

The Luna Choosing Game by Jane Above Story Chapter 21

Chapter 0021

After receiving Susie's news, I needed a moment to catch my breath. I didn't understand . The royal

doctor had already examined Elva, as recently as the day before. How could she have a fever again?

Wouldn't the doctor **have** detected any anomalies before they fully formed?

Those questions would have to wait. For now, all I knew was my daughter was sick and I had to get to

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gett

her.

I pushed away my soup bowl, and apologized to those around me. "I'm sorry. There's a n emergency. I

have to go.

Susie squeezed my arm, then returned to her chair.

As I hurried toward the exit, I glanced back at the table.

A bold girl had already slid herself into my abandoned seat. She must have said a joke, because the

people around her laughed. Even Nicholas looked at her and gave a relaxed smile.

My heart jumped in my chest. He'd been so tense when I had been sitting there. But now, in my absence,

he felt comfortable enough to enjoy himself?

A bitter kind of sadness wormed its way inside of me, but I pushed it down.

Elva was sick. I needed to get to her and find out what was going on.

One of my maids was in the hallway outside the dining room, waiting for me.

Two royal doctors are in with her now," the maid said. She kept pace with me as we rushed back to my

bedroom.

How did this happen?" I asked.

The maid seemed as confused as me. "She seemed fine until about an hour ago. The fever came on so

suddenly. We thought at first **she** was just tired."

We rushed in my room. Elva was in the bed, the blankets pulled up to her chest. She had a cold compress on her forehead, held in place by my quieter, second maid.

The **two** doctors, presumably, stood **a** few feet away from the bed, speaking softly with each other.

Elva gasped **and** hurried to her side. I touched the back of my fingers **to her** cheek. She was burning

Elvassoice was weak. A tear slipped out **from one** closed eye and tumbled down her face

"It's okay, honey. Mommy's here now. It's going to be okay."

She seemed soothed by my presence, enough to fall asleep.

I glanced at the second maid, who was diligent in holding that compress and watching Elva. Confident **she** would alert me if something else occurred, I stepped back from the bed to consult with the doctors.

As I came toward them, they stopped their hushed words to each other and looked at me. One with

blank expression. The other had a pitying **look**.

“Why does Elva have a fever?” I asked. “What’s her new treatment plan?”

The doctors glanced at each other, then back at me.

“There is no treatment plan,” the blank one said.

I must have misheard. “Excuse me?”

a

The pitying doctor also had a tiny condescending smile. I hated him more than anyone else in the world

at that moment.

“Her condition is severe,” he said. “We hope you will see reason, and give up on wanting to treat the girl.”

“See reason?” My temper flared hot. “You are talking about a person a child – not some wounded

animal that needs put down.”

“We should save our resources for those with hope of survival,” the doctor with the blank look said. I

viciously hated her as well.

I didn't understand. Were their resources so scarce they would refuse to help a child? Why hadn't that been mentioned earlier? Julian had made it seem like they would take care of Elva, since she was a guest.

But now, here they were, saying she didn't deserve a chance to live?

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" I asked. My voice was rising with my panic. "Elva has been

evaluated already, and no one said a thing about her having a terminal illness!"

Ma'am. There's no need to shout," said the pitying one. "We can hear just fine."

Blank expression crossed her face.

I attempted a deep breath, **but** it came out shaking. I wanted to scream at them, **but** I had dealt with bullies before. Shouting wouldn't work. For Elve's sake, I had to submit to whatever they asked

Chapter 0022

I

Forcing my voice level, I asked, "Why wasn't I previously informed that Elva was suffering from a

terminal illness?"

The pitying one pushed his **glasses** up his **nose** with his index finger. "Perhaps we were optimistic before. But she has since taken a turn for the worst. We aren't fortune tellers, ma'am."

That wasn't what I wanted to hear. "So you won't treat her? At all?"

The pitying one shrugged. "What's the point?" He placed his hand on my shoulder, and it took everything within me not to shove him away. "Giving up now is for the best. You'll see that soon enough."

"I will never agree with that," I said. "Elva is worth saving. At least **try**. Please. I'm begging you.

The doctor with the pitying look shook his head. He called to his colleague. "We're done here." a

“No...” My **legs** went weak.

As one doctor walked straight out the door, the other, the one with the blank expression stopped at my

side.

In a whisper that no one else could hear, she told me, “Perhaps leaving the palace would be better for

her.”

I looked at her in confusion, but she offered no further explanation. She left the **room** without glancing

back

Was she insinuating that someone here might have done something to Elva? Or was she saying that no one here would help her because of who she was?

