

The Luna Choosing Game #Chapter 0631 - Read The Luna Choosing Game Chapter 0631

Chapter 0631

Things were quiet on the way back to the palace. We'd managed to escape before we saw a bear. Nicholas had seemed confident that none of the people we had run into had been a bear shifter.

"I would have known," Nicholas said. "Their smell would have given them away."

Alphas had sensitive noses, so I had to assume that was true. Whatever the case, we managed to return to the palace without incident. Tiffany took the photo of the twins and rushed back to the sitting room we had been using for our meetings.

Once she was gone, Veronica sighed. "She's been trying so hard to make the most of the time she thinks she has left."

All of us looked at Julian, but he glanced away, avoiding all of our glances.

"We could all do with that determination," Julian said. "Since we are working to stop a war before it can begin." With that, he, too, went down the hallway, following in Tiffany's steps.

Veronica nodded at me, and at Nicholas, and then shadowed Julian in the same direction.

I wanted to help, too. It would take all hands on deck to track down all the orphanages and foster homes between the northern border and the small town.

But there was something else on my mind first. A much different matter needed my attention before the elimination ceremony tomorrow.

With the others gone, I turned to Nicholas.

"I need to speak with your parents," I said. It was time to make my decision, and take my stand.

I was frightened, of course. Defying the king wasn't recommended if you wanted to live a long, healthy life. But wasn't going to let that fear stand in my way anymore.

The kingdom was too important.

Nicholas was too important.

Nicholas gave me an uncertain look. He knew about his father's desire for me to withdraw from the competition and throw my support behind Bridget.

I hoped he trusted me to make the right choice.

"Do you think they'll see me?" I asked him.

Nicholas looked at me hard for a moment more, then he stood taller and nodded. "Let's find out."

He held out his hand for me. I immediately took it, and together, we went in search of Nathan.

An hour later, I stood beside Nicholas in front of the King and Queen. The Queen was sitting down, enjoying her tea. She did not greet us beyond a soft nod of her head. The King was pacing back and forth in the space behind her chair.

His hair seemed even grayer than the last time I had seen him. I regretted that this conversation was likely to add more stress to his life.

But it could not be helped. I'd made my decision, and I wouldn't drag it out anymore.

"I hope you are here to tell me good news," the King said. He stopped pacing only long enough to stop, face us, and say those words. Then he began walking again.

"I've decided what to do about your... suggestion," I said carefully. While he hadn't made any overt threats, I knew his idea that I should withdraw was less of a suggestion and more of a blatant command from my king.

I really hoped I lived through this day.

Shaking my head, I clawed at the bravery buried deep inside of myself. Nicholas was beside me. He wouldn't let me be killed or tried for treason.

The King stopped again and faced me. "Tell me, then."

His fierce gaze bore into me. I swallowed down a rising lump of fear in the wake of such piercing focus. I wouldn't be intimidated now. I had to be strong for the man I loved and the future I wanted for all of us.

"I will not be withdrawing from the competition," I said.

The King froze. The Queen lowered her teacup down to the saucer with a loud clink.

"You need to think about what you are saying," the Queen said, her voice eerily calm. "You would sacrifice the good of the nation... and for what? Your own selfish gains?"

"No," I said.

Although I did struggle for a long while about whether accepting my feelings for Nicholas would indeed be selfish of me, I have now learned to embrace them. Especially when the alternative would place Bridget on the throne.

"Bridget is not fit to be Nicholas's Luna. If you had asked me to support another, then maybe. But I will not surrender this nation or the man I love more than any other to that fiend who has time and again placed her own needs and desires about those of the people around her."

This time, it was Nicholas who went very still. I didn't know why he would be surprised. Surely he knew the depths of my affection for him?

I supposed I never said it out loud. I wished the first time hadn't been here, in front of his parents, but needs must.

I would simply have to tell him again later, more privately, when it was just the two of us.

"Bridget is a well-loved champion of the people -* the Queen began.

*Piper is right and we all know it," Nicholas said.

"Don't interrupt your mother," the King scolded.

Nicholas looked at him. "Tell me I'm lying."

The King ran a hand down his face.

"Bridget would put herself first. She would care for her own gains before that of this kingdom. And she would be a terrible partner for me," Nicholas said.

"And what is your solution then, Nicholas?" the Queen asked. She lifted her hand toward me.

"Yes," Nicholas said. "I would rather have someone caring and compassionate at my side."

*She is common, Nicholas," the Queen said, like I wasn't standing right there.

*She brings a unique perspective," Nicholas countered. "And the people adore her."

The Queen sighs deeply. "Nicholas... What are we to do with you...?"

"Piper," the King said, and I straightened, realizing I was being addressed. "I would ask that you leave the room so that we may speak with my son privately on this matter."

I wasn't so sure that was a good idea. Had my rejection of his suggestion been firm enough? Did I need to make myself clearer?

"Your Majesty," I began. I lowered my head in reverence, but kept my feet firmly planted. "Am I to attend the elimination ceremony tomorrow?"

The King was quiet a moment, long enough for my nerves to prickle and my heart to ache. But then he said, "How

else would you know if you have been selected?"

That was as good as confirmation as I could expect. My rejection had been heard and respected. Now it was up to the nature of the competition, whether I stayed or went.

