

The Luna Choosing Game by Jane Above Story Chapter 101

Chapter 0101

I ignored that comment. “Now that he knows, maybe we can include him in our investigation into the underworld.”

Julian hummed like he was considering it, but his ‘no’ came out very definitive. Like he’d only pretended to think about it for my sake. Had he thought about this before? If so, he’d likely have a good reason.

“Why not?” I asked.

Sighing. Julian gave his head a slight shake. “My perfect older brother is too strict with the rules for the kind of work we need to do. If we followed everything by the book, like he would want to, we’d only continue to chase our own tails around.”

Nicholas had always been an upright citizen. It had been part of the reason I hadn’t wanted

I had done something illegal, when I’d traded away my wolf.

him to know

“What we’re doing, Piper, will require us to bend some rules, and maybe blatantly disregard others. Could you imagine Nicholas turning a blind eye to all that?”

I couldn’t.

I wished I could say otherwise. If Nicholas were involved in the investigation, I would feel much more secure about it. Julian was effective, but not exactly reliable. Nicholas, meanwhile, was the definition of dependable.

“Even so, I’d like to tell him someday,” I said. “Maybe when we get closer to the end.”

“Maybe.” Jul gave away nothing, as per usual. He might never acquiesce. When the time came, it would likely rest on my shoulders alone if and when to include Nicholas. I would include him though. Eventually.

“Speaking of, I have another lead. We could go **on** another date to investigate.”

“That didn’t work **out** so well for us last time.” I had not forgotten the Luna’s lecture toward me, where she had basically accused me of being **more** irresponsible than Julian simply for not stopping his reckless behavior.

I learned several valuable lessons last time,” Julian said. This time will go much smoother.

And just how exactly, do you plan on sneaking away from the cameras for a second time, **without** incurring the wrath of your entire family??

shrugged Easy. We just don’t tell them.”

His quick, deadpan response startled me into laughing. I quickly recovered when I realized he was dead

serious.

“Come on, *Piper*. Live a little.”

“And where exactly would we be going this time? Hopefully somewhere as nice as an abandoned

warehouse?”

I couldn't believe I was leaning toward actually doing this. But then, I was desperate to feel my wolf again. Plus, it had been nice to be away from the cameras for a while, even with the trouble caused

afterwards.

"I'm wounded you would think so low of me." Julian smiled wide. "Of course I have somewhere much

fancier set up for us this time."

"Fancier? The sewers this time, then?"

He laughed. "Actually, no. We've already checked there. We're were hoping that they meant 'underground

'in the literal sense. Unfortunately, no such luck."

I tried to imagine Julian trudging through the muck of the sewers and couldn't quite manage it. "Surely

you yourself didn't go into the sewers."

"And why not? If they were there, should I let someone else take the credit?"

Huh. Sometimes I struggled to piece together the puzzle that was Julian. I thought he'd care more for

vanity. In a way he did, I supposed, as he was selfish enough to want to take full credit of the potential

find.

Yet nothing he ever said to me really felt like the full truth. I wondered if the only person who truly knew

the real Julian, was Julian himself.

“So, what do you say? Join me on a secret rendezvous, and we’ll see what we can uncover.”

have no desire to join you in the sewers,” I said.

His eyes were alight with mischief.

“Piper, this time I’m taking you to a mansion.”

Today’s Bonus Offer

Chapter 0102

The next morning, a knock came early on the bedroom door. Fortunately, Elva and I had risen with the dawn and were already dressed.

Expecting the nanny, I headed for the door, yet when I drew it open, the person on the other side

surprised me.

“Nicholas. What are you doing here?”

Behind him, Mark cleared his throat. Immediately, I realized my error.

“Prince Nicholas,” I corrected. After last night, I had become entirely too familiar with him. I had to be more careful, for both our reputations, not to address him so informally. Especially in front of others.

“I came to see Elva,” Nicholas said.

“Nick-lass!”

