

The Luna Choosing Game by Jane Above Story Chapter 121

Chapter 0121

It was much more difficult than I'd been expecting. I'd already gotten **stuck** twice,

Susie was a patient teacher though, and kept a level head. She only giggled a bit when I'd fallen onto my backside, and not laughed outright. Plus, she helped me up right after.

Nearby, the wolves Night and Silver were watching. Mark was still trying to convince them to join me

inside the castle too, but they had at least committed to keeping a **close** eye on us outside of it. They

also explained that if we called for them, they would come running.

Honestly, it was more than I expected, and I was incredibly grateful to them

In our breaks, Elva went to Night for hugs. He lapped at her face with his big tongue, making her giggle.

Susie, curiously, spent most of her break time chatting with Mark. They weren't flirting exactly, that

would have been against the rules, but they both seemed a bit bashful, almost like they wanted to.

I imagined Susie's family might not be too fond of her ending up in a romance with a Beta, I bet she

would be happy though.

I decided to pretend I didn't notice anything, and let whatever would happen, happen, or vice versa.

I

As I went to greet Silver, I sunk once more into the grass. Then I threw up my hands **in a show** of

frustration that was only half put-on.

Elva laughed. Susie hid her face with her hands. Mark hurried over to set me upright again.

“Can’t I just wear flats?” I asked.

Susie shook her head. “That would be against the Queen’s rules.”

I’d already broken the Queen’s rules once, with my too-short glove length during the First Ball. I had no

desire to repeat that experience.

“Put your weight on your toes,” Susie said.

“All day?”

She shrugged.

Groaning, I sunk back down to the ground, this time only so I could kick off the damned shoes. If I would

have to walk around on my toes all day for the garden party, I at least wanted to be comfortable now.

I stretched my toes in the grass and sighed at the relief.

10

+15 BONUS

Silver came closer and I scratched her behind the ears.

“She agrees that those shoes are foolish,” Susie said, translating the wolf for me.

“Glad we agree.”

Someday, with my wolf returned, I'd return her and talk to Silver myself. I'd tell her how grateful I was for

all that she'd done for me, protecting me from the boar, and now protecting Elva and I from anyone who

might want to do us harm.

return the favor.

Wolf or no, she was a good friend to me, I wished I could return

She leaned her weight into me, almost like she understood.

A bit later, after Silver had flopped down into the grass beside me, Elva came up to my side.

“Mommy,” she began then hesitated. She sometimes did this before asking what she considered an

important question. T

“Yes, honey?”

She tugged at the hem of her shirt with both hands. She watched as it folded and unfolded, and asked,

Who's my daddy?”

My whole body froze. “Uh...”

Oh, no. I had always known that someday I would have to tell her the truth, but I never imagined it would

be this soon.

How could I possibly explain this to a three-year-old? Or was it better to simply lie? I had lied by omission so far, allowing her to believe I was her birth mother.

"I... well, you see..."

I glanced around but Susie and Mark looked **as** lost as I was. They were no help at all.

"Um... if you... er..." I didn't even know where to begin.

Elva merely continued tugging at her shirt. "Can I pick a daddy?"

I swallowed hard. "Uh... who did you have in mind?"

She looked up at me, her eyes wide and honest. As innocent as could be.

"I want Nick-lass to be my daddy."

Chapter 0122

For a moment, I sat there in shock, looking at Elva and her wide, earnest eyes.

Nicholas wasn't exactly the last person I thought she'd say. He had been visiting her a lot lately, he always seemed to make time for her. But I would have thought Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny would

have taken higher priority for a three year old

My face burned hot at the implication that Nicholas would well, we would have to be married for

Nicholas to be Elva's father, wouldn't we?

I cleared my throat. "Um, Elva, honey Nicholas can't be your **dad**

Elva tilted her **head**. "Why not?"

"Someday he's going to have his own family to take care of His own wife, and his own kids. He won't

have time to spend with you and me

Elva's shoulders slumped "Why?"

“We won’t be living here anymore then, and he’d have to travel away from them to see us. You wouldn’t

want him to make his family sad, just so he’d come to see us?”

“But I’ll be sad

Her face fell and my heart ached.

