

# The Luna Choosing Game by Jane Above Story Chapter 111

## Chapter 0111

I glanced back at Susie. Looking at me, she crossed her fingers. If we could somehow manage to be together, that would be most ideal.

But no. Too quickly, Susie was called to be paired with someone else.

“Next we have Piper...”

I sucked in a breath. My remaining options weren't great, but hopefully I wouldn't be paired with

“And Linda.”

In the kitchen, Linda and I glared at each other. We were supposed to be going through the offered cookbooks, searching for the finger foods of our choice, but neither of us had touched them yet.

Other girls around us were chattering and laughing, working together as intended.

When I reached for one of the books, **Linda** scoffed, “You would.”

“What's your problem?” I snapped, unable to stand the tension anymore.

Linda had all the cards here, since she knew my secrets. I didn't know why she had to push it further by being such a roadblock in the challenge. Didn't she understand that if we butted heads here, it would only look bad for us?

Crossing her arms, she didn't seem to care. “My only problem is that I'm being forced to work alongside you, the absolute embarrassment of the competition.”

7 have always held my own

It makes me wonder now, knowing what I know. I wouldn't be surprised if he conspired to keep you

**here.**"

By he, she clearly meant Nicholas, though she wasn't willing to use his name, probably in case someone

overheard.

I lowered my head a bit because, well, she wasn't wrong exactly. Mark had given me the hint to help me

win favor with the ambassador, and both Julian and Nicholas had lied about me killing the boar.

Maybe I truly wasn't here on my own merits. The thought gave me no comfort at all.

"I can tell you are realizing I'm right," Linda said. "How naive of you, if you **hadn't** realized it before. I don't know what he wants from you, Piper, though I can guess. But even you can't be so foolish as to think **you'll** actually win this competition.

I knew what she thought Nicholas really wanted from me. The same thing everyone else thought too.

Sex.

What negative opinions they had of their princes to assume they'd only kept me around for carnal pleasures. Didn't they expect their husbands to be as virtuous as them? Or did they expect any love affairs to stop once the marriage **took** place?

Or worse, did they simply not care one way or the other?

Some of the girls, many who had survived the elimination had made their previous opinions known. They didn't care which prince they ended up with, they just wanted

to be Luna. If they were so single-minded in that goal, would they be willing to overlook infidelity?

How... sad.

I hoped I was never that desperate for anything, that I would overlook my partner's betrayal.

What was worse, at least for me, was that Linda had assumed all this of Nicholas, who was easily the kindest, most loyal man I had ever met. Julian, perhaps, I could see bending the rules with a cruel smirk and pretty words, but never Nicholas.

When we had dated, I had trusted him implicitly. It had never even crossed my mind that he would cheat. It was simply impossible. We had been dedicated to each other.

But this idea of him that Linda had, an insatiable man who kept his old fling around just to sleep with her, was so outlandish that it was worthy of pity.

I did pity her. She had so few good qualities of her own that she could only hope to win through

blackmail and mockery.

"You don't know anything." I **said**.

Her eyes flashed dangerously.

"I know enough," she said.

And it was a threat.

Chapter 0112

When Linda said she knew enough, I knew she was referring to her blackmail. What she knew was that Nicholas and I had been campus sweetheart three years ago. Unfortunately, that was enough to get her everything what she wanted.

She picked up one of the cookbooks. "Since I know everything, I expect you to agree with my decisions. here. I know best, after all. You should consider yourself fortunate to be paired with me."

“I can help.” I started to reach for a book of my own, but she slapped my hand away.

“You can help by not screwing this up for me.”

For the rest of our hour together, I was forced to agree with all of Linda’s decisions, even the ones I knew wouldn’t make sense. No one would select three different kind of egg dishes. Where was the

variety?

But when I tried to suggest it, I was immediately shut down.

“It would be such a shame for little Elva, wouldn’t it?” she said. “If her mother was tossed out on the street, destitute and publicly shamed. Absolutely tragic.”