"Now, please. Leave us," the King said.

I side-eyed Nicholas, to make sure he was okay with this. He caught my gaze and nodded.

"I also need some time alone to speak with my parents," Nicholas said. "I will catch up with you at the ceremony tomorrow."

Tomorrow? Disappointment flooded through me, though I did my best to school it from my face.

He didn't want to see me tonight? For what could possibly be my last night in the palace?

I tried not to let my worries get the better of me, as I nodded and saw myself out from the room.

In the hallway, Nathan closed the door behind me, giving the royal family some privacy.

Why wouldn't Nicholas want to see me later? Was something else going on?

Chapter 0632

The next morning, I awoke feeling groggy. I hadn't slept at all the night before, too stressed about what the day might bring, especially with Nicholas's disappearance after the meeting the day before.

He had said that he would talk to me at the elimination ceremony, but I didn't know that meant I wouldn't even clap eyes on him for the rest of the day. Not even Julian had seemed to know what was up when I had confronted him about it.

"I'm sure it's fine," Julian had said. "Nicholas isn't going to just ditch you now, after everything you've been through together."

That wasn't the comfort that he had thought it was. All night long, I tossed and turned. Maybe Nicholas felt bound to me because of what we shared. Maybe our affections toward each other wouldn't be enough when push came to shove. Maybe Nicholas agreed he needed someone else for the nation.

No. He stood up for me to his parents. At least against Bridget. But what if they were able to sway him to look closer at Olivia or Lilliana again?

By the time my alarm went off the next morning, I reasoned I had slept for maybe about ten minutes the night before.

After dressing and breakfast, Elva and I returned to the room to find our suitcases out on the bed, Charlotte was frowning at them.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Nathan said everyone had to be packed just in case."

"It's not your fault," I assured her as I came to her side. I placed my hand on her shoulder and gave her a small smile. "It won't be the first time we've done this."

"I'll watch the broadcast tonight," Charlotte said. "The minute Nicholas says your name, I will be right here, putting all of your things right back."

I appreciated her confidence and told her so. Though, in my heart, I knew the King would be the one with the final word. I doubted even Nicholas would be able to stand up to his will.

The King had given me a chance to bow out gracefully. Since I had refused to do so, now it was time for him to take matters into his own hands.

Meanwhile, Elva walked over to where she had her stuffed animals set up, in her play area. She slowly picked them up one at a time and brought them toward the suitcase. She dragged her feet as she walked, clearly upset.

When she came closer, I put my arm around her and pulled her against me in a sideways hug.

"We're going to be okay," I told her.

"I know," she said in a reserved kind of way that broke my heart a little.

"We'll survive no matter where we are," I added, giving her a squeeze. "So long as we have each other."

"Okay, Mommy." She shuffled away from my hold and put her stuffed animals in her suitcase. Then she returned to the play area to collect more of her toys.

I felt like a failure of a mother, unable to offer my child comfort. I couldn't lie to her and promise her that we would stay. But to hear her so monotone, so defeated...

My entire chest ached.

Later, when the bags were packed, and Elva was left in the care of the nanny, I changed into my fancy sequin dress and headed down to the ballroom. There, a familiar state had been erected, facing the thrones. Some invited guests were already there. I recognized many noble families by now.

I quickly spotted Veronica and Tiffany and made my way over to them. Tiffany's attitude reminded me of Elva's. Reserved and defeated. Though she still managed a smile, however wobbly.

We hugged each other one at a time.

"My biggest regret," Tiffany said, "was being unable to find that foster home."

Chapter 0633

We had spent the better part of yesterday, making searches and calls. We'd had a few hits that didn't pan out. We were a far way from being finished, however.

"Maybe Julian will still let us help, even after we are gone," I said.

Veronica gave me a flat look. Tiffany rolled her eyes.

"Not this again, Piper," Tiffany said. "You are not getting eliminated today. No shot."

"You didn't hear the things the King was saying," I said.

"Well, it's not the King who is going to be married to you, is it?" Tiffany said. "Trust Prince Nicholas. He's going to make the correct choice."

I lowered my chin, embarrassed at having to need Tiffany's support in this moment, when she was the most likely to leave.

*Sorry..." I said.

Tiffany lightly punched my arm. "No more frowns, yeah? Oh. There's your prince."

I looked over in time to see Nicholas enter. He was sharp in his fitted tuxedo. I thought he might look at me, but he didn't. In fact, he seemed set on looking everywhere but at me specifically.

Was that just my imagination? I felt sensitive to all things Nicholas at the moment.

Bridget took that opportunity to slink into the open space beside me.

"It will be so much quieter without you here, Piper. Tragic, truly," Bridget said, though her toothy smile gave away her true feelings.

"You should be in prison for everything that you've done and tried to do," I told her. "Nicholas might not choose me, but if you think for a second that you are going to be the one to stay, then you are more delusional than I thought."

Bridget glare cut through me. She lowered her voice to a dangerous hiss. "I am not only staying, I am going to be Nicholas's Luna and this nation's Queen. Just you wait, Piper. You'll be watching my coronation on the television from your small town soon enough."

*Bridget," Veronica said, stepping closer to me. "I thought I smelled something. Are you sure you put on enough perfume?"