“Someday, I’ll find a nice man that wants to be a part of our family, Elva And he’ll be the best dad you

could ever hope for ”

She looked down to the ground. “But I want Nick-lass”

I

I wished there was more I could say to comfort her. I understood her attachment to **Nicholas** He was a

good man. The best, maybe. He was good with Elva. He was honest and kind.

I imagined he would make an excellent husband. I remembered our days together. He was ambitious

and strong willed with the rest of the world, but he always compromised with me. He was generous with

both his time **and** his money

Even on nights after we fought with one another, we would always make up before we went to sleep.

“I love you,” he had whispered as he caressed my cheek with his thumb I can’t sleep knowing you are

unhappy”

Bringing my image of that caring man into a future where we would be married and taking care of Elva?

C

+15 BONUS

Then he’d bid her goodnight and come to me We’d hold each other through the night, just as we had done in the past, when one of us or the other snuck into the other’s room

I remembered how warm he was it haunted me

I blinked, pulling myself back into the present There, I chastised myself for thinking of Nicholas that way

ether. And for good reasons, too

It was clear we would never be together. And for good reasons, too

I

Nicholas was a prince if I had known that three years ago, maybe I would have never pursued him then either Our hearts had been so close, but our social classes were so far apart, he might as well have been standing on the moon

"I'm sorry, Elva," I told her now, pulling her into a hug "Unfortunately, sometimes these things just don't work out. It's not anyone's fault. It's just impossible."

Her thin arms wrapped around my neck and she held me in return. Had she known I needed a hug too?

"We'll survive," said "Just like we always have before"

Elva sniffled a little. "Okay, Mommy"

That night, the other girls and I were sharing the kitchen to prepare our food items for the garden party

Linda still wasn't speaking to me, so we hadn't been able to pair our selections as well as the other girls. However, I could guess that she had chosen some kind of egg appetizer, since she had been so fond of

those during our earlier meeting

Since she was picking something with protein, I decided to pick a more veggie-type food. I scoured the cook books, skipping the ones that sounded too complicated, and settled on stuffed mushrooms.

I set to making the mushrooms, then I waited my turn for the ovens

When the oven beeped, I withdrew my piping hot stuffed mushrooms and turned to place them on the

counter for them to cool

They smelled delicious. The appearance was a bit lacking on some of the mushrooms. I would put

those ones in the back of the display

Still, I felt proud I couldn't wait for them to cool, so I could try one to test the taste.

Chapter 0123

+15 BONUS

One of the girls came close to me, peering at my selection. "Huh. I feel like you could have done better,

Piper

She was mocking me, which I would not dignify. "I'm quite proud of this actually."

"My friendly advice?" she said, smirking at me. I was fully prepared to ignore her, until I saw the large

container in her hand. "Needs more salt."

I reached, but I was too slow. She had already upturned the container of salt all over my stuffed mushrooms, totally ruining them. She poured the entire container until it was empty, and then dropped it carelessly on the floor..

"Oh, dear. That might have been too much. Sorry!" She giggled as she walked away.

I stared down

at my ruined food. There was no saving it. Even if I removed the massive pile of salt from

on top of the mushrooms, the taste surely had already been soaked in.

I would have to discard this batch and try again. However, since I had already used my t urn at the ovens,

I now would have to wait until everyone else had finished.

Sighing, I regathered my supplies and started anew. I did as much as I could until I needed to cook. Then

I had to wait.

And I waited. And waited.

Some of the girls, I was starting to wonder, seemed like they had chosen appetizers that took extra-long

to **cook**, just to mock me. Or maybe the waiting was just getting to me.

I was in the kitchens until late. By the time the others had finished and left, it was well after dark. Finally, the oven beeped at my set temperature and I placed my second batch of stuffed mushrooms within it.

At the very least, this batch didn't look quite as ugly as the last. I refrained from thinking the sabotage

was a good thing, however.

With the timer set, I sank onto a stool to wait again.

"There you are.

I glanced up. Nicholas walked into the kitchen.

When I saw him, my face flushed, remembering my earlier daydreams about him as my husband. I cleared my throat and turned away.

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husband. I cleared my throat and turned away.

hot in Here, offered weakly, as an explanation.

suppose it is." He came closer. "All the other girls finished some time ago."

shook my head, "My first batch didn't turn out right."