I kept my mouth shut after that.

When we were finally allowed to separate for the day, I was worn out and eager to spend time with Elva.

Nicholas had agreed to check in on her while I was busy, so I was not surprised to find him and Mark playing cards in my bedroom while Elva took a nap.

Both Nicholas and Mark looked at me when I came through the door. Mark frowned.

Nicholas asked, “What happened?” He kept his voice soft, so as not to wake Elva.

My heart skipped a beat. How had he been able to tell something **had** happened with only a single glance? Mark had only grimaced, but Nicholas knew instantly, it wasn’t a sickness, nor a passing moment

of anger.

He knew something bad had happened.

I walked to them and fell into one of **the open** chairs at the table. I held Nicholas’s gaze, before flicking a

telling glance to Mark

Nicholas, fortunately, caught my meaning. “Mark can be trusted. He knows must everything about the

past, and our current... predicament.”

I nodded, relieved. “You both surely **know** about the newest competition.”

“Yes.”

“Then you **know** we girls are to work in pairs. But you might not have expected that my partner would be

Linda.”

Nicholas straightened. Mark leaned forward, placing his elbows on the table.

“Has she threatened you?” Mark asked.

“Not bodily. Though she has taken charge of our challenge and refuses **to** accept any input from me. And some of these choices she is making... I feel as if she might be setting me up for failure.”

It would be a dangerous gamble on her part, to make us both look bad while hoping she alone would weather the storm. I suppose she had a chance of surviving it, more than I did, simply because of the

importance of her pack.

Even so, it was a risk. One I wouldn't have thought her calculating enough to make. Yet the evidence

was there.

“At this rate, whether the secret of our past is out or not won't matter. I'm going to be eliminated strictly

for incompetency if Linda has her way.”

“We should do something about this,” Mark said, catching Nicholas's eye.

“Our options are limited,” Nicholas said.

God, I really wished we could just tell the truth about our past. If we were out from under Linda's

blackmail, then she wouldn't be able to hurt any of us. But, if we came forward ourselves, then I'd be

breaking the King's order.

Unless...

If we went public with the secrets of our past, maybe it would give me some level of protection. Surely

**once** the truth was revealed, if I was to go missing, someone would notice the connection. The King

wouldn't be able to simply disappear me so easily.

Chapter 0113

Yet would the public questioning be enough to deter the King? I had to think so. After all, public opinion was swaying much of what happened here.

As long as I continued to earn the public's favor, then I should be safe.

I hoped.

"I have an idea," I said. "But there's **one** thing I have to tell you first. About my private audience with the

**King,"**

Nicholas' expression was carefully neutral, but Mark's worry was outright.

"Tell us," Nicholas said.

I closed my eyes, hesitating for a moment. I had kept this secret from Nicholas, wanting to protect him, but if I was going to take this risk, I would need strong allies. No one was a stronger ally than the oldest

prince and his Beta. 2

"The King knows about our past," I said.

When I was met with silence, I peeked open my eyes. Nicholas's brow was pulled together.

"I never told him."

"I know. He said that," I said. "But he... He had you followed, Nicholas. He likely had me followed too. He

knew things, and I

"Did he know about Elva?"

"I don't know. He didn't say if he did. But he's terrifying. The very walls have ears for him. I wouldn't be

surprised if he knew everything."

Nicholas crumpled the cards in his hand. "He threatened you."

I lowered my gaze.

"Piper?"

"Yes. He said if I told anyone about you and me, he would... well, the threat was clear."

He slammed his **hand** down **on** the table. "That will not happen."

The noise roused Elva. "Mommy?"

Nicholas immediately cooled his anger. "Sorry," he whispered to me.

"I'm here, honey," I called, rising from the table. I touched Nicholas's shoulder as I passed, offering him **quick** forgiveness. Then I walked around the bed to help settle Elva again.

"Is Nick-lass here too?" she asked.