Bridget not-so-subtly dipped her head to sniff herself. Then she lifted her chin. "I smell great, thank you." Still, she scurried away.

*Thanks," I whispered to Veronica once Bridget had gone.

*If she wins, we're all in trouble," Veronica said. "But she won't. You'll see."

The candidates took our places on the stage while the King and Queen seated in their thrones with Nicholas and Julian beside them.

Nathan stood in front of the nearby camera, waiting for the countdown from one of the crew.

Three...

Two...

One...

*Good evening, ladies and gentleman. Thank you for joining us for the next elimination ceremony! Which of the princes' candidates will be going home tonight?"

As Nathan spoke, a second camera came closer to our faces, giving us each close-up's one at a time as Nathan said our names.

When it was my turn, I didn't know where to look, so I tried looking over the cameraman's shoulder while giving a shaky smile. My nerves were really working against me now, but I did my best to hold it together.

For me to even have made it this far was an accomplishment. I tried hard to hold onto that hard as my chest squeezed tight.

*Tonight, both Prince Nicholas and Prince Julian will eliminate one of their chosen candidates, leaving only two for each prince, and-

"Wait!" Nicholas called out. Every eye in the room went to him as he stepped away from the throne.

"Nicholas," the King whisper-yelled, but Nicholas kept walking. He stopped in the empty space between the stage and the throne.

*I have an announcement of my own to make," he said, and I held my breath.

My heart thundered in my chest so fiercely, I worried that it might break free from my ribcage and jump across the floor.

What announcement was Nicholas about to give? What could he have to say that was so important he would hold up the entire ceremony?

*Some of you maybe have been expecting this," Nicholas said. He spoke confidently and crisply, as clear and sure as if he had been delivering a written speech. Though this speech seemed entirely unprompted. He didn't even have notes. "While to most, I suspect, this will come as a surprise."

*This is most unorthodox, Prince Nicholas," Nathan said.

*I ask only for your patience, Nathan," Nicholas replied. He looked around the entire room. "For all of your patience. This will not take long."

Everyone seemed to agree and accept his words. A quiet murmur filled the ballroom, but it quickly died in anticipation of Nicholas's words.

I glanced at Veronica beside me. She gave me a look that indicated that she knew more than I did. I tilted my head in question, but she simply motioned forward toward Nicholas, as if I should wait and see.

So I did, looking back to the man I loved as he stood in front of the entire kingdom with such bravery and strength.

He was a true leader, even his mere presence demanded respect.

*This competition is no longer necessary," Nicholas said. "At least, not for me. For I have already found the woman of my dreams, and the only one I would ever want to be my Luna."

My heart hammered so loudly, I could hear it in my ears. I placed my hand over my heart in effort to make it ease so that I could hear more properly. I didn't want to miss a single moment of this speech.

My hopes were rising, but I tried to keep them in check. There was no way to tell for sure that Nicholas meant me. Maybe his father got to him. He could have been talking about someone else. He could be making any choice right now.

God, I hoped it was me though. Please. Please. Please. Let it be me.

*I knew her since before the competition even began," Nicholas said. "I had held her in my heart for a long time, not expecting to see her again. But since she's been returned to me, I cannot deny the desire I hold for her and for her alone. If she would please come forward."

Nicholas's gaze swept over the candidates.

Bridget was the first to move, stepping down from the stage.

If Nicholas noticed, he made no indication of it. Instead, his eyes found me in the crowd.

*Piper," he said.

Bridget froze, then totally disappeared, as did everyone else in the room but Nicholas and I.

I had to be dreaming. That was the only explanation. Yet when I pinched myself, nothing changed about the scene. Nicholas was still standing on the floor between the stage and the throne, with the cameras and all eyes locked on him. He was still holding his hand out toward me, waiting.

I wouldn't keep him waiting anymore.

Dropping down from the edge of the stage and walked slowly toward him. He kept his hand outstretched, so I placed mine within his. He closed his fingers around mine.

*Piper," he said, and he smiled in earnest. The joy on his lips met that of his eyes. It was almost too much, like

staring into the sun. "I have loved you for years. I thought time and distance might diminish my feelings, but they have only grown. You are the only one I want by my side, now and forever."

Then, suddenly, Nicholas dropped to one knee.

"Will you marry, Piper? Will you be my Luna?"

"Yes!" I cried at once. I didn't need time for this decision. I had been wanting this from the beginning, since I had learned the identity of the prince. I had tried so hard to push down my feelings over the past several months, but they'd always managed to burst free despite my best efforts.

I wanted Nicholas as my husband, my mate, and my King. My heart would settle for nothing else. Nicholas's smile grew impossibly wide as he jumped to his feet. He tugged me closer to him, and there, in front of his parents, the candidates, the nobles, and the entire kingdom itself through the camera lens, Nicholas kissed

me.

And I kissed him right back.

"Nicholas!" the Queen shouted.

*This can't be happening!" Bridget shrieked.

Others cheered and clapped.

*Turn off those cameras!" the King demanded.

But it seemed far too late now. The elimination ceremonies were broadcast live. The kingdom would have seen everything Nicholas said. It was far too late to take it back now.

*If everyone can please calm down!" Nathan called.

Nicholas's arms tightened around me. I pushed my fingers through his hair.