Oh?

Too salty.

I didn't want to tell him about the sabotage. He might feel the need to do something abo
ut it. If he got involved to protect me, it would only end up with more resentment aimed t
owards me.

We were supposed to be proving to people that we didn't still care about each other.

Nicholas picked up the empty salt container off the floor. "I don't suppose this has anything to do with it."

I looked at it, then at him, but kept my mouth firmly closed.

He stepped closer. "Piper —"

"It was just a joke, Nicholas. I can handle it. Honestly."

He watched me a moment like he wanted to argue, but then he sighed. "Fine. But if it becomes more

than that, I expect you to come forward."

I

They could threaten my life and I doubted I would tell him, but I appreciated his concern regardless.

He walked to the oven and peeked inside. "It's against the rules for me to help any candidate with their

challenge."

That hadn't stopped him before, in the forest with the boar. I wondered if he would help me now, even saying that, if I only asked.

Fortunately, I didn't need to find out.

"It only has to cook," I said. "I'm afraid there's not much help you could give now, even if you wanted to."

He nodded. "Good. That eliminates my temptation, then."

I lifted a brow. "Does it?"

His eyes held mine a touch too long. I felt drawn to him, a moth to a flame. I stood up from the chair and loined him in front of the oven..

I peeked in for myself. The food looked like it was cooking well.

Piper, 1

I turned to look at him again and he suddenly stopped. I was very close, closer than I had intended to be

Like this, all he would have to do is lean down...

I only had to press up...

"Nicholas," I said in a breath.

I wanted to kiss him.

Chapter 0124

Nicholas's mouth was so close. As I looked at it, he licked his lips. I licked mine in reply. We leaned

closer, closer, dangerously close..

Then the oven timer dinged.

We immediately straightened, snapping away from each other. Nicholas turned, coughing into his hand.

I reached for the oven mitts and pulled the finished stuffed mushrooms from the oven.

With the tray safely on the counter, I couldn't find the courage to look at him again.

He cleared his throat. "Nostalgia does tricky things to the **mind**."

"It does," I agreed, thankful for the safe retreat his words offered.

"I should go now." He took a step, then paused. "Goodnight, Piper."

"Goodnight."

I didn't move again until his footsteps disappeared from the kitchen. Even after he was gone, I needed a moment to get my heartbeat under control.

Finally, I returned to putting the finishing touches on my stuffed mushrooms and preparing them for

storage.

I very carefully did not think about what just happened, or what it might mean.

The next morning, Charlotte and I were adding the finishing touches to the garden party dresses for me and Elva. She was sewing on the ruffled trim with the sewing machine, while I hand-stitched some sparkly gems onto Elva's skirt.

"I have news," Charlotte said, "about your other maid from the early days

The friendly one, I remembered. Though Charlotte had certainly opened up to me now, in the early days, she had seemed to only barely tolerate me. The overly-friendly one had helped me feel more at ease right away.

“I tracked her down,” Charlotte said. “They let her go from the palace staff, but she was able to find another position in a noble household.”

I exhaled in relief. I had worried that she was trapped in a dungeon somewhere.

“She’s enjoying it. It’s less stressful.” Charlotte picked at a straw thread.

“Thank **God**,” I said. “I’m glad to hear she is safe and well. I’ve been thinking of her.”

“She’s both of those things. When I spoke to her, she seemed worried about you, though. It seems like

the whole of the palace might be against **you**”

“Not everyone is,” I said, giving her a smile. “And that’s what matters. With the support I do have, I can

outlast any of these hardships.”

Minor humiliation and ruined appetizers were nothing compared to the hardships I had endured in the **past**.

Here, I had a roof over my head, **food** for both Elva and me, **and proper** medical treatment for Elva. Any

adversity I had to endure **was** secondary to those basic needs, which in the past had either been denied

to us or **was** incredibly difficult to come by.

Although, despite the lack of physical turmoil of these minor hardships, they still made my staying here more difficult. I had to be careful to make certain I **succeeded** in every challenge. I wanted to stay here as long as I could.

I held

up

the fabric, frowning at it. "I worry about this shade. I don't know what I'll do if it's incorrect." Having lost my notes, I couldn't be sure that I had guessed the color correctly. Even one or two shades different would be noticeable under the afternoon sun.