"He is." I brushed some of the hair back from her face. "He's keeping us safe. Mark, too."

Elva nodded, easily accepting that.

"Is the garden party soon?" Someone must have told her already about the next challenge.

"A few days."

"Will I get another pretty dress?"

"Of course."

H

"Will I get lots of food?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Will I get to ride a wolf?"

I laughed lightly. "That might be harder to provide."

"If the princess wants to ride a wolf at the garden party, then so be it." Nicholas approached the other side of the bed. He smiled down at me and Elva. "I've been thinking having more protection around

wouldn't be harmful, after all."

I lifted a brow. "Surely the wolves wouldn't be allowed in the palace."

"Not all of them," Nicholas said. "Maybe only two."

Mark stood as well. "I will begin the arrangements at once."

I

"Ask them first," I said. I could guess the two he wanted to employ **were** Night and Silver, but I hated to

bother them, pulling them out of the wild and into a stuffy castle, when they were meant to be free.

Nicholas nodded, and conveyed the request to Mark.

"Of course, sir. Piper." Then Mark backed away, out of the room.

"Does this mean I get to ride Night again?" Elva asked.

"We're asking him." I said, before Nicholas could blindly agree. I'd learned quickly that he **had** trouble

Later, when it turned to evening, and Nicholas had to go, I walked him to the door.

"You never told me your plan," he **said**.

I gave him a soft smile. I felt better telling him now, knowing he knew of his father's threats. He would protect Elva and me, of that I was certain.

If we played our cards right, the public would help, too.

Sol told him, "We take charge of the narrative."

Today's Bonus Offer

Chapter 0114

Nicholas and I sat in a pair of chairs in front of a camera. Behind the camera, a producer stood ready to ask us questions. But first, we needed to finish our statement.

"Piper and I ended our relationship three years ago, when Piper dropped out from the academy. It was entirely coincidental that she was selected and brought here to participate in the Luna Choosing Game,"

Nicholas said.

He glanced at me. It was my turn to pick up the pre-written speech.

“We have been careful not to allow our past to interfere with the selection whatsoever. In fact, most of our time here at the palace has been spent apart.”

I had originally mentioned about how I had gone on two dates with Julian, but Nicholas had made me

cut it.

“But it would help sell our case,” I’d said. “If the world thinks I’m more into Julian...”

“Being into Julian would not earn anyone any favors,” he’d replied, stern, and had refused to speak more

about it. “I won’t be swayed.”

He was always so touchy about Julian that I decided to let it drop. Hopefully the public could make that connection on their own, without needing to be reminded.

“We appreciate your continued support both for the competition and for Piper herself as a candidate,” Nicholas said now. “And hope that you will continue to look favorably upon the royal family, who strives only to bring peace and prosperity to our great kingdom.”

Nicholas nodded to the producer, who then began to ask us questions. They were mostly fluff. Things

like how we met again, and if there were any lingering feelings.

No,” Nicholas said flatly. I knew he was lying. At the very least, we had agreed to be friends. But it still

hurt to hear him answer so **quickly** and flatly.

“And you, **Piper**?” the producer asked.

Grabbing my hurt, I **used** it to **help** find my own quick answer of untruth. “No. I felt nothing. Our

relationship ended a **long** time ago. We are both different people now.”

I felt the heavy weight of Nicholas’s gaze **on** me. I ignored it as best I could.

Eventually, the interview ended and the broadcast was done. The producer thanked us both for our time,

and for our willingness to share such vital information with the public.

Still, I felt nervous the entire walk back to my room. However, once I was there, Charlotte greeted me

with an odd sense of excitement. I knew she often watched the public's reaction on television, but I didn't dare hope her reaction was based solely on that.

"Is it true?" she asked.

I nodded. "It is."

"I knew it! I knew you both had something."

"It was a long time ago, Charlotte."

"Okay, okay." She calmed herself, though her smile remained. "Whatever you say." She took a step toward me. "The public wonders..."

My stomach dropped. "Wonders what?"