The rules of propriety, however, did not extend to my three year old.

Elva rushed toward the door. Nicholas bent down and scooped her up into his arms. Elva giggled as he

lifted her.

I’d already told Elva that we would be staying around for a while longer, but she didn’t seem to quite

believe me. Now that she could actually see Nicholas, it was like those remaining worries had been

washed away.

“Come in and play! I want a tea party.”

“Okay, okay,” Nicholas said.

When Elva got too squirmy, he set her down. She snatched his hand and pulled him furt her into the room.

Nicholas looked at me as he passed. Unlike so many times before, when he gazed at me now, his eyes held a certain measure of warmth. Ever since last night, when he learned I hadn't betrayed him – at least **not** out of choice he had been softer toward me.

It wasn't anything like when we had been dating, when his affection was obvious and carefree. But it was less harrowing than the looks of cold indifference I had grown used to the past few weeks

“Are you joining us for the tea party, Piper?” he asked.

I well wanted to say yes but I had other plans. Plans that might show up at any moment.

Like

right now, as Julian sauntered into the room like it belonged to him. When he spotted Nicholas, he didn't even slow. Instead a smile quirked his lips.

“Oh, good morning, brother.”

All the good cheer vanished from Nicholas's face. “What are you doing here, Julian?”

Julian picked at his nails, as if he hadn't a care in the world. “Oh. I'm taking Piper on a date today.”

Nicholas glanced at me. Julian wasn't wrong, though under Nicholas's scrutiny now, I kind of wished I

could deny it.

“It's true,” I said.

Nicholas's gaze hardened as he sliced it back to Julian, “There was no official date announcement.”

Julian shrugged. “After what happened last time, can you blame us?”

“If you had followed the rules—**

“Rules are boring. Piper and I have plenty of fun on our own.”

“The tea party, Nick—lass! It’s starting!” Elva tugged on his arm.

Nicholas grit his teeth, looking for all the world like he wanted to physically tackle Julian, but the little

Legirl on his sleeve held him back.

“It’s fine,” I said, stepping between the two men. “I’m okay with this.”

With me in his line of sight, Nicholas’s anger dimmed somewhat, though his annoyance was clear in the downward turn of his lips and the chill in his eyes.

“How?” **he** asked.

“It’s just how Julian is,” I said.

How I wished I could tell **him** the truth! That these ‘dates’ with Julian were just excuses to investigate the underground that had taken my wolf.

But Julian had rightfully pointed out the Nicholas was a stickler for the rules. This entire conversation only evidenced that.

Nicholas clenched his jaw but didn’t say more.

Julian waved me toward him. “Come **on**, Piper.

I broke for a minute, to whisper goodbye to Elva. “Be nice to Prince Nicholas.” She’d barely paid

attention to me, still trying to tug Nicholas to where she’d set up her plastic tea cups and stuffed animals.

When I went to Julian’s side, Nicholas finally gave in, joining Elva at her makeshift tea party. But I felt his eyes on me the whole way to the door.

Chapter 0103

“How do you plan on getting to this mansion you mentioned?” I asked, once we were out in the hall.

Julian’s Beta, Brian, fell in step behind us. “We can’t take that flashy car again, if we **actually** want to keep

it secret this time.”

“It would be too conspicuous to drive. Even if we escaped the grounds undetected, the bad guys would

quickly notice our arrival.”

“What’s your plan, then?”

He glanced at me. “Can you ride a horse?”

I haven’t ridden since the academy, but I thought I could still manage somehow. So I nodded.

“Good. We’ll have to sneak there though. Brian?”

Brian widened his stride to walk at Julian’s side. “Yes, Prince Julian?”

“Run interference, yeah?”

“Of course.” Brian increased his pace, breaking ahead of us, likely to block the path of any guards or

unwanted onlookers we might run into or who would run into us.

—

Texts began to pour into Julian’s phone near instantly.