"It's correct," Charlotte said, all confidence.

I lowered Elva's dress back down to my lap. "How can you be sure?"

"I double-checked before I ordered the color."

That still didn't explain it. "Double checked how?"

Charlotte offered a hint of a smile. "The servants, we talk to each other. I won't touch on the specifics, but let me just say that Linda is not kind to her own maids. They dislike her greatly, and were eager to help you when I told them what happened."

"I'm grateful," I said, amazed by Charlotte and the other maids. They truly did work behind the scenes to either make or break the contestants. It was a bit intimidating too. I hoped I always stayed on their good

side.

Though, as someone who worked in the service industry, I **knew** that often all it took to earn favor was to treat the wait staff as the people they were, and not as commodities that existed only to serve.

Chapter 0125

"Thank you," I said. "Please thank them for me, as well. I wouldn't want to get them in trouble by approaching them directly."

"I'll pass on your gratitude," Charlotte said.

We continued to work throughout the day. When we finally finished, it was time for me to attend a

banquet.

Elva, who had been patient all day, complained loudly that she wouldn't get to attend.

"You'd hate it," I told her, hoisting her up into my arms. "A bunch of stuffy people insulting each other

while pretending to be nice."

"Why would they do that?" she asked.

"I don't know, honey." But I did know. With only 9 candidates left, everyone was on the edge. We were coming down to the wire soon, and all the girls, except Susie and I, wanted the crown. "People

sometimes have to cut each other down to make themselves feel more important."

"That doesn't sound very nice"

"It's not," I agreed.

As I prepared for the banquet, I was startled by an unfamiliar maid sticking her head through the door.

Charlotte immediately intercepted her and then sent her away

"Who was that? What did she want?" I asked when she had gone.

Charlotte seemed unsettled, her brow pulled together. "I'm not sure. She didn't even ask anything. She

said she had the wrong room but that seems impossible.

"Did you recognize her?"

Charlotte nodded. "She's tending to Lilliana." She helped me lace up my silver dress in the back. "Be careful tonight."

"Will," I promised. Why would Lilliana's maid peak her head into my room? What had she hoped to see? None of it made sense.

I finished dressing, then hugged Elva. After a quick goodbye to Charlotte and the maid, and Mark outside the door, I headed down to the dining room for the evening's banquet.

I felt beautiful in my stunning silver gown with a low-cut bodice and a slit up the side. The fabric sparkled

It was a dress fit for a Luna. I maybe should have felt like an imitator wearing it. Instead, I felt something. like a princess of moonlight.

As I descended the stairs, Julian stood at the bottom to greet me.

"May I escort you to the dining room tonight, Piper?"

I lifted a brow. "Why?"

He laughed. "So mistrustful. Maybe I just want to be the one on your arm."

I narrowed my eyes.

“Fine. Maybe it would look best if we walked in together. You are supposed to be my favorite after all.”

I

That still didn't feel like the right reason, or maybe, not the only one. For now, however, I supposed I could accept it.

“Very well.” I accepted Julian's offered arm.

“Beautiful dress,” Julian said.

“It is.”

“Looks great on you.”

I side-eyed him.

He winked at me. “It looks better on you than it does on her. That's for sure.”

Her? Who?

“Lilliana,” Julian said.

We quickly arrived at the dining room. Julian released my arm to allow me to enter the room first.

Inside, wearing the exact same dress as me, stood Lilliana.

The girls looked between us. Then the whispers started.

Julian tapped his chin. “What came first? The chicken or the egg?”

“You better not be calling me either a chicken or an egg,” I grumbled at him.

So this was why Lilliana's maid had intruded into my room – to see which dress I was wearing. But why?

Didn't it make us both look bad to arrive at an event wearing the same thing?

Lilliana only gave me a passing glance, seemingly not bothered. But I was blushing fiercely with

embarrassment.

Unfortunately, it was far too late to change.

Perhaps you should change position at the table so you don't get so much camera time," said one of

the girls to me.

Julian laughed. "She's not going anywhere."

I glared at him, but he just smiled wider.

"Trust me."