"If you two are still a fling."

I shook my head at once. "What about Julian..?"

"Oh, they like you and Julian too. I know you were nervous about this conference, you really had nothing to worry about. The public adores you. And now that they know, this regular girl dated not just one, but

two princes? They are even more in your corner.

My stomach slowly returned to my body. "They are..." 7

"You are out here living the everyday woman's dream, Piper. For a lot of viewers, the competition has

become less about which girl the princes will choose, and more about which prince you will choose."

"That's outrageous," I said. "I don't have any kind of power like that. I'll never make it to the finals."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Charlotte said, but didn't press, especially after I threw my hands up and walked

away.

Charlotte had to be mistaken. There was no way that many people were rooting for me. I knew they were

I on my side, but like this? I couldn't dare to hope. It would hurt too much to learn it was n't true.

Chapter 0115

Chapter 0115

Later, I had to attend another meeting with Linda, this time to coordinate our outfit choices with the

tailor.

Linda was so furious, she was practically on fire. Her entire face was a bright red. Her lips were twisted into a snarl. Her brow was lowered.

Nicholas and I had taken away all of her power with our press conference today, and she knew it.

The tailor politely cleared his throat. "Would you like some cold water, miss?"

Linda sharp gaze shifted onto him and he winced.

"It's just that... well... your color is all wrong. It will be hard to match fabrics when you are not at your

usual tones."

"Well, make it work anyway!" Linda snapped.

Inside, I felt victorious. I had silenced Linda, stopped her blackmail, and so far, the King has left me

alone.

Yet my good feelings shriveled, when I looked around the room at the other pairs of girls, most of whom were casting me sour looks.

"First, Prince Julian. Now, Prince Nicholas?" someone whispered. I looked in the direction of the voice,

but I couldn't tell who had said it.

"Slut," I heard someone else say.

"Whore

Text to go.

So many whispers, one after the next. But I could never catch anyone actually saying them.

"I will take a drink of water, if you must," Linda grumbled, recovering her composure.

"Very good, miss." The tailor scurried away from us toward the door.

"You think you've won something." Linda said to me, once he had gone. "But I can tell you, all you have done is speed up your own demise. I was willing to work with you. Do you honestly believe that they..." **She** motioned around the room to where the other girls were watching. "...will respect **you** now?"

They'd only just barely tolerated me before. I could see their looks of hatred now. Their plotting. Their

Maybe having more wolfy protection wouldn't be such a bad idea after all. Mark had promised we'd have an answer from them today. I truly hoped they agreed. I could already feel the knives at my back.

The tailor returned with water, which Linda drank down. Eventually, her complexion returned to normal and we could continue. The tailor made many suggestions, and I scribbled them down on the same pad of paper I had used to take note of Linda's favorite appetizers for our table.

He gave me the specific names to write down, not just the basic shades. The names were complicated things, with a long sequence of numbers at the end.

"If you are to match exactly, you will need to order the fabric by name, not mere color," the tailor said. "A

ton shade, even a half step apart will be instantly noticeable in the sunlight.

By the end of our hour—long consultation, I was tired from trying on fabrics and listening to Linda's complaints. I was eager to go back to my room and rest.

So I wasn't paying the best attention to the foot that had suddenly **come** into my path. Nor the tray of waters that the tailor had left sitting on a chair.

—

I tripped, falling into the chair, and spilling the water and myself — all over the floor. My notes sunk into

the worst of the mess.

The ink smeared into unreadable splotches.

I scrambled toward it, slipping on the tile, but by the time I reached it, the entire thing was soaked

through and ruined.

All of the fabric and color names I had written down were lost.

I

The girl who had tripped me smirked down at where I knelt in the water and glass and misery..

“Oops.

Today’s Bonus Offer

Chapter 0116

I forced myself to my feet. The tailor, after making sure I was upright and unharmed, immediately rushed from the room to retrieve a towel and a servant to clean the mess.