Following Brian’s instruction, we were able to follow a path that lead us away from absolutely everyone. We didn’t even see a single servant until we reached the stables themselves, where the stable hands

were preparing two horses for ride.

“Your Royal Highness,” they said with a bow as we approached. They’d been expecting us.

“Take the mare,” Julian **said** to me. “She’s gentler Better for a rider out of practice.”

I hadn’t told him the last time I **rode**, but he’d seemed to surmise it all his own. Julian was like that, noticing things. I wondered if I had any secrets I could keep from him. He already seemed to know everything about me.

I put my foot in the stirrup and mounted the mare. Once I was in the saddle, my horse-riding days returned to me quickly. Although in almost every memory, I had been by Nicholas’s side. I felt a bit hollow, not having him here now.

Julian, from atop his horse, received another text. “Brian is in the security office. We have to go now to avoid being seen **on the** cameras.”

Following his lead, we rode our horses out of the paddock. Once we were past the fence, we urged our horses to run. I rode in Julian's shadow as he expertly maneuvered the terrain.

I remembered how after he and Nicholas had saved me from the boar, they had claimed that no one knew the area around the palace better than them. Julian continued to show that now, expertly avoiding fences and too-high cliffs that might hurt the horses.

We rode for an hour or so, seeing nothing but wilderness, until he finally slowed at the edge of a clearing. I slowed my own horse beside his, until

fully stopped, hidden just behind a tree line.

Past

the clearing stood a massive mansion, almost as large as the palace itself. Someone very

important must have lived there.

I almost asked Julian who it was, when suddenly I felt something, like a pull in my chest.

It stole my breath away.

Julian noticed. "Piper?"

I couldn't speak. I couldn't even think to formulate words.

All I could do was focus on this pull, this tether that begged me to follow it.

Was this my wolf? **Was** it calling to me?

The danger of the moment was forgotten. Everything else was too.

"Piper!" Julian must have seen what I was about to do before I did, but he wasn't fast enough to close the distance and grab my reins

He tried, but I was already kicking my horse forward and tearing across the field as fast as the horse

could go.

"Wait!" Julian gave chase. I could hear a second set of horse hooves pounding into the grass, echoing those of the animal beneath me.

I wouldn't slow. I couldn't.

My wolf was here.

Today's **Bonus** Offer

Chapter 0104

I pushed the horse as fast as she could go. My wolf was here, I could feel it.

But then, suddenly, it felt further away. It was leaving me!

In the driveway beyond the house, a car started to drive away. I pulled at the reins, guiding the horse in

that direction.

Faster, faster. We were going to lose it!

The horse huffed with each heavy exhale. Its hooves clattered against the concrete driveway. We followed the car as it pulled out onto the road, slipping straight through the road-iron gate that had opened

for the car.¹

Julian was right behind me. He'd stopped calling for me and instead now followed my lead.

We chased that car. The windows were tinted, I couldn't see inside. But I knew my wolf was there. It was

so close, I could have cried.

But then the road reached a straight stretch, and the car accelerated to a faster speed than my horse

had any chance of matching.

The distance expanded, adding yard after yard, until the car was on the horizon line, and my horse was

slowing from exhaustion.

I watched the car go, even long after it was out of sight. Inside my chest, the tether between me and my

wolf stretched and stretched, until it finally snapped and was gone.

Julian dismounted quickly beside me. "We have to get off the road."

As I stood there in **shock**, he grabbed the reins of my horse as well as his own, and led both away from

the road and into the forest brush alongside it.

I was numb. I couldn't move.

For one brief moment, I had felt my wolf again. Now, as before, I was empty.

Julian, a man determined, carefully guided our horses deeper into the woods. He didn't say a word the

entire time

He could have been mad at me, I wasn't sure. Whenever I had seen Julian mad in the **past**, typically at

Nicholas, he had lashed out with a sharp smirk and barbed insults. This silence was something new.

In the depths of the forest, we reached a small grassy patch. Julian stopped, and the horses began to

"Can you get down?" Julian asked me. "We need to let the horses rest for a few moments. We pushed them pretty hard."