I collapsed. I **would** have likely banged my knees on the floor if my maid hadn't caught **me** and helped.

me down.

What was I going to do? I couldn't let Elva die! Even if she was sick enough... even if it was fated... **didn't**

she deserve some treatment?

The poor girl was in pain!

Miss Piper said the second maid from Elva's bedside,

Aluson I pushed myself back to my feet and scrambled to Elva's side: Her little hand was reaching **out**

in both of mine

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The **poor girl** was in pain!

"Miss Piper," said the **second** maid from Elva's bedside,

I myself back to my feet and scrambled to Elva's side. Her little hand was reaching out

"It hurts..."

"I know, honey. I'm sorry. But it will be okay soon." It was a lie, but how could I let her believe that none of these monsters would actually help her?

"Promise?" She peeked at me through her lashes. Her eyes were damp with tears.

Had she heard me yelling? My heart sunk in agony.

This poor child. My poor baby.

I had to do something. There had to be someone in this **huge** palace who would help Elva. If I had to force

someone to help her, I would.

"I promise," I said, determined now.

My misery could wait for if I failed. I was a mom with a mission now.

I kissed her small hand and placed it back on the bed. When her eyes closed, I stepped back from her

bedside.

I asked both maids to stay with her. "Guard her like she's your own."

They both agreed.

Then I ran from the room. I spotted a few guards in the hallway.

“Please!” I said, approaching them. “We need more doctors. Different ones.”

The guards frowned. They shifted uncomfortably. “We’re sorry, miss. But the royal doctors have already

seen your daughter. We’ve been instructed to honor their judgement.”

“But **they’re** wrong! Can’t you see that?”

The guards looked away from me. “We’re sorry.”

No help here, I realized. I pressed on, asking every guard and servant I came across, but each reply was

the same, with varying levels of sympathy.

And no one would stand against the doctor’s decision.

Wildly, I thought of turning to Susie, or even to Nicholas. He’d shown kindness to Elva before. Surely he

wouldn’t turn her away so cruelly now.

Perhaps leaving the palace would be better for her.

Maybe no one here was safe.

I had to get back to Elva

I swiveled on my heel, and returned to my hallway. Just **as** I rounded the corner, I saw a figure disappear around another one, further down the hall.

Was that Lena?

It didn’t matter. Elva was the most important person in the world to me right now.

I pushed through the doors to my bedroom. “Elva!”

But the bed was empty.

Elva was gone.

Chapter 0023

When I returned to the bedroom, Elva was missing from the bed. I nearly screamed, were it not for both of maids, who quickly approached me.

“W—where’s Elva?” I asked them, panic quaking my voice.

“You caused a right commotion, running around,” the talkative maid said. “It was enough to catch the

attention of Prince Nicholas.”

Nicholas? “He’s still at the banquet...?”

I remembered looking back at him as I was leaving. He’d been smiling at an eager girl desperate for his attention.

“The banquet is still occurring,” the maid said. “He must have excused himself early.”

Why would he do such a thing? Surely he hadn’t overheard what Susie said about Elva? Even if he **had**, *he w*

wouldn’t have cared... would he?

“Prince Nicholas came in here,” the quieter maid said. “He felt Elva’s fever, and then carried her out of

this room himself.”

My mind was a spiral of fear and worries. I struggled to think straight. I only knew that wherever Elva

was, I had to be near her.

Nicholas wouldn’t make her leave the palace, would he? She was just a little girl.

No. No, as much as he’d changed from three years ago, he wouldn’t hurt Elva. I was certain of that. Especially when I thought of how gently he had held her when she ran to him at the mixer in the parlor.

But where would he take her?

He was a prince. Nowhere in the palace was off-limits to him. Where would I even begin looking?

couldn’t go to his room. That was a grave offense. Nathan had made clear that it could cost me my

eded to be strong for Elva. I needed to be alive.

the bedroom, trying to think I wanted **to** scream in frustration.

I

As someone knocked on the door, I glanced, and a guard
d, who had told me they'd been ordered

He seemed much less troubled now, looking fully at me. "Miss Piper, you are to go to the royal infirmary.

Come with me. I'll show you the way."

I quickly went the guard. Sensing my urgency, he maintained a fast **pace** as he led me through the back hallways of the palace, through places Nathan had not included on his tour.

Visiting off-limit places was surely allowed if I'd been summoned, **right**? I didn't have time to worry. I'd

risk beheading if it brought me to Elva.