We came up for air, but only for a single breath, then to reposition and go in for another kiss.

My entire body was bursting with love for this man. I wanted to give him all that I have, so that he could know his affections for me were not unequalled.

Though perhaps he already knew. He had, after all, heard me declare my love for him to the King.

That wasn't the same as telling him myself though. So the next time we came up for air, I leaned back to deter his kiss long enough to whisper the words, "I love you, Nick."

"And I love you, Piper. Be my wife."

I giggled. "I've already said yes."

*Maybe I want to hear it again."

I kissed him again, soft and sweet. "Yes." Another kiss. "A thousand times, yes."

To think, twenty minutes ago, I had been so certain that I was going to be forced to leave the palace and return to my old life, while Nicholas would move with someone else.

How quickly that mindset changed.

Now I could see clearly how foolish I had been.

Nicholas had always been mine, even from the start. I never should have doubted that.

We kissed and we kissed, and the crowd cheered.

Until -

Everything went dark. A gasp sounded in the crowd. Someone screamed.

"What's happening?" I asked, clutching Nicholas's shoulders.

"I'm not sure," he replied, as his arm tightened securely around me.

*Everyone please stay calm!" Nathan shouted.

Somewhere, glass shattered. Bodies moved. Heavy footsteps sounded throughout the room.

Then, abruptly, the lights clicked back on.

The first thing I noticed were the new arrivals. Towering, unknown males dressed in soldier fatigues. They were scattered in a semi-circle on the outside of the ballroom, blocking off the broken windows they had obviously just

rammed through.

Then, two figures stepped forward from the new group.

One was a man in a bird mask decorated with hawk feathers. He was otherwise dressed in black. Beside him, a figure I recognized, because it matched my own exactly.

Jane.

"There's two of them?" Bridget gasped.

Jane just smirked as she stepped forward. The man, likely Hawk from the way he was dressed, stayed ever in her

shadow.

The King stood tall and proud behind his line of guards, perhaps thinking Jane and Hawk might want to speak with them. Instead, they walked around them to stand before Nicholas and me.

"A touching scene," Jane said. "A pity that it's not meant to last."

Chapter 0635

"What are you doing here, Jane?" I demanded. "What do you want?"

I had mixed feelings, seeing my sister alive and well before me. Last time I had seen her, she had been falling off a balcony, death imminent.

She wasn't the little girl that had followed along in my shadow anymore, I knew that. She had proven time and time again that she only meant pain and hardship for Elva, me, and everyone else who dared to care about us.

I shouldn't care at all whether she lived or died.

But... I still did.

Despite everything. Despite how she tried to kill me, how she had been so close to succeeding.... she was still my sister.

I wanted her in jail, facing punishment for all of the terrible things she had done to me and to others. But I also wanted her alive.

Seeing her... tears welled in my eyes. I blinked them back, needing to be strong in this moment. Nicholas had just proposed, which put me in line to be the next Luna. I couldn't hide now. I had to stand tall and show myself worthy of such an honor.

"This is a private party," I said.

Jane laughed a little. "Too private for your own sister to attend?"

"Who are all these people?" I asked, ignoring her dig at me.

Nicholas squeezed me. He kept one arm around my waist as we faced off against my sister. He turned toward me, while keeping his gaze on Jane, as he said, "Bears."

That explained their height, I supposed. Most of them seemed well over six foot. Only Hawk was closer to Jane's height. Though he was no bear, but a sorcerer.

At the same moment, guards flooded into the ballroom from the staircase. Jane made no threats. She simply watched it happen.

Odd.

My nerves prickled. Something was going on here more than a simple assault.

*Jane," I said, more commanding. "Tell us what you want."

*To tell you a story," Jane said. "Of a missing bear princess, who was brought with her twin sister across the border and hidden within wolf territory. They were stolen, denied their true heritage, and forced to live in squalor. And for what? For fear of their strength."

"What does any of this have to do with us?" I demanded.

*Piper," Nicholas said, a soft warning in his voice.

On the stage, Julian moved from beside his parents closer to the edge, as if he was angling to jump on Jane if necessary.

Hawk clocked him before Jane did, and clucked his tongue as he shook his head. Julian stayed where he was. *This has everything to do with us, Piper," Jane continued. "Surely not even you are so fool as to not see the obvious."

I could see what she was saying, but it was too farfetched.

"We were twins, and we grew up in foster care," I said. "But I have a wolf, Jane. Not a bear."

*No, Piper," Jane snapped. "What you have is both. That's why we were taken. Why we were hidden. They feared us, as wolf-bear hybrids."

No way. "I don't know what kind of lies you've been fed, Jane, but that's just not true."

"It is true, Piper. And I'm ready to take my place on the throne, once and for all." Jane's face twisted into an angry snarl.

She raised her hand, and the bear-shifters roared. They transformed, one after the next, into massive bear forms, all dark fur and claws.

The guard growled in response, some of them shifting into their wolf forms.

They barked and snapped at each other, but didn't attack yet.

Everything felt like it was standing on the edge of a knife. One move, and the whole thing would slice to pieces.

"We can talk about this, Jane," I said. "We don't need to go to war."

*The time for talking has come and gone, sister. All that is left is action."