I understood and slowly dismounted the mare.

Julian finally looked at me, but his expression was unreadable. He looked so much like Nicholas in that moment; it was clear they were brothers, even if their personalities were so different.

"You felt your wolf," he said. "In that car."

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have —"

"No. I should have calculated that you might react that way. I could only imagine what it must have felt

like to be reunited."

I couldn't have explained it even if I tried. Instead, I hooked my fingers together and sunk in on myself a

little. I felt carved out, hollow inside.

We stood there in silence again. Julian fiddled with his phone, but he seemed frustrated with it.

"No signal out here."

“Are we lost?” I asked.

“No. I can get us back from here, but it won’t be so secret if I can’t coordinate with Brian. We’re way off the prepared route, and I don’t dare go back that way. Those at the mansion will be looking for us now.

“I’m sorry. I truly hadn’t meant to cause trouble. I just... I felt a pull, and I had to follow.”

“I get it, Piper. Really.” He ran a hand down his face and then sighed dramatically. “I suppose we’ll have

to settle for Plan B.”

“What’s plan B?”

He winked.

“Julian.”

“Trust me, Piper.”

I didn’t. Couldn’t. Julian was far too manipulative, always watchful, always scheming. And he was a

troublemaker, through and through.

“I trust Nicholas,” I said.

Julian put a hand over his heart. “You wound me.”

I crossed my arms, unwilling to admit how this banter helped me feel a bit better. “You haven’t earned

my trust yet.”

“You have good instincts then.” He smirked. It was nice to see him back to his usual self. “I’m likely the most untrustworthy man you will ever meet.”

Chapter 0105

We waited a bit longer, until the horses were rested, then we began the slow ride back to the palace

“Just whose palace was that?” I tried asking, hoping he might surprise me with an actual response

“Someday we will have established great trust between us,” he said, evasive as ever.

I sighed.

He grinned at me. "You won't believe me, but I'm only not telling you for your own protection. I need to

look into this further before I reveal too much."

At times like these, I wished I had my phone, or any access to the internet, so I could just look it up. As it was, I was at the mercy of whatever information Julian wanted to share.

As we neared the palace, Julian suggested we once and he began to text with Brian.

more try to be sneaky. His phone service returned

Yet, the moment we walked our horses toward the paddock, a camera crew rushed toward us as if they had been waiting for our return. Cameras pushed straight into our faces. The producers shouted out

questions.

"Prince Julian! Tell us about your secret rendezvous!"

"Piper! Was it worth the risk, breaking the rules to see the prince?"

"Piper, do you think what you've done is fair to the other –"

Julian slid his arm around my shoulders. "Come now, guys. This is no big secret. Hasn't it been obvious

that Piper is my favorite?"

I totally froze. I'd already been blindsided by the cameras and questions, and now Julian was making up

such an absurd lie?

He flashed **me** a wide, cocksure grin that seemed to say, Play along.

"Piper! Is that true? Are you Julian's favorite?"

I wasn't a good liar. "... guess?"

“Don’t be so shy, sugar plum. Julian nuzzled against my cheek. It took everything I had not to rear away

I

Julian wasn’t an unattractive **man**, but this was too close, too much. Especially because I **knew** he was

faking it

Even for Julian, he was laying it on thick. I was confused until I saw Nicholas near the stables, watching

us with a furious expression.

When Julian’s hand lowered to my waist, Nicholas stormed forward.

“Tell them, sweetheart,” Julian purred.

“Uh... okay... honey...” I barely forced the words out. I supposed allowing the cameras to believe we had runaway on a romantic date was easier to explain than where we’d actually been.

Nicholas pushed through the cameras. “That’s enough. Stop filming.” He covered one of the camera lens with his hand. “You’ve shot enough.”

One of the producers attempted to argue, but Nicholas glared him down.

“I said, no more filming.” Nicholas said, voice cold as the Arctic.