Chapter 0126

Whispers sounded around me, speculation on who was copying who. Lilliana had arrived to the banquet first, but not everyone was convinced that meant she had picked the outfit originally. Absolutely no one entertained the idea that it could have been a coincidence.

When I suggested such a thing to the girl beside me at the table, she rolled her eyes. "Nothing is a coincidence at the palace."

"She's not wrong." Julian said. "It's obvious to me that Lilliana is copying you."

"Well, I didn't copy her," I said firmly.

Julian waved around his soup spoon. Think about it. By your own admission, you have now dated two of the three princes. Is it any big surprise that some of the girls are going to end up imitating you?"

That seemed like such a ridiculous notion. Lilliana especially wouldn't have a need to copy me. She had already gone on dates with Nicholas, and she had been seated beside him for some time now.

Even if she wasn't already favored by Nicholas, she was so regal all on her own. What use would copying me have for her, other than to bring her down?

"Lilliana has her own grace," I said. "She doesn't need anything from me."

"Cute, but incorrect." Finished with his soup, he pushed the bowl away. A servant immediately came to retrieve it. "Thanks." Julian patted his napkin to his lip. "Lilliana is a fraud."

The girl opposite him gasped. He shrugged.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

“Everything about her has been pre-planned, from the way she parts her hair, to the way she sits or stands, to the way she speaks. Have you talked to her? It’s spooky”

I couldn’t remember saying more than a few quick words to her.

“She’s acting.” Julian said. “She’ll do whatever she has to, be whoever she has to be, to win the crown. She’s been pretending so long, I’m not sure she even knows who she really is underneath it all.”

As he spoke, I couldn’t help but feel an odd sort of sympathy for Lilliana. To care so much for power, that she was willing to erase her entire true personality? How could anything be worth so much?

Had she spent her entire life living behind a shell? Did she truly not remember who she was anymore?

Julian nudged me. He must have been able to see the pity on my face. I, unlike Lilliana, was not talented

“She gave herself up willingly, Piper. Girls like her do it all the time. Anything to chase that crown.”

I kept my voice soft, not wanting the others to hear. “It’s just so **sad**. **What** will happen to her if Nicholas

doesn’t choose her?”

Julian shrugged. “She’ll probably have to find herself again.”

For her sake, I hoped that would come to pass. I understood she was desperate to be Luna, but to give up so much? Surely if she could remember herself, she would realize the fol

lly.

Or maybe that was a foolish thought. Wishful thinking from a girl who didn’t really belong here among these sharks. I had no desire for power or glory. I just wanted Elva to be okay.

Julian’s voice lowered to match mine. “Do you know why you would make a good Luna, Piper? Because you see people, even when they can’t see themselves.”

I shook my head. “I don’t want to be Luna.”

Julian smiled. “Another good quality of yours.”

With so many girls missing since the last elimination, there were a lot of empty chairs at the table. Most of the girls had been split into sections. Julian, me, and the Luna were seated at one end. The King and Joyce were on the other end. Nicholas, Lilliana, and the majority of the girls sat in the center.

A slew of empty chairs now separated those three groups.

Glancing over at Nicholas, he seemed like a whole world apart.

Suddenly a camera closed in on my face. I sat back **in** my chair.

“Hey,” Julian said, shoving the camera away. “Personal space is a thing that exists, you know.”

“Apologies, Your Royal Highness,” the cameraman said.

“It was my fault, sir,” said the producer behind him. “The kingdom wants to know about candidates wearing the same dress. Piper, do you have any comment?”

Chapter 0127

In my ear. Julian quickly whispered, “Pretend you don’t care.”

It seemed like sound advice this time, so I tried to take it. I wasn’t a great liar, but then, this lie wasn’t

too far from the truth. Other than being a minor annoyance, this really wasn’t that big of a deal.

“**It’s** a beautiful dress,” I said. “I wish even more people could be given the chance to wear it.”

“Charming,” the producer **said** with a smile. “A woman of the people.” He nudged the cameraman.