Jane dropped her hand. The bears pounced. The wolves intercepted.

Innocent nobles ran screaming.

*Piper!" Veronica called, rushing toward me, while all the other candidates hurried to escape behind the guard.

Most of the royal guard, rushed to protect the King and Queen, pushing them back into safety.

Nicholas and Julian stayed by my side, fighting as they would my own personal security.

I wanted to help, so tired of being helpless.

"Miracle!" I cried within myself. I felt her, deep down, inching closer to the front of my mind, but in the end, she did not surface. She merely sat there, unable to help.

And she wasn't alone.

A different presence was with her inside of me. Something large and strong.

"Miracle?!"

Miracle's voice came into my thoughts, "Accept who you are..."

I didn't understand! I clutched my head, suddenly having an overwhelming headache.

A battle raged around me, filled with roars and growls and teeth and fur.

I struggled to stand upright.

Hands grabbed my wrists and forced my hold away from my head. Jane stood there, smirking at me.

"You know the truth," Jane said. "Your wolf knows. Quit being such a coward, Piper! Fight for your true heritage?"

I just wanted to marry Nicholas and help bring an end to this war. I didn't care about my lineage, or power, or whatever else Jane wanted me to care about.

"Go away!" I snapped at her.

That wasn't the answer she wanted. Her face scrunched up. Her voice turned vicious. "If you cannot see for yourself which side you should be on, then I will make you see." She looked over her shoulder. "Hawk!"

At once, the man in the bird mask swooped in, grabbed both me and Jane by the shoulder.

In a startling and disorienting swirl of color, everything shifted and changed.

I heard a wolf howl. Nicholas? Why was it growing farther and farther away?

Nicholas! I tried to cry but for a moment... somehow... I felt as if I had no mouth.

It was too much for me to comprehend. My head pounded. My skin felt as if it was being ripped apart.

I tried to hold onto consciousness, but everything was going dark around the edges. I was losing myself, losing

everything.

And after too brief a moment, the world went black.

I awoke with a throbbing headache. My back hurt. I was lying on a brick floor.

Groaning, I lifted my hand to my forehead as I sat up and opened my eyes.

I was in some kind of basement, locked in a tall but narrow cage. There was another cage beside mine, with a different prisoner inside.

Blinking a few times, my eyes took a long time to adjust to the dim light. When they finally did, I recognized my fellow prisoner.

*Joyce." My voice was raw. I coughed after saying the name. I glanced around for water, but of course, there was

none.

"Hello, Piper," Joyce said sadly. "They'd threatened that you'd be joining us soon. I'd hoped that Nicholas would have been able to stop them."

So Joyce was also here unwillingly. That was good to know. I hadn't wanted to believe the worst in him, but after everything that had been done to him, I hadn't been sure he'd ever break out of his brainwashing.

Rubbing my head, I glanced around. "Where are we?" I asked him.

Joyce sighed, as if he dreaded the answer. "We're in the North, Piper."

"The north?" He couldn't mean.

"We're not in my father's kingdom anymore," Joyce said. "We're far beyond reach of any rescue."

I struggled to wrap my mind around all of this. I was apparently one of the missing Bear princesses. We were in the North. No one was coming to rescue us.

Nicholas was far away, maybe still standing in that ballroom, staring at the place I had been. Or, worse, he was still fighting with the bear warriors Jane had snuck in.

I had no idea how much time had passed, and no way to check it. The room Joyce and I was in was very bare bones outside of our cages. It looked like an old wine cellar, but no bottles had been left behind. The shelves had begun rotting.

"How do you know we're in the North?" I asked. The room had no windows.

"Can't you feel it? The chill? The hint of pine permeating the air?" Joyce said.

How easy it was to forget that Joyce was also an alpha wolf, since he rarely showed his alpha qualities. But an alpha, with their more enhanced senses, would be able to detect those subtle differences.

*Also, every guard I have seen so far is a bear," Joyce said. "That's not as much as a giveaway. They could have sneaked into our country, but given the other reasons, that doesn't seem to be the case."

"Oh," I said, a sinking feeling rising within me. I had no reason to doubt him... unless he was still in league with the underground organization. But given the tattered state of his clothes and darkened bags under his eyes, he didn't seem like he had returned to their fold.

*I see you looking at me like that," Joyce said. "With suspicion." He hung his head. "Make no mistake, their capture of me was no great rescue. They don't care about me at all. They stole me away only to use me for their own nefarious purpose."

"What purpose is that?" If I could uncover this plan, maybe I could do something to escape on my own. With all of my friends so very far away, it was left to me and Joyce to rescue ourselves.

I didn't much like our chances, especially with my wolf not talking to me. But the only other option was to give up. I would never give up.

"His purpose," Jane said from the doorway as she sauntered into the room, "is to be my husband."

Jane was wearing a tight black tracksuit with her hair tied back. Hawk entered right behind her, still donning his bird-mask. It was very unnerving, not being able to see his face.

I pushed down my increasingly agitated nerves and tried to focus on the matter at hand.

To plot my escape, I needed as much information as I could gain.

"Why would you need to marry Joyce?" I asked.

*To bring the wolf and bear nations together under one ruler," Jane said. "Me."

*Just because you are a lost bear princess - if that's even true - does not mean both nations will give up everything to follow you."

