raised his hand, silencing me before I even began.

Nicholas, however, was not so easily cowed. "Bridget is the most disrespectful of all the candidates, if that is what you mean. Also the most conceited, and the most -"

"You were friends in the past," the Queen said, cutting him off.

*She has changed," Nicholas said. "She is no longer the girl I knew, if she truly ever was. I'm inclined to think now, she has been playing a game from the start."

"Nicholas."

"I'm serious, Mother," Nicholas said. "Her many attempts on Piper's live prove-"

*A woman's wounded heart lashes out," the Queen said, cutting him off a second time. "Once you have dedicated yourself to Bridget, she will calm down."

I didn't believe that for a second. Nicholas grunted, showing he didn't either.

The Queen ignored our skepticism, seeming pleased with herself for winning an argument. She hadn't won. We just didn't know how to keep arguing with someone so delusional.

But, wait, what did any of this have to do with me? Or what the King wanted from me. "Your majesty," I said, directed to the King. "What would you have me do? You mentioned a choice?"

"Yes," the King said and cleared his throat. "Piper, it would be best for the kingdom if you resigned from the competition and while doing so, made a statement giving your full support to Bridget."

My... support? He couldn't be serious. He wanted me to not only give up on the competition, but to also publically root for Bridget to win?

"If the public sees that you are supportive of Bridget, it will end any dispute and put the full public vote behind the strongest candidate," the King said. "You can understand, surely. For the good of the kingdom."

*Absolutely not," Nicholas said.

"Silence, Nicholas," the Queen snapped. "This is not a choice for you to make. Your selfish opinions have been recognized already. Let us see if the girl you hold so much affection for is equally as selfish."

*You wouldn't want us to lose the war, would you?" the King asked me. "You would do whatever necessary to keep the people safe?"

I would, but...

For me to go along with this, I would have to agree that Bridget would be the best Luna for the kingdom. At this point, I just couldn't say that.

Though I could see their reasoning as well. If Bridget and I were truly splitting the vote, it could make things more

difficult if a war were to break out and half the kingdom didn't support the royal family.

But to allow Bridget to be Queen?

To let Nicholas commit himself to a life of misery?

"I need to think about this," I said.

"Piper," Nicholas started.

"Take your time," the King said. "You have until the eve before the elimination ceremony to make up your mind."

Chapter 0609

After that terrible meeting, I needed some space to think. Nicholas, having left the room with me, was reluctant to leave me alone.

"You can't listen to them, Piper," he said. "They are just trying to manipulate you."

"Maybe," I agreed. That was a distinct possibility, especially with how kind the King was being to me. But, his words did have some merit. What if my choice did affect morale of the people, and thereby the outcome of the war? I didn't want to be so brazen as to assume I alone could affect such a thing, but...

If there was even a chance, I had to carefully consider my choice. I couldn't behave rashly here.

"I just need time to think this over," I said. "I'm not making any decisions yet."

Nicholas stared at me with embers kindling in his eyes. A spark and his gaze would turn to a wildfire.

He was holding himself back. I knew there was much that he wanted to say. I waited for him to gather his thoughts and make his own decisions on what would be best.

In the end, after a long moment, he said, "Bridget would be a terrible Queen. She would be no benefit to the war effort."

"She's well liked," I said. "She could improve morale."

"Morale is not enough," Nicholas said.

I didn't disagree. But... what could I offer in her stead? I knew less of politics than she did. Even if she was a terrible person, she might provide more knowledgeable assistance than I could.

Ug, I didn't know. My head was pounding, a headache coming on strong.

"I need to think," I told Nicholas.

Finally, he nodded. Yet before he let me take my leave, he reached out and clasped my hand in his. He squeezed my fingers in comfort.

"You would not be a terrible Queen," he said.

With that, he released me and walked away.

I wandered the halls of the palace, lost in thought.

I couldn't let the kingdom tear itself apart, but nor could I trust Bridget to rule fairly.

Thusly, neither decision presented to me seemed to be a good one. This was an impossible choice. No matter which way I went, the end result could have dire consequences for the entire kingdom.

I didn't know what to do.