Close in on Lilliana now. **Let’s** see if she has a response”

Rolling my eyes, I returned my attention to Julian

“Very good,” he said. “One way to win against the drama-seekers is to always feign indifference. With no

drama, they get bored and move on. Wearing the same dress to this banquet could be a front page story.

or **something** limited to a footnote”

“It doesn’t even deserve to be a footnote,” I said

Julian laughed. "True"

At the end of the meal, as the royal family and the girls were standing from their chairs, Nicholas cleared

his throat to claim the attention of the room

He took one of Lilliana's hands in his

My stomach dropped. This wasn't anything unexpected. Despite our near-kiss, nothing had changed

between Nicholas and I. He was a prince in search of a mate, and Lilliana was his favored.

Even if she was wearing a mask so thick no one could see through it, not even herself.

"Lilliana, would you do me the honor of joining me for a second date?" Nicholas asked.

Her smile did not reach her eyes. "Yes. Of course."

Everyone politely clapped. I did, too, not wanting to draw attention to myself.

Nicholas deserved better than someone who was so fake, but it wasn't my place to say so. After all,

wasn't Nicholas also wearing a mask? He had claimed that **he** was searching for the perfect Luna, not the

perfect mate.

Perhaps Lilliana would be the perfect Luna.

But he would be so miserable if he could not be himself.

I was not caught up in my own downtrodden feelings, that I didn't immediately notice the **many eyes** that had shifted to me and my dress.

One girl even slinked up beside me. "What are you wearing to the garden party, Piper?"

More girls joined in eager to

hear my response.

"Uh.." I was pretty sure we weren't supposed to share that information.

“A trend—
setter,” Julian said from behind me. “If you will excuse us, ladies, Piper and I need to say a few quick words to my brother.”

Any brief hope that Julian might have been about to save me smashed to pieces. “We do?”

Julian wrapped his arm around my waist and led me through the crowd. “Don’t you remember? You are my favorite, Piper, so of course I need to show you off to the cameras. Cameras which **are** currently zoomed in on my stuffy elder brother.”

I had a very bad feeling about this.

“Ah, Nicholas!” Julian called as we approached.

Nicholas’s face had been impassive, but now it seemed aggressively so, like he was fighting a battle to stay calm. A muscle ticked in his jaw.

“Allow us to congratulate you on your second date,” Julian said, slippery smooth. “With ... um... what was

your name again?”

He knew Lilliana’s name, of that I had no doubt. He’d likely **just** been trying to get under her skin, like he

did with everyone else.

But Lilliana had no reaction what—so—ever. She just smoothly filled in her name. “Lilliana.”

“Right.” Julian frowned at her before turning his smile up to full—blast for his brother. He hugged **me** closer to him. “Such a pity that you have to settle for an imitation of the real thing, brother. Good for me, though, since I get to have the best.”

My face burned in embarrassment. I wanted to

Julian and deny what he was saying,

but with my eyes on Nicholas’s face, I caught his sudden reaction. And it made **me** pause.

le away *fro*

Fire burned in his eyes.

Nicholas was **furious**.

Chapter 0128

Nicholas

I hadn't wanted to ask Lilliana on a second date, but after a threatening letter from the King this morning **and** the way he glared at me all dinner long, I knew I had **very** little choice in the matter. Especially if I

wanted to help protect Piper.

So I had pushed down the part of myself that revolted against the idea, and publicly asked Lilliana. As expected, she accepted simply and concisely with **no** outward reaction.

That was for the **best**, I knew. Emotions only complicated things. We didn't need love between us to get married. Lilliana was best for the kingdom, so I would fall in line.

Even if my heart wanted something else...

Well, it didn't matter what my heart wanted. I had shut off that part of myself three years before, and no resolution of misunderstandings was going to change that now. It was far too late to open myself up

again.

I wanted to forget about Piper. I wanted her and Elva safe and happy, but not near me. They were dangerous. They reminded me how things could be, what happiness looked and felt like.

I couldn't be happy. I had to be King.

But then Julian flaunted her in front of me. She looked gorgeous in the dress Lilliana had so poorly tried to emulate. Piper filled out the dress in a way Lilliana's stick figure never could. Piper had such delicious

curves and...

Julian had one of his hands on Piper's hip. I glared at it, hoping to set fire to it with my eyes. I'd never

had that ability before, but one could hope.

I wanted to throttle Julian for staking claim on Piper, suggesting she belongs to him. But how could I deny it? I wasn't in a place where I could step forward and challenge his claim. And Piper was keeping her

beautiful, full lips firmly closed on the matter.