*They will when they see my power," Jane said.

"What power?"

Jane had never had her own wolf. The only ability she ever had, she had stolen from me. But now I had it back, and I wasn't going to give it back - ever. She would have to kill me first.

Although, maybe killing me is part of her plan.

*Two babies were kidnapped when the rebels attempt to disrupt the bear nation," Jane said. "Only one had been tested and proven to have shifter abilities. The other was raised to ever be a decoy. A spare to toss away in case

the true princess were in danger." She spat out the word true, like it disgusted her.

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*Can you imagine the life of that poor second child? Ever to live in her sisters shadow? So invisible that the kingdom doesn't even know she exists?" Jane continued. "Well no longer. Too long have you been given everything you want, Piper."

"You're going to try to steal my wolf again," I said, realizing.

*Not try. We are going to take your wolf and your bear, and then I'm going to kill you," Jane said. "My greatest error in the past was letting you live. I will not be making that same mistake again."

I swallowed thickly. "I don't have a bear."

Jane smiled a little, the edges of her mouth lifting up, even as her brow lowered. "You're lying. You can feel it inside of you, can't you? Maybe your wolf hasn't told you, but you feel the presence of... another. You can't lie. Even when I harbored your wolf, I could feel something else, even if it was dormant at the time."

Miracle had been silent for a while. This would explain that, as well as the other presence I felt inside of me. Yes, I knew deep in my heart that her words were true.

I didn't understand how it could be, but I knew that it was.

Jane and I were the missing bear princesses, and deep inside of me, a bear lay sleeping.

Not wanting to give Jane the satisfaction of an answer, I slid my gaze to Hawk instead.

*And what is his role in all this?" I asked. "Surely the underground organization doesn't want to help you because it's the right thing to do."

"No," Hawk said. His voice was low and deep, sinister in its smooth coldness. The simple word sent a shiver up my spine.

*Hawk and the others will be my advisors," Jane said.

*Ah. So they will be the ones actually running both of the kingdoms," I said. "You'll be just a pawn."

"I will be Queen," Jane said, more forcefully.

"Don't lie to yourself, Jane. You know he's only lifting you so that he can gain his own power. He's supporting you to use you.

Jane narrowed her eyes at me. She slid her gaze to Hawk for just a moment, before looking back to me. Hawk didn't acknowledge her glance at all.

"Hawk and I have an understanding," Jane said.

"Well, you have no such understanding with me," Joyce said. "I never agreed to any of this."

*You will make the correct choice when the time comes," Jane told him.

"You can't make me."

"Oh, can't I?" Jane said, lifting her brow. "Perhaps you'd like to be tortured again. We can make it worse, you know. We can get into your head and play around. You always scream so sweetly when we do that."

Joyce immediately coiled into himself.

*Jane," I snapped.

"Stay quiet, Piper," Jane snarled at me next. "Or you'll be in the torture chair right after him. We were planning on just killing you after taking your wolf and bear, but we could always have our fun first."

I closed my mouth, but I glared as hard as I could.

She wasn't intimidated by me. Behind bars as I was, I doubted I made for a threatening figure.

"We must prepare," Hawk said.

Jane nodded and turned to follow him toward the exit. "Don't get too comfortable, Piper. You'll be leaving soon

enough."

She laughed all the way to the door, then slammed it closed behind her, leaving Joyce and I in sudden eerie silence.

In his cell, Joyce began to softly cry.

I pretended not to hear it. Nothing I could say would provide him any comfort now.

Slumping down in my own cell, I wallowed in my own self-pity, the direness of the situation sinking in.

God, I missed Nicholas. My heart ached for him, longing in a way that physically hurt.

He was so far away, I knew that with certainty. As if a string separated that distance and tugged at my heart.

A sting that bond me and Nicholas together?

That sounded like... a mating bond.

Chapter 0638

A mating bond...?

Yes. Even though Nicholas and I had never talked about the love between us, I had still felt it grow over these months together. Nicholas had never made a bonding bite on my neck, yet inside of me, that bond had cultivated. Our hearts were bound together, mating bite or now.

There was no denying it.

I felt a distant heartbeat echoing beside my own.

Nicholas.

The presence of that heartbeat, as far away as it seemed, gave me as much comfort as if Nicholas had been standing right beside me.

From that comfort, I drew strength.

In the past, Nicholas or Julian or both had come to my rescue when I needed them. But now, they were thousands of miles away. Unless I wanted to die - which I didn't - I needed to find my own way out of this, and fast.

Reaching out, I placed my hands on the bars and gave them a little shake. Despite everything else down in this cellar that was old and decrepit, the bars seemed new and were fairly well installed. They didn't have any give. "What are you doing?" Joyce asked.

"Can you shift?" I asked him. "A human can't do a thing about these bars but an alpha wolf might be able too." Joyce hung his head. "I haven't shifted since... before..."

He didn't need to finish. The underground's manipulation of him seemed to have left him weakened. I wouldn't push the issue.

But that certainly didn't help the issue. Even if I could shift into my wolf, I wasn't sure Miracle and I would have the power to bust through these bars.

An alpha wolf could.

And maybe... a bear.

Still holding the bars, I closed my eyes and began to meditate. It was difficult, with the fear pounding in my chest and the occasional snuffle from Joyce.