The producer backed down at once. “Yes, Your Royal Highness. Of course, sir.”

“Good.” Nicholas crossed his arms. “Now, leave.”

The camera crew immediately listened, and began to return toward the stables. With the cameras gone,

I finally exhaled.

“Thanks, brother,” Julian said. “You arrived just in time for the save. Not that I wasn’t enjoying myself...”

Julian grinned at me. I was distinctly aware of his closeness and the hand on my hip that had yet to

move.

Nicholas slowly faced us. His sharp glare shot fire at Julian's hand on me. Julian quickly retrieved it and

stepped back an inch or two.

"Why so angry, Nicholas?" Julian asked in a teasing tone. "Don't like when someone else plays with your

toys?"

Now I glared at Julian too. "I am no toy."

Julian brought both hands up. "Apologies, Piper." He didn't say more.

"Piper," Nicholas **said**. "Elva is in the gardens with Susie and Mark."

I was eager to see her, especially after the misery of gaining and losing my wolf. Only a hug from my

daughter would truly help me heal.

"Go on ahead. I'll take your horse." Nicholas held out his hand, accepting the reins. "If you **don't** mind, I need to have a word or two with my brother."

I thanked him and started walking away. As I looked back over my shoulder, the two brothers stared at

each other.

Nicholas glowered. Julian smirked.

"You are so obvious, brother..." Julian **began**.

Too soon, I was out of earshot to hear more.

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each other.

Nicholas glowered. Julian smirked.

“You are so obvious, brother...” Julian **began**.

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Today’s Bonus Offer

Chapter 0106

Nicholas

“You are so obvious, brother,” Julian said, “It’s a miracle the camera crews haven’t yet picked up on your

pinning.”

If I wasn’t so in control of my emotions, I would have punched him. Not just for his wrongful accusation about my feelings regarding Piper – I was not pinning – but because of his persistence in bringing her

down with him.

I didn’t punch him, but it was a near thing.

I settled
instead for bringing myself to my full height **and** growling at him. I was only two inches taller

than him, but I made the most of it now.

“Maybe you don’t care about Piper’s reputation, but I do. Disappearing with her for hours does not

improve her image with our family or the people.”

“Piper **knew** exactly what she was doing.” Julian’s smirk added an edge. “Trust me, she’s a pro.”

My hands formed fists. Piper could fool around with whoever she wanted. That wasn’t my concern

anymore. But Julian... He had no right involving himself.

“Piper is a single mother. Do you fully intend to support her **and** her child? She’s not the type for you to

love and leave, Julian.”

Julian tilted his head. “Why do you care so much? I don’t see you lining up to date her.”

The words speared through me. Why did I care? “For Elva’s sake. She’s just a child.”

“Don’t bring Elva into this, Nicholas. She might be a reason you are so protective, but she’s not the only

reason.”

I couldn’t listen to this. Any other reasons I may or may not have felt simply did not matter.

Piper was not mine to have. She hadn’t been for a long time.

Discovering the truth about our past had left me unsettled. I was still trying to set myself straight. For so long, I had thought she had betrayed me. I had branded her a liar and a cheater, and hardened my heart

against any kind of love.

Yet she had been hurting the same as **me** all these years. She had made her choices to protect Elva and

herself. How could I hate her for it?

Chapter 0107

Piper and I both preferred monogamy. I doubted that had changed in the past three years.

Julian's eyes sparkled with mischief. Tell her then. See what happens. She's under my spell whether you

like it or not."

"Fine."

I walked Piper's horse back to the stables, where a stable hand stood waiting to take over. After passing

him the reins, I continued on to the gardens where I knew Piper would be, with Elva, Susle, and Mark.

I found her quickly enough, playing tag with Elva in the grass. Piper would hurry to catch Elva, then slow

down at the last moment so Elva could make a daring escape! Elva giggled each time.

"Catch me, Mommy! Catch me!"