Ugly, green jealousy seared inside my chest.

I couldn't help remembering the heat of the oven as Piper and I had stood side by side in the kitchen the night before. She had turned to me, her brown eyes dark in the dimly-lit room.

She was so... irresistible, I had leaned forward before I **knew** what I was doing.

I had wanted to kiss her so badly, my entire body ached.

+15 BONUS

But then the oven timer had gone off and we had separated, I had played it off like it **had** been a mistake, or a trick of the moment, but it hadn't been. I had wanted to kiss her then, just as J wanted to

kiss her now.

But I knew it was impossible.

Lilliana smiled at me in a vague sort of **way**.

Julian smirked much harder. He knew what he was doing, playing with me.

—

Piper's face scrunched up, troubled likely for my sake. She was far too **kind**.

The nearby cameras, meanwhile, caught it all.

I cleared my throat, gathering myself **again**. The princely mask easily slid into place, a well-worn routine.

"How good for us both, Julian," I said, hating every word. "That we have both found favorites in the

competition."

Julian added teeth to his **smile**. "Yes. Good for someone, alright." His eyes slid to Lillian, who gave no

indication that she noticed. He didn't say more.

With Lillie

With Lilliana indifferent to his remark, I felt no strong desire to defend her, so I let the matter drop.

The cameramen and their producers eventually grew tired of our silence and dragged their attention.

elsewhere.

One of the King's servants immediately found his way to my side. "The King wishes to speak to you immediately. If you would follow **him** to his chambers."

I could have groaned if I had a modicum less self-control. As it was, I simply straightened my shoulders.

"If you will excuse me."

"Good luck, brother," Julian said.

Piper reached out and touched my arm. It was a simple gesture. It didn't have to mean anything. Except

it did.

like that v

A gesture like that was familiar/Overly so, to some people's eyes.

so, to some people's eyes.

I patted her hand, then pulled away before anyone could see.

Chapter 0129

I felt the warmth of her hand long after she had removed it.

I followed **my** father away from the dining room **and** to his rooms. He did not look back at me once, nor spoke to me until we were behind closed doors.

Once the door had shut behind us, however, he swiveled to glower at me.

"You've ignored my summons these past days."

I had. "There have been many things that required my attention."

"Matters more important than respecting your King?"

"More important than humoring the tired whims of my father, yes."

The King's face went bright red. "How dare you! Who do you think you are?"

I stood my ground. "Tell me you have some **reason** to want to see me other than Piper."

He thrust his finger into my chest. "She is a danger, Nicholas. You are not taking this seriously."

He huffed out a frustrated breath, then turned on his heel again. He placed some distance between us.

"You could have better handled the revelation of your past relationship. You nearly made us the laughing

stock of the kingdom."

"Piper is popular with the people," I said. "No one was laughing. If anything. It helped us gain their

respect."

I hated that it was true. I had no intention of using my relationship with Piper in such a way. I had only wanted to protect her. But if it would help appease my father and therefore get him to lay off Piper, I was willing to use anything to my advantage.

I would apologize to her later.

The King crossed his arms. "We need her gone, the sooner the better."

I

crossed the room, closing some of the distance between my father **and** I. He stood near the fireplace,

staring down at the flames.

"I'm doing everything you want. I've asked Lilliana on another date. Piper is not a threat to you."

"But she is. Can't you see?" He **looked** back at me. The flickering flames cast shadows across his face. The way you talk about her, Nicholas, is very peculiar. I know she was special to you once, but sometimes

Don't be ridiculous.

* +15 BONUS

"You know you can never be with her, don't you? You are my oldest son. Regardless what we told the

producers and the promoters, you are most likely to take my throne when I pass. As King, you cannot

allow some commoner –"

“You don’t need to over–
dwell on this, father. I know better than anyone how much Piper doesn’t belong
here.”

“Then why do you insist on allowing her to stay?”

I shook my head. “The people adore her

“The people would adore any of our
choices. Lilliana, for example. Think of **ways** to bring her up in the
people’s eyes. They don’t need Piper to rally behind.”

In my mind, I
tried to replace my shared moments in Piper’s presence, with Lilliana instead. It was al
most laughable.