The royal infirmary had a few beds and a wall of bookcases. Several tables were covered in chemistry equipment **and** microscopes.

far

Elva was in one of the beds, with an older woman doctor leaning over her. Nicholas was nearby, far

enough back to give them space but close enough to be watchful.

I rushed to Elva's side at once. She was still sleeping. I touched her cheek. She was warm, but not as hot

as before.

"Her fever has subsided," the doctor said.

A half-sob, half-sigh of relief shook my whole body, I cried as I held Elva's hand. I made sure her

blankets were tucked in securely around her.

Then, after a while, I could speak again.

“I don’t understand. The other doctors said. They said...” I couldn’t vocalize the horrible words they’d spewed. I dared not voice them here, **for** fear this doctor might agree with them.

“I know what they said.” The doctor’s brow lowered, angry. “And they are wrong. Though Elva’s condition is tricky, we should not and will not give up on her.”

She leaned closer to me. “I am Prince Nicholas’s personal physician. Ask for me directly if she has another need. I will add regular check-ups of her to my routine.”

Thank you, I said to her, then looked at Nicholas. He leaned against the bookcase, arms crossed over his chest.

Chapter 0024

He watched me but he didn’t say anything.

“Thank you, Your Royal Highness, I

didn’t do it for you.” His gaze fell to Elva, who looked so small in her hospital bed. “No harm will come

to any child in this palace.”

“I

“Even so.” I was grateful for his help, no matter the reason he gave it. “Thank you.”

The doctor glanced between us. “If you will excuse me, I will personally take Elva’s prescription to the

pharmacist. It seems safer that way.”

“I

“Thank you,” I said, as Nicholas said, “That would be best.”

When the doctor left the room, Nicholas kicked off the bookcase and came closer. He peered down at Elva from her bedside, a soft look on his face.

I remembered his interview. Nicholas loved children. He wanted a big family. That kindness must have extended to Elva.

“Truly.” I said, “I **don’t** know how to thank you for this.”

His soft look hardened when he gazed up at me. “Children are separate from our situation, Piper. Elva is innocent in all of this.”

It was clear then, that he didn’t want me to take this gesture personally. He wanted to maintain distance from me. But he was still willing to help Elva, and that was what really mattered.

I wished I could think of a way to convince him that I wasn’t here to chase a crown or rekindle what we

had. If Julian knew I was only here as a publicity stunt, then surely Nicholas must have also known.

Yet he held onto his anger for me, and wrapped it around himself like an impenetrable shield.

He’d likely never warm to me. I had to just accept that.

Looking at Elva, I knew I had bigger things to worry about anyway.

The doctors in my room. When they were leaving, one of them said, “Perhaps leaving the palace **would**

for her

said that

want to harm Elva. Hell, you

Immediately, I thought of the flash of Lena I had seen leaving the hallway just as I’d arrived.

She hated me. Would that be enough reason to endanger my child?

“From **now** on, only my personal physician will tend to her,” Nicholas said. The gold in his eyes flashed dangerously. It might have been a trick of the light.

Elva stirred. “Mommy?”

“I’m here, honey.” I inched closer. “How are you feeling?”

“Okay now,” Her curious eyes shifted from **me** to Nicholas. “Who are you?”

Nicholas placed a hand on his chest. “I’m Prince Nicholas.”

“Nick-lass?”

Panic surged through me. “Oh, no, no, Elva. We address him as ‘Your Royal

“It’s okay,” Nicholas said, stopping me. “Nick-**lass** is fine.”

Elva smiled. She reached her arms out to him. “Up, please.”

Nicholas leaned down. Elva wrapped her arms around his neck. Holding her close, he lifted her from the

bed.

My whole heart melted into a puddle of warm goo. Elva had made a new friend. Nicholas was so good

with children.

In a different life, this could have been our family.

Immediately, I shut down that thought. Nicholas resented and hated me, and I had no delusions that **Would** change. I might have regretted breaking up with him, but though the guilt remained, whatever

feelings I’d **had** for him were buried in the past.

This was a flash in the pan kind of feeling. I saw something cute and my heart reacted.

It didn’t mean lingering feelings were involved.

Nicholas shifted Elva in his arms, and (**caught** the wince he tried to hide **as he** bent his right wrist

injured

Chapter 0025

Holding Elva, Nicholas winced as he bent his right wrist. He had tried to hide it, and maybe would have **been** successful if I had been anyone other than his ex-girlfriend.

He’d told me the story himself, when we had been dating.

Nicholas had excelled for his age. His werewolf abilities were some of the strongest in the entire

kingdom, even when he’d been a child.