Piper laughed too, a bright and honest smile on her face that made my heart leap forward in my chest. I

placed my hand over it, willing it to slow.

Piper should not have been able to affect me so readily. Yet when I saw her with such a joyful expression, all I could think of were ways to keep it there.

Julian suggested I reevaluate. Amongst his usual bullshit, that idea held a ring of honesty.

Why did I care so much about Piper and her happiness? I cared for Elva, but this ran deeper than that. I could care for Elva without worrying overmuch about Piper dating Julian. But the thought of the two of

them made my stomach churn.

Maybe if Piper dated someone else. Someone who wasn't my no-good playboy brother.

But... no. Would they deserve her? Would they treat her right? Would they make certain she smiled, just

like this, every day for the rest of her life?

The thought of Piper with anyone did not settle comfortably within me.

Loathe as I was to admit it, Julian was right. Despite all reason, maybe I was jealous.

If that were true, I needed to learn to control myself, quickly. I was in this competition to find my mate. I

would give my wife no less than the full entirety of my heart I couldn't be wasting portions of it pining

after Piper.

Nick-lass" Elva called to me, waving both arms. "Help!"

Piper had nearly caught her again.

Having been spotted, I walked closer, until Elva ran to safety behind my legs. Piper stopped in front of

1. me.

Her cheeks were flushed from running. Some of her hair had come undone from the tie at her neck. Her skirts had grass-stains along the bottom.

She had never looked so beautiful.

"Did everything go okay with Prince Julian?" she asked me.

Now was my chance to tell her what a cad he was, and to discourage her from ever wanting to see him again. But if she truly had caught feelings for Julian, what I would tell her would hurt her.

She was so happy, so bright. So... loving.

I opened my mouth to disparage my brother, but found I couldn't say the words.

I didn't want to break her heart.

"Everything's fine." I told her. I accepted the responsibility then and there. If I couldn't tell her the truth about Julian, then I would need to find ways to convince him to become more loyal to her.

Piper would have everything she wanted. I would personally see to it

Then, and only then, could I focus on repairing my own heart.

Elva bounced in circles behind **me**. "Catch him, Mommy! Make him it!"

Piper's cheeks reddened in embarrassment. She looked up at me through her lashes. "If you want to play

As if I would ever be able to turn her down when she made that face. "Very well."

Slowly, she reached out and tapped my

Chapter 0108

Our game of tag lasted for another twenty minutes or so before Elva finally tired and wanted to pick flowers instead. Susie sat with her, teaching her how to make a flower crown with her gathered collection. Mark stood nearby, watchful.

Nicholas and I sat in the grass a few yards off. I'd been pleased when he chose to sit beside me. I felt like there was much regarding his conversation with Julian that he had been keeping from me.

He was relaxed, resting back on his elbows with his long legs stretched out in front of him. His typically perfectly styled hair was a bit windswept from running.

He looked perfect and comfortable, and in another life, I would have stretched out along side him and buried my face into his neck.

Now, I maintained my careful distance.

I teased, "I hope you were too tough on Julian."

At once, I regretted the words. The softness in Nicholas's **face** hardened. He pushed himself into sitting

upright.

"He's still in one piece, don't worry," he said gruffly.

I tried to quickly think of a different topic of conversation. The weather, perhaps? It was pleasant today.

"You must care for Julian deeply," Nicholas **said**, causing my thoughts to stutter.

Did Julian's lies truly work on Nicholas **as** well?

I knew I should probably correct him, but I wasn't sure. Julian had said we should keep the truth from Nicholas. Maybe this lie was an extension of that. I wanted to protect him.

But this felt too far. It didn't seem right.

"I wouldn't say it's all that deep," I said, trying to reveal just enough truth without entirely showing my

hand. I hated lying. I really wasn't built for the deception Julian wanted.

"Oh, no?" Nicholas raised a brow, acting casual. But his grip on his knee had tightened, giving him away.