My **soggy** notes were beginning to fall apart in my hands, too wet to even maintain their paper shape.

“Linda,” I said, going to her.

She scrunched her nose as I came close, as if the very sight of me disgusted her. I was disheveled now, true, with my gown damp in some places and my hair a mess. But even so...

“Can I have those names again?” I asked. I knew she had written them down same as me.

She quickly hid her notepad from my sight. “If you lost those names, then this is on you, Piper. You need

to learn to take responsibility.” She narrowed her eyes. “We wouldn’t want anyone to think you had unfair

advantage.”

“It’s not like that,” I said.

She continued on, like I hadn’t said anything. “At least half of our table will look good, and the royal

family will be able to tell who did which half.”

“That goes against the spirit of the event,” I said. “We’re supposed to work together. Adversaries

cooperating, like the Luna is supposed to.”

I don’t care. You are a hindrance, not an adversary. Surely the royal family will understand that.”

Linda walked by me and out the door. The other girls all shunned me, except for Susie, who gave me a

sympathetic wave.

I looked at the fabrics left strewn at the place where we **had** been, but we’d tried on **so** many things, I

could remember exactly what we had decided upon. I tried to remember what I could.

At the very least, I could **guess** about Linda’s preferences, after having heard them drilled into my head

for an hour. Using that knowledge, maybe I could at least make a compatible half of the table, even if it didn’t match up exactly

After writing down the **fabric** and color names I could guesstimate were maybe correct, I rushed down to the kitchen to look through the cookbooks again.

was there, pouring over the pages, when one of the King’s servants found me.

“You have been summoned to stand in audience with the king.” the servant said.

I swallowed thickly. It wasn’t the servant’s fault that I was maybe about to die. I

probably been ordered to chase me. I doubted I would get very far.

So I buried my fear deep down, rose my chin in defiance, and decided to face my inevitable end. I only hoped Nicholas could hear of it and intervene before I **was** hanged for treason, or some other charge.

The servant led me out of the kitchen and around the winding hallways until we entered the King’s personal chambers.

He was sitting in a chair at the head of a six-person table. When the servant and I approached, he offered me the chair to his left.

“Piper. Sit.” It wasn’t a question.

I immediately sat.

A pair of Joseph's guards were standing against the wall. The servant who had guided me returned to standing at the door but did not exit.

With the secret out, perhaps the King did not see the need to keep his threats private anymore.

He was quiet

for a long

long moment, simply eyeing me with a stern, joyless expression. When he did finally speak, he did so with a low, too-calm tone.

"Piper, you have gone against my express wishes. Not only have you exposed Nicholas's sorted dating history, but you have also tarnished the reputation of the nobility."

I wasn't entirely sure how Nicholas's having dated me was directly connected to ruining the reputation of any of the nobility. But, with the anger that seemed to simmer under the King's surface, I decided not

to argue the point.

"Now the public has begun to piece together a timeline of when you dated, and all that has occurred since, the King continued. "Some are even beginning to question if Nicholas isn't Elva's real father."

## Chapter 0117

I went carefully still. Oh, I was starting to see now, where his anger came from. Dating a commoner was one thing, a mistake that could be easily forgotten, but for a noble and a commoner to share a child was a grave error that usually ended in someone's untimely demise.

The King leaned forward in the chair. "You understand the importance in this, even if you couldn't before, yes? You must reveal who the true father is, to clear up this... misunderstanding."

My thoughts moved in a whirlwind, but I couldn't think of a lie convincing enough. The truth was, I **had** no idea who the baby's father was. I had thought it might be someone in the underground organization, but I couldn't be sure. And I had no names to even begin searching.

Theoretically, only my sister knew the father of her child. Even then, with everything she had been involved in, I wasn't sure she could be certain either.

“A royal illegitimate child is a threat to the order of succession. Even if she is not Nicholas’s child, the perception that she is would be enough to cause ruin under those that wish to rebel against us.”