Eventually, my wandering led me to the library, where I found Veronica studying once more. She had a stack of books beside her, nearly as tall as she was sitting.

Realizing I had never thanked her properly for her help with the ritual to heal Elva, I approached her now. I cleared my throat as I drew near to let her know of my presence.

She glanced up at me. "Hello, Piper." I tried to thank her for helping with Elva, but she waved me off. "In the end, I did very little."

That wasn't true. It was only with her studying of the merfolk text, that we knew the counter-curse was even possible. Not to mention that she paid some of her life force to help the curse be broken. She was as much a hero as any of us. More so, because she was so committed from the start.

"Veronica," I started, ready to argue my points, when I realize she's not really paying me much attention anymore.

Her gaze seemed firmly drawn to a spot on the wall to my left. She was totally lost in thought. "Veronica?" She shook her head as if clearing it. "Forgive me," she said. "I heard about Joyce."

That was enough of an explanation for me. "I'm sorry," I said. I knew she was trying so hard to help shake him from his underground conditioning.

She shook her head again. This time, while glancing at me. "I was so certain I had almost gotten through to him. If I'd had more time..." She sighed. "I don't regret going on the island trip. How could I? When we were able to cure Elva. But I feel such a terrible burden. If I had been here, maybe this wouldn't have happened."

Chapter 0610

"You don't know that," I said. "It's as possible that Hawk kidnapped him as it is that Joyce wanted to go. We don't know all the facts."

Veronica received no comfort from my words. Her shoulders slumped slightly. "I wish I could have been in two places at once."

I didn't know what to say to that. It wasn't her fault, but she didn't seem inclined to listen to reason. I stayed quiet instead, offering her comfort by my presence more than my words. Whatever she was feeling, I could help her carry it. We were friends. Her burdens were mine as well.

"So many long faces," Julian said from the doorway. He grinned at us as we came close. We both looked at him. I noticed Veronica's eyes brighten slightly, though gloom still hung over her like a dark cloud. "Good thing I come bearing gifts."

Julian had his hand behind his back. As he approached Veronica, he pulled a small box from behind his back and placed it in front of her, right on top of the book she had been reading.

Veronica lifted a brow at him, then at the gift.

"Go on," Julian said.

Veronica opened the box. Inside were a few seeds. I didn't understand the significance, but Veronica's mood immediately shifted, lightening.

"Where did you find these? These flowers are so rare..." She was in awe.

Julian's grin widened. "I'm a prince, remember? Rare or no, I can deliver."

I didn't understand. Julian noticed as he glanced at me.

*Veronica mentioned that she regularly uses the pollen of a certain flower in many of her potions and spells. I thought it might be nice if she could just grow her own, instead of constantly sinking money into the pollen." *A most thoughtful gift," Veronica said. The corner of her mouth shifted slightly, lifting in an almost smile.

I smiled now too, in relief. If I couldn't lift Veronica's spirits, I was pleased that someone else could.

Julian's grin softened, looking at Veronica, and for a brief moment, I felt as if I was intruding on something that was not meant for me.

Soon, the moment passed, however, and we chatted like friends. The distraction was nice while it lasted. But in the back of my mind, I still agonized over the choice I would soon be required to make.

Leaving my friends to each other's company, I went in search of Elva. I found her in the gardens, again with the wolves Night and Silver, though this time Nicholas was with her as well.

I approached quietly. The wolves looked at me but Elva was deep in conversation with Nicholas.

"What does your wolf look like, Nick-lass?" she asked.

She was teasing. "I've shown you before," Nicholas replied with a gentle smile.

"I forgot," she said. A fib.

Nicholas laughed lightly. "Very well."

He stood and stepped back a few steps. In a flash, he fully shifted from human to wolf. As an Alpha, his wolf was massive. To anyone else, he would have been intimidating. But Elva wasn't afraid in the slightest. Instead, she laughed.

"When will I be able to do that?" she asked.

My chest tightened.

My little girl, already so strong and so smart. She was on track to manifesting her wolf sooner rather than later. I was both proud and worried.

With a war on the way and the underground hiding in the shadows, who knew what kind of future waited for her? Was there anything I could do to make it brighter?