"Miracle..." I whispered in my mind. "Please... whatever is happening. I need you... and I need our bear..."

I listened intently to the voice within myself, trying to hear what I couldn't before. Pushing out all other thoughts and sounds, I focused as hard as I could.

And that was when I heard it, a whisper from a far away place.

"Call for me..." It wasn't quite Miracle, but it wasn't not Miracle either. It was like a different part of us both, somewhere near and far.

"Miracle..." I said in my mind. Then, aloud, "Miracle!"

At once, my body shifted, adding mass and fur. In a flash, I had shifted from my regular human self into a large bear.

"Whoa!" Joyce cried, immediately stepping back from the bars between us.

The energy needed to maintain such a fierce presence was nearly overwhelming. I wouldn't be able to hold this form for very long. Knowing that, I lifted my massive paws and slammed them into the door, smashing through the lock.

The door swung open at once. Outside, I turned to Joyce's cell and did the same.

As soon as his door also hung free, I let Miracle slip away and shifted back into human form. I stumbled. Joyce hurried and caught me. Catching my head in my hands, I leaned against Joyce a moment, catching my breath. "Are the enemies coming?" I asked. I'd just made a hell of a noise.

*The room is soundproof," Joyce said. "Most likely, they didn't even notice."

He kept his hand on my shoulder, even as I steadied myself.

"That was a hell of a trick," he said.

"I couldn't maintain it. It was so draining... I'm lucky I did what I did."

"We're both lucky then," Joyce said. "When you're ready, we should try to get out of here."

"Let's go," I replied, not wanting to spend one more minute in this hellhole.

Joyce seemed suspicious of me, holding his arm out as if I might fall over. When I didn't, he followed me together the door. This one, thankfully, was unlocked. They likely never expected that we'd make it this far.

Chapter 0639

We slipped into the hallway easily enough. The lights were off, so we stuck to the shadows. We didn't go far when we started to hear raised voices.

"I want to know if Piper was telling the truth." It was Jane.

"You cannot mean to trust her more than me," that was Hawk. His cold voice sent shivers running up and down my spine.

"I do not," Jane countered. "That's why I'm asking you. Are you only using me to gain more power?"

Hawk was quiet for a long moment.

Joyce and I inched closer to the open doorway their voices were coming from.

"Careful," Joyce whispered, as we drew close.

I inched toward the door, but was careful to stay hidden in the shadows. Leaning over slightly, I peeked into the

room.

A fire burned in the fireplace, casting eerie dancing lights in a library. Hawk was facing the fireplace, his arms crossed over his chest. Jane was standing behind him, arms outstretched.

*You aren't answering me!" Jane snapped.

*I do not speak to anyone who takes that tone with me," Hawk replied.

"To hell with all of that," Jane said. "You should be listening to me! I am the princess!"

"Your sister is the princess," Hawk said, voice icy cold. He swiveled on his heel, suddenly facing Jane.

In surprise, she stumbled back a step.

"You are nothing, do you understand? Nothing, unless I dictate it so," Hawk's voice dropped lower, now barely more than a cold growl.

"I am a princess of the North!" Jane said, recovering her nerves and her indignation at once.

Hawk narrowed her eyes.

"You are the one who is nothing without me," Jane said. "When I am Queen, I could snap my fingers and have your head lopped off. It is only by my good nature that you will be allowed as advisor at all."

My heart quaked for Jane. As far as she had drifted, she was still my sister. And she could not see how she was prodding a shark right there in that moment.

"You are not a queen yet," Hawk said.

Jane lifted her chin. "I might as well be. And you would do well to bow while I am still feeling generous."

Pompous as she was, Jane's lifted face kept her gaze upright and away from where Hawk's hands were curling into fists.

*You wish me to bow," Hawk said.

*I demand it," Jane replied.

Hawk stood still for three full seconds. Then, in a blur, he was suddenly on Jane, with his fingers curled around her throat, and with her falling down onto the ground. He crawled over her, sitting on her chest as he squeezed and squeezed. She clawed at his hands as she gasped, suddenly devoid of breath.

Instinct pushed me, and I started to move.

Joyce grabbed my arm, fiercely yanking me back before I could enter the room.

"Stop," he whisper-yelled in my ear. "You will give us away!"

"That is my sister," I growled back, trying to keep my tone soft even as rage swelled in my heart.

*She wouldn't do the same for you," Joyce said.

He was right. But I wasn't my sister. I was me. And I would always try to save her, no matter how far out of reach she felt.

Yet before I could pull myself free, a deep thud sounded throughout the building. It shook and rattled. Dust flew free from the nooks and crannies that had been uncleared for years.

And in my heart, I felt the string stretching between Nicholas and I suddenly become much shorter.

Somehow, Nicholas was here.

Chapter 0640

Nicholas was here. I didn't know how. I didn't know why. But he was here, and that gave me the strength I needed to act.

I ripped my arm away from Joyce's hold and rushed into the room where Hawk was choking my sister on the ground. Using all of my strength, I plowed into Hawk.

My surprise more than my strength likely overwhelmed him, because he released her and rolled away, knocking his head into the wall. That disoriented him for a few minutes. He grabbed at his head as he struggled to pull himself up to his knees.