I understood the danger here. The King would protect his bloodline. If I didn’t say the right thing, Elva

and I both might perish.

“She’s just a little girl,” I said, fear squeezing my chest. I couldn’t get enough air. “Please don’t hurt her.”

“I will have no need to, if you give me a name. One name, Piper. Who is the father of that child?”

What could I say, but the truth? Elva wasn’t mine, but my sister’s. I had no idea who the father was. I hadn’t been part of my sister’s life since years before, and I only came into it after Elva was already born.

Julian had told me not to tell anyone. But surely he would understand, if the only other option was death.

Worse, Elva’s death.

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I closed my eyes and wished for Nicholas. I didn’t know where he was, but he swore he would protect

1. us. Where was he when I needed him? Why wasn’t he here?

My only comfort was that he might have been protecting Elva. Yes, if he was with Elva, he would keep her safe. It didn’t matter what happened to me.

**opened** my eyes to see the King rise from his chair,

“Now Piper.” **He** waved for his guards. “Or did I need to arrange for more substantial questioning, I am trying to be civil. Do not make this difficult”

“Oh ! see I’m interrupting a party in here,” said Julian, suddenly at the door.

The servant there tried to block his path, but Julian masterfully sidestepped him, then twirled to step

around him.

Julian sauntered casually across the room, not paying much attention to the guards closing in or the King with his hands curled into fists on the table.

“Not now, Julian.”

7 was simply looking for Piper. Oh! There she is.” Spotting me, he came to stand behind my chair, blocking the guards from getting closer. This wasn’t a very good place for hide and seek.”

He tugged at my arm, forcing me up from the chair.

“Wait one minute.” The King growled, waving a finger. “She’s not going anywhere until I get my answer.”

Julian looked at me, eyes the very picture of innocence. “What’s the question?”

I opened my mouth, but it was the King who answered, bellowing now.

“Who is the father of that child?!”

“Oh, that’s easy,” Julian said, shrugging.

“It is?” I said softly.

He winked at me, then looked at the King.

“Nicholas is Elva’s dad.”

Chapter 0118

The King’s whole face went pale for a beat, and in the next, he became very red, like he might explode.

Julian let the lie linger for far longer than was comfortable, until the King seemed like he might choke to

death on it.

Then Julian laughed, and said, “**Just** kidding! Nicholas isn’t the father, sorry!”

He pulled me away then, quickly, before the King could recover.

The servant, concerned for his King, rushed to his side, leaving our escape open.

Out in the hallway, Julian pulled out of one royal room and into another. This one wasn’t quite so elaborate, likely a prince’s personal chambers. Yet it seemed far too organized and clean to belong to

Julian.

A television was on overtop of a sofa. I thought I heard Nicholas's voice, but Julian spoke louder and closer, straight in my ear.

"You cannot tell the **King** the truth about Elva's birth or the story of your wolf."

I blinked, surprised by his urgency. He'd switched from mischievous to deadly serious in an instant.

"I have reason to suspect that some of the royalty might be involved in the underground market. We can't trust anyone. Not my brothers, not the Luna, and not the King."

"Surely not Nicholas..." I refused to believe that he would have anything to do with what happened to me

or Elva.

Julian rolled his eyes. "Of course not Nicholas. But we can't tell him the truth of our investigation. So we need to keep them all in the dark about everything ever."

I couldn't believe my ears. If the King was involved...

What could that possibly mean for the kingdom?

"Give me time. Until I find out who knows what and who is innocent, we cannot let anything slip

Got it?"

I nodded.

"Good." He pushed a hand through his **hair**. "**God**, that was close. He was about to sick those guards on

you.

".. Elva." I needed to get to her, right away.

"Hold on." Julian retrieved his phone. He dialed something, then brought the phone to my ear

Prince Julian?"

Mark said, his voice stiffer than I was used to. "How may I assist you, Your Royal

Highness?"

"Mark, it's Piper. Is Elva okay?"