I didn't know why he cared so much about this. He'd already told **Julian**, flat out, that he was not jealous.

Yet he was acting for all the world like a man who was

I must have been imagining it. But I still wanted to put him at ease.

I'm not serious about Prince Julian," I admitted. "We've had our dates, but they don't mean anything.

He loosened the death grip he had on his knees, and **nodded**. He didn't say he **was** relieved, but I could

I

see it in the way his features smoothed **out**.

For a time, we silently watched as Elva worked on a flower crown. It fell apart almost instantly, but with

Susie's gentle encouragement, she began **again**.

And in that time, I felt a sense of peace. I still felt loss from the gain and absence of my wolf, but to have

felt it, even for a fleeting moment, gave me a sense of comfort. I had thought it totally lost. Yet it was still

out there calling to me

Julian had tracked it down once. I had to believe he could do so again. Next time, I wouldn't let it get

away

"Have you thought about Linda's deal?" Nicholas asked me.

My pleasant mood instantly shifted, sinking down. "You mean, her blackmail?"

Of course I wanted to keep my previous relationship with Nicholas a secret, since the King had made threats against my life if it were to be exposed. But that wasn't the only reason.

Tmtorn," I said want to make sure I can stay for Elva's sake. If I'm disqualified" or worse, "-who

will happen to her. But, at the same time, I hate the thought of you forced to be with
know

someone for my sake"

Don't worry about me. I'll do whatever it takes to help Elva stay healthy and happy.

He glanced at me, golden eyes warm in the sunlight. I felt like there was more to what he was saying. beyond just his words, but we'd spent too much time apart. I couldn't read him as easily as I used to

Len so, the words at face value were still enough to make me melt. Nicholas wanted to protect Elva. most as if she was his own. I almost couldn't believe my good fortune, in having such a kind man in my fe, in whatever capacity I had him.

Chapter 0109

"Things haven't been easy between you and me," he said. "But I'm thinking that should change."

"What do you suggest?"

He glanced back to Elva. Her flower crown stayed together this time. Smiling wide, she placed it on her

head.

"Let's be friends," he said. Surprised, I looked at him. He watched me a moment, before adding, "For

Elva's sake."

"I'd like that."

Just then, Elva ran over to us and offered her flower crown—to Nicholas. He dipped his head low to

accept it.

Later that afternoon, the other girls and I were brought into the parlor for an announcement regarding

the next challenge.

I had been in the room for approximately two minutes when the snickering began. It seemed, from what

I could overhear, that the girls had found out about my secret rendezvous with Julian and were most displeased.

As someone walked by me, they nudged me hard with their elbow.

“Hey!” I said.

“Oh,” said the girl. “I didn’t see you there. You really should be more careful where you stand.”

I rubbed my sore arm. “You could watch where you’re going.”

They only notice important **things**.”

“Careful,” said another girl. “Apparently she is Prince Julian’s favorite. Though who knows what she had

to do to earn it.”

“Not to worry,” said a third. “Prince Julian doesn’t take seriously the girls who put out right away. He’ll

play around with her, have his fun, and **cast** her aside. The girl he marries will be of more virtuous stock.”

The first girl chimed in, “Aren’t we supposed to be virgins?”

The second girl laughed. “Can’t expect the girl with the kid to abstain from sex.”

I wanted to defend myself, but I didn’t want to make **things worse**. I didn’t think there was anything I

own agenda.

Linda glanced at the group of us, then surprisingly moved away without a word. Of anyone here, I thought she for sure would want to take a stab at me.

Instead it was Olivia who came to stand before me. The crowd parted for her like she’d already been chosen Luna, and all deferred to her as she spoke.

“I have some friendly advice for you, Piper, and I suggest you take it.”

“That really isn’t necessary,” I said.

“It is, actually. If you want to be taken seriously as a contender in this competition, then you really

shouldn’t keep doing things that make you look like a slut.”

My eyes went wide at such a blatant, derogatory term.