"Jane!" I called and rushed to her.

Clutching at her neck, she gasped for air. When she saw that I had been the one to save her, her eyes went wide." What the hell are you doing?"

"Can you see now? These people are not your friends. He doesn't care about you. He doesn't want to help you." I spoke quickly, knowing I was short on time.

I grabbed Jane's hands and helped her stand. We had to get out of here right now. Hawk could collect himself at any moment.

"Piper!" Joyce called from the doorway. He was looking nervously down the hall, then up at the ceiling as the building continued to shake around us. More dust filled the air.

*Jane, please." I continued to hold her hands, even as she tried to tear them away. "Just come with me. We can figure this all out. Despite everything that happened, you are still my sister. And we're both... princesses? Doesn't that give us both a bright future?"

Jane's face twisted in disgust. "They were going to throw me away anyway, because I didn't have a wolf or a bear. They considered me freak, Piper. I will never have a place there, not as I am."

"We can work it out," I pleaded. "If you stay here, they'll use you or kill you or both. Jane, please."

"You've never cared what happens to me," Jane sneered. She ripped her hands free from mine. "Don't pretend to care about me now!*

"I've always cared about you!" I shouted back. "How could you never see that? Everything I ever did was to protect you! I want my sister back."

*Your sister is gone!" Jane said.

*Then I just want you! However you are! Whoever you consider yourself to be! You are my flesh and blood, and we will work through all of this together. As it should be! You know I'd never leave you behind!"

"Do I know that?!"

"I gave up my wolf for you, Jane. And Elva, ..."

I would never forgive Jane for the things that she had done to that little girl. Jane had been the one to place the curse! After abandoning her child.

But even with that, I still wanted to help Jane. I would always protect Elva, but if I kept them separate. If I could get Jane into some kind of hospital... get her the best treatment the werewolf or bear kingdom could offer... then maybe she would eventually return to herself.

*Jane, please." My voice trembled.

Jane's eyes had been icy since the start of our reunion all those months ago now. But as she looked at me in this moment, I saw a sliver of hope. For the first time in such a long time, some of her anger seemed to thaw and she was that little girl with pigtails who followed me around.

We were twins, but I was the big sister. I was the one always looking out for her. Despite her cloudy memories

and the underground's manipulations, I never once left her behind. She was forever in my heart, even when we had been separated.

Jane swallowed hard. Tears welled up in her eyes. "Piper..." Her voice broke.

For one gleaming moment, I had my sister back. My heavy heart lifted, weighed down for so long by the regret and the pain that Jane had been lost. But now, here she was.

"We'll work it out," I said, and held out my hand for her to take. "We'll work everything out, Jane. It's going to be okay."

She believed me. I could see the hope spark within her. She lifted her hand to take mine.

Then, she froze. Her mouth dropped open in a quiet gasp.

The tip of a blade protruded from the front of her chest. A bloody starburst spread outward, staining her clothes and dripping down, down...

Her eyes stayed on mine as the hope there dwindled. She was frightened.

My heart lurched and I started forward. "Jane!"

The blade ripped away from her, and she slumped forward into my waiting arms. She was heavier than I expected and we both toppled to the ground. I rolled her over onto her back and cupped her face. My fingers were red with her blood.

Her eyes were empty now, the life gone from within them.

Jane was dead.

There was no trick this time. No missing body, lost in a fall. No disappearing acts.

I held her here, face growing cold in my hands. Her skin paling. Her eyes blank as death.

"Jane?" My own tears welled, then fell over my cheeks in fat wet globs. I shook her a little, as if we were children again, and if I shook her enough, she would awake. "Jane.... please..."

She was gone. I knew that. But my body and mind were in shock.

After everything we've suffered, even at each other's hands, I never thought it would end quite like this.

"Piper!" Joyce called as he rushed forward.

I lifted my head sluggishly, and saw Joyce in a grapple with Hawk. The bloody blade faced Joyce now. Joyce kicked Hawk in the chest, sending him stumbling back. In that distraction, Joyce grabbed me and dragged me toward the door.

I knew we had to flee, but it was difficult to make my legs work. Still, remembering Elva, I tried.

Yet as we made our way to the door, we were suddenly blocked by Hawk again, knife in hand.

He had teleported.

Joyce tucked me behind him. Rarely had I seen such bravery from him before. To see it now, I was in awe of him. He had broken the last of their brainwashing all on his own. He did not seem tempted by their false promises any longer.

Hawk didn't seem like talking to him at all.

The building shook. More dust and dirt floated down around us, like a malevolent snowfall.

Nicholas was near. If I could clear my head, if I could speak to Hawk, stall him somehow...

I forced myself out of my grief-addled shock, enough to shout the question that burned in my mind.

"Why did you do this? Why kill Jane?!"

*She had served her purpose," Hawk said, voice ice cold. "She brought you here."

"Me?"

*The only princess the bear kingdom wants," Hawk replied. "Jane was ever a disappointment. But you..."

"Don't talk about my sister that way!" I shouted.

He ignored me. "You are the key. With you at my command, I will have unparalleled control over both kingdoms, and soon, all of the world will fall in line."

"I will never be at your command!"

"Oh, no? We'll see about that," Hawk said, and lunged at Joyce.