Immediately, his voice softened for me. “She’s here and she’s fine. Why? is something happening?”

“It’s the King, I... Please don’t let anyone take her ”

“She’s safe with me, Piper. On my life. No **one** will harm this child.”

The way he emphasized, I could tell he knew what I was asking, and I could hear his reply loud and clear.

I could have cried for it.

If the King himself comes through this door, I will still protect this child.

“Thank you, Mark. Thank you so much.”

“It is an honor, Miss.” He coughed. “Though I should tell you, it is also a direct order **from** Prince Nicholas.”

I breathed in added relief. To have them both on my side, and now Julian too, gave me immeasurable comfort.

But that left one question...

“Where is Prince Nicholas?”

“Piper,” Mark said. “Are you near a TV?”

Julian had wandered closer to where the television blared in the room. He waved me closer. As I did, I slowly lowered the phone to more clearly hear.

Nicholas was sitting on a white chair facing the camera, in a room not unlike the one we had given our shared statement in

“Unfortunately, with that evidence, I can show you conclusively that I am not Elva’s father.” Nicholas

said.

“Unfortunately? the producer prompted.

The child is a credit to her mother and her pack,” Nicholas said. “I would have been proud to have her be mine. Alas. He let the word hang.

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“You smart son of a bitch,” Julian said to the television. Any such compliment from Julian to Nicholas was **rare**, even with an **insult** attached. I doubted very much he would have said it had Nicholas been in this very room.

I gave Julian a confused look.

Chapter 0119

“He’s saving your bacon, Piper. Elva’s too. By publicly decrying this theory, he’s giving you a shield. The **King** can’t touch Elva now without public uproar,”

Oh. I looked back at Nicholas in awe. I had suggested the public statement before, but for him to continue that idea, to protect us... My chest filled with warmth all of the sudden.

“Do you have any idea who the true father is?” the producer asked.

“I know only that he is the worst kind of coward. A man who refused to stay to support his child or his mother. Why name him and give him the publicity? Let him live in the shadows with his weakness.”

Nicholas spoke with a passion he rarely showed, especially on camera.

Julian whistled. “He’s really nailing this interview. I never knew he had it in him.”

“When he returns, you should tell him so,” I said.

He laughed. “And let it go to his head? The guy has a big enough ego, Piper. Be serious.”

Someday, I wondered if the obvious rift between the two men would ever heal. I also wondered what had caused it to start with. They’d always seemed to hate each other, even when we had all been in school.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Julian said. “Sometimes people just don’t get along. There doesn’t have to be a rhyme or reason or some great backstory.”

I supposed that was true, though it still made me feel very sad for them.

Turning into me, he grabbed both my wrists and shook them back and forth, making my arms waggle.

“Cheer up. We should be celebrating. And we will, as soon as...” He glanced at the television, but the interview was over.

“Julian?”

“Give him a minute.”

I looked around. We were alone in the room. “Who?”

The door opened, and Nicholas walked in. Julian tugged, pulling me forward by wrists in to his waiting.

Arms.

“I’m so happy for you, Piper!” Julian said loudly, likely for Nicholas’s benefit.

Nicholas stopped just inside the door. Then he stepped further in and threw his surtcoat down onto the couch.

“What the devil are you doing in here?”

I gasped and tried to break free from Julian, but he squeezed me too tightly for me to wriggle away

“Julian. Let her go.” Nicholas’s voice was very forceful.

Julian sighed dramatically, but released his hold. I stumbled, suddenly without his constraint. In a flash Nicholas was behind me, righting me with his strong hands on my shoulders.

“Are you alright?” he asked me.

“I’m fine,” I said.

“Don’t mind us,” Julian said. “We were just excited to see your interview

He straightened. “You saw that?” He was looking at me but Julian answered.

“Yes, we both saw you fumble your way through another public speech,” Julian said. Nicholas clenched his jaw

I looked between them, a bit amazed. That was not what Julian had said earlier.

Julian winked at me.