She would never go with me to an orphanage to feed the children. She wouldn’t smile at
me like Piper

did. If it had been her in the kitchen the night before, I would not have been tempted to k
iss her by the

oven.

“**You** need to reassess your priorities, Nicholas,” the King said. “I’m only looking out for
you.”

I knew, **in his** own way, that he meant those words. The kingdom was important, and so
was my place in

1. it. Any lingering feelings for Piper threatened to unravel everything he had planne
d for me.

I tried to keep that in mind. I tried to be strong.

I would be.

But that didn’t mean Piper had to leave.

“My priorities are in order,” I said. “Piper is good for ratings **and** to garner the people’s g
ood will, but I

have no remaining feelings for her,”

It was a lie, but, I would take the truth to the grave with me.

“Good,” the King said. “Let’s keep one thing very clear...”

The King looked once more into the fire.

“Piper will never be Luna. Not so long **as** I live.”

Chapter 0130

The day of the garden party event, I awoke early, dressed, and hurried down to the kitchen to warm my stuffed mushrooms. Many of the girls were already in there, and I had to wait my turn at the ovens.

I didn’t mind waiting this time, since the closer I heated my food to the start of the event, the more likely it **would** still be warm by **the** time the royal family came to our table.

With my appetizer warmed, I headed to the gardens and found Linda already at our station, fixing her

half of the **display**.

“Good morning. Linda,” I said as I approached.

She didn’t reply. I guessed she was still avoiding me. That was going to make this situation more **difficult**. How were we supposed to work together if **we** weren’t speaking to each other?

I resolved to do my best anyway, as much **as** I could without her support.

Noticing that she had already arranged her deviled eggs over the table, I started to intersperse my

stuffed mushrooms among them.

That, of all things, seemed to finally trigger her into speaking.

“Keep that garbage on your half of the table,” Linda snapped.

I pointed to the eggs that were obviously on my half. “Fair’s fair, Linda. Plus, it will look better if –

me what would look better.” She quickly grabbed her eggs and moved them to her own side.

“Don’t tell me

I noticed then, that she didn’t have any ice or anything to keep the eggs cool. Depending on how soon or late our table was visited, that could be a problem. Eggs that weren’t kept cool, could be prone to spoiling.

“Linda, do you have anything to

“I said, stop talking to me.”

I closed my mouth. That wasn't actually what she had said, but I decided not to push my luck by pointing

that out.

my warm

Instead, I **continued** to set out my stuffed mushrooms. With her cold eggs on one side, and my

mushrooms on the other, and the drinks in between, our display was visually appealing, I supposed.

It didn't feel **in** the spirit of the event, exactly. We were supposed to explore compromise and flex our

diplomatic abilities, showing how we could **give** and take with adversaries. Our display was split. But

since Linda would not budge, this would have to do.

+15 BONDS

only hoped I **could** find a way to talk **around** whatever questions the royal family might have for us. Linda was certain to try to **pass** all the blame onto me, for anything they disliked.

Across the gardens, the royal family, with a **trail** of cameras behind them, began the event. Lilliana's table had been elected to go first.

From my distance, I couldn't discern what Lilliana had made, but I could very clearly see the moment she decided to hand—
feed it to Nicholas. He stood still as a statue, but he opened his mouth. He bit into

the **food** she **offered**. He chewed and chewed.

My stomach twisted inside of me.

My ribcage felt too tight, like my chest had constricted.

I couldn't understand what I was seeing. Surely feeding one of the judges was against the rules. But the King and Queen simply looked on, smilingly slightly. They nodded to one another.

Joyce seemed disinterested in the whole affair, looking off among the trees like he'd rather be

somewhere else.

Julian, however, watched for a moment, an amused expression on his face. Then he turned **and** looked directly at me. When he caught me staring, his smirk grew into a smile. He broke away from the rest and

began to approach me.

I wanted to hide, but during the competition, I couldn't leave my station. I was entirely trapped until the

royal family had visited my table.

So I had nowhere to run to as Julian came to stand beside me. We both looked at where Lilliana was

handing Nicholas a flute of champagne.

"Interesting, isn't it?" Julian said. "It's like watching a train wreck. Repulsive, truly, but one cannot turn

away."