“Listen to her, Piper,” said another girl.

“You are embarrassing yourself,” said someone else.

Olivia flipped her perfect hair over her shoulder and continued, “Not even Prince Julian will respect you if you give everything away so easily.”

They had it all wrong. I could only allow them to push me so far. “Julian and my relationship is entirely

innocent.”

The girls stared at me for a moment, then erupted into a roar of laughter. Even Olivia chuckled, though

she covered her mouth with her hand.

“I’m serious!” I insisted.

“Julian? Innocent?” Someone snorted.

“Honestly, Piper,” Olivia said. “Do you think we are so gullible? Everyone knows **Prince Julian** is chasing you because you are the easy lay. You’re the only one here who isn’t a virgin.”

I was a virgin, but they didn’t deserve to know that. I lifted my chin up high, attempting to cling to my

sense **of** dignity.

But then Olivia struck a lethal blow. “You walk around like you belong here. But we all know you are here

for ratings only. Why would a girl like you ever **think** she could deserve one of the three princes?”

Chapter 0110

Olivia's words struck through me like a fatal blow. I didn't deserve to be here. I knew that. Everyone

knew that.

they were nobility, all prim

But it wasn't because I had loose morals or a child. It was simply because and proper, and I was a shadow of my former self. A wolf-less waitress, just trying to get by.

I had no right to waste the princes' time.

They didn't know that I wasn't here for romance. I had no intention of marrying any prince. I just wanted

medical care for Elva, and to find my wolf.

I couldn't tell them that, though, so I kept it all bundled up inside of **me**, buried down into the deepest

part of myself.

Let them think whatever they wanted. They would anyway, no matter what I said.

Olivia sneered, smug like she'd won a victory here.

Yet before she or I or anyone else could say another word, Nathan tapped onto his microphone and

drew all of our gazes up to the lifted platform.

"Congratulations **again**, on surviving the first round of eliminations," he said.

Now that the other girls' attentions had been waylaid, I noticed as I looked around that the room did feel more spacious. Even the girls who had mocked me had been much less than the typical number.

We were only down from 25 to 15, yet the difference felt like more.

However," Nathan continued, "The competition must continue, and therefore we will begin preparations for the next challenge you will face. This time you will each be playing hostess to the royal family for a

garden party

I tried to think what that would entail, but I didn't participate in any garden parties at the academy. The

other girls, however, seemed like they would burst in excitement. They eagerly whispered to each other

with wide smiles on their faces

Nathan cleared his throat to silence them.

“You will each be given your own table to serve a **drink** and a selection of hors d’oeuvre s. You will be judged on your outfit and hosting abilities, as well as the presentation and taste of the food.”

Now, food I could do. With my restaurant experience, I knew a bit about food and how to plate it. I would

impromptu lessons.

I glanced around for Charlotte, and saw her standing in the back of the room, far away from the others. She really did seem to hate crowds. This whole competition must have been miserable for her.

With her help and Charlotte’s, I felt confident that I could succeed in this challenge. I had to, for Elva’s sake, and for that of my wolf. I didn’t want to win this choosing game, but I wanted to stay in the running

for as long as I could.

With a challenge like this, everything should come together.

“Now for the twist,” Nathan said, silencing the room once more.

My stomach sunk down to the ground. Trepidation crept along my spine.

“You are to host together, two to a table. Pairs will be selected at random.”

A simultaneous gasp filled the room, then everyone began chattering at once.

“Ladies! Ladies, please! Your attention.” Once Nathan had it, he continued, “The Luna must always maintain poise and perfection even under such duress as having to cooperate with an

adversary.”

That quieted everyone in a hurry, stifling their outrage. If the Luna would handle this with grace, then they had to too, or risk scoring low.

I didn’t particularly care what a Luna would or wouldn’t do. But even I recognized that I would have to emulate her diplomatic nature if I had any hope of continuing to survive here.

will now assign the pairs," Nathan said. A servant handed him a clipboard.