I glared at him.

“I liked it,” I said to Nicholas.

“You did?” Nicholas asked me.

“We watched it together,” Julian said. “Her and I.”

He was antagonizing again, but Nicholas and I were far too busy looking at each other to listen to him.

“The way you

you talked about the man who left me... He’s not even real, but I felt your hatred. If it had been true, it would have made me happy to know that you felt that way.”

I do feel that way. Or, that’s the way I felt, before I knew the truth.”

“Nicholas, I...”

Julian cleared his throat. “I guess I’ll see myself out.” He gave a bow with a flourish, then **skipped** toward the door. “Don’t have too much fun, now.”

At his teasing, Nicholas and I separated a bit. I crossed the room. He stayed near the television. When Nicholas spoke again, **his** voice was tight. “So you and Julian were in here... alone...”

Chapter 0120

“It wasn’t what it looked like,” I said on reflex

“You said before what you felt for Julian wasn’t serious,” he said.

“It’s not.”

Nicholas crossed his arms. His jaw tightened and he didn’t say anything else.

I didn’t know what else to say, how to ease his worries, than to tell him the truth. “Julian saved me from

your father.”

Nicholas’s entire focus zeroed in on me. All emotion vanished. He looked me over as if I were looking for injury,

then spoke fiercely, “What happened?”

I explained, about the summons, about the threat, and about Julian’s timely intervention. By the end of it, Nicholas had come closer, standing before me again, concern crinkling his brow

“I’m okay now,” I said. “I heard some of your speech. You likely assuaged most of his fears. So you

saved me, too. Thank you.”

He shook his head. "It wasn't hard to say those words. I had held onto them for as long as I knew you

about you and Elva. Before I knew the truth."

"I'm sorry." I should have told him the truth sooner, perhaps, but it had taken a long time for me to believe that he would even want to know. For so long, it had seemed easier for the past to stay in the past.

"I wish I would have known about your situation then. Maybe I could have done something to help." He sighed. "Some of what I said today. I meant about myself."

I

vehemently shook my head. "You had no way of knowing the truth, Nicholas. I purposefully kept it from you. I'd thought **then** that I was protecting you... Honestly, knowing what I know now, I don't regret it."

"You can't mean that."

I looked him in his eyes. His were so gorgeous, even under the dim tungsten lights. Golden irises with flecks of green, watching me like I was someone worth setting his royal gaze upon. Someone who

mattered.

I would always be grateful to him for his kindness. But facts were facts, and a whole world separated **us**

now, as it did then.

"You'll likely be king someday, Nick"

I hadn't used that nickname outside of my dreams in three long years. It took a physical toll saying it now, on me, with my heart aching. On him too, if the way he thickly swallowed was any indication.

"You need to make sure you settle down with the right woman for the kingdom." I shrugged, a little sad. "That is not, nor ever was, me. And if you tied yourself down to Elva and me, you would have regretted **it**. Maybe not right away, but at some point."

Nicholas watched me for so long, like he was trying to look straight down into my soul. I wondered what he saw there.

"I wouldn't have regretted it," he said.

My eyes went wide, looking at him. He seemed so... earnest, as if he meant every word. But how could he? Sticking with me and Elva would have changed the entire trajectory of his life.

Marrying a commoner, adopting her child, he might never have had the chance to be king. Surely he could see that the value of a kingdom was worth more than that of a broken-down waitress and her kid.

He didn't seem like he agreed. In fact, he looked for all the world like he wanted to keep arguing with me.

But he didn't say one word more, and neither did I.

After a while, he said, "You shouldn't be in here alone with me. It's against the rules.

Nicholas was a stickler for the rules.

"I'll go," I said.

I stopped at the door to glance at him. He faced away from me and did not look back.

Later, with Susie's help, Elva and I practiced the appropriate curtseys for the garden party. We were out in the gardens. I had to wear heels, to simultaneously practice walking in the grass without the heels

sinking down into the dirt..