Because of this, when a war had broken out in the north between the Werewolf Kingdom and the Bear

People, Nicholas had been sent to the front lines. He’d only been 11 at the time.

Though his talent was immense, he lacked the years of training that other soldiers had.

He fought hard and well. He felled many foes. But his inexperience too often led him into situations he

might have otherwise known to avoid.

Once, he followed an enemy deep behind their lines, and straight into a trap.

Only with the sacrifices of so many others, was he able to escape, but not without injury.

Over time, most of the wounds had healed. All except for his right wrist.

He'd explained to me that he was often able to suppress the pain. It didn't always bother him. But when the cold set in, **or** it rained or snowed, the pain would flare up again.

So many nights I had laid awake after hearing his story, imagining an 11 year old version of the boy I loved fighting in a shifter war. I had nightmares, imagining his fear, the pain he'd felt from his injuries, and the guilt he'd suffered every day, knowing others had died to save him.

Now, thoughts of the nightmares returned, with a new, different angle. Nicholas, a prince, had been sent to war, Weren't princes supposed to be pampered and protected?

Nicholas looked at me, and I pulled my gaze away. I couldn't let on that I knew his injury pained him. Since he hated **me** now, he'd hate showing me his weakness.

didn't want him to hurt himself further by trying to hide it.

"We should get back to our room," I said.

I

my some do take Elve from him, but she buried her nose against his collar

That would probably be best." Elva could be the most stubborn girl in the kingdom, when she put her

mind to it.

As we left the infirmary and made our way back to my room, I tried to smile at Nicholas. His kindness and generosity were not lost on me. It wouldn't hurt to make nice with him, for Elva's sake if nothing else.

"She likes you," I said.

He gently patted Elva's back. The girl had fallen asleep in his arms. He seemed pleased with the words, though he didn't offer any type of reply.

After a long moment, he said, "She'll be safe here. I will see to it personally."

I didn't know what else to say, other than, "Thank you, **Prince** Nicholas." I tried another smile. "I'll try to teach her how to pronounce your name."

"Don't you dare," he said softly.

That familiar fond feeling flooded through me again. He couldn't actually like being called Nick-lass? Or maybe he did. It was rather cute.

Elva was already getting so big. Soon, she would lose the cute way she said things. I supposed there was no need to rush it, not if Nicholas didn't mind.

Once we were back in my bedroom, he tucked Elva into her side of the large bed, then left the room without another word to me, not even a goodnight.

A twinge of disappointment rose inside of me, and resenting it, I buried it quickly.

Nicholas meant nothing to me anymore.

The next day, Elva was feeling infinitely better. She bounced around the room with her **usual** 3 year old energy, regardless of how many times I tried to get her to sit still and rest.

While sighing from my latest failed attempt, one of the maids brought me an invitation that had been delivered to the room.

I

asked.

For the First Ball, the maid said, holding out the glittering notecard. The whole thing

had

been dipped in gold, with the black pen lettering handwritten afterwards,

Chapter 0026

I read through it all. This invitation includes Eiva...?" Could that be right? But there was her name, clear

as day, directly **beside** mine. Perhaps this was some kind of apology for the doctors' behavior last night?

Or was this something else another publicity stunt?

I supposed I couldn't be picky enough to let it bother me. The royal family invited us both, so we both would attend. Full stop.

Right now, my bigger concern could be focused on the detailed dress code included at the bottom of the invitation.

"The tailors will be here in an hour," the talkative maid said. "They'll measure you both for the dresses."

"Princess dresses?" Elva asked, all doe eyes and sweetness.

The maid smiled at her. "Something very close to, yes.

Elva cheered.

The maid returned her attention to me. The dance instructors will arrive tomorrow."

"Dance instructors?" I knew how to do a two-step as well as anyone.

The candidates must know all of the latest dances. Some of the proper steps for the social dances are quite complicated, these days. And then, of course, there are the traditional formal dances that the King prefers."

Okay. So I guessed a simple two-step wasn't going to cut it this time. We hadn't done much dancing at the Academy at least, not formally.

Two-step worked just fine for impromptu dances alone in the garden under the moonlight.

I shook away those memories. Nicholas had likely forgotten those special nights, so I should as well.

The tailors came and went, leaving behind the measurements for both Elva and me. The maids said they would make the dresses themselves. I offered to help, but they vehemently refused

it is our honor to assist you, the quiet one said.

none the less. After some coaxing I convinced them to at least let me help with them

one said.

Together, we moved some sewing machines and a work table into my bedroom. As they worked, I peered through some of the scraps of fabric they'd left to the side.

as

Some of the fabrics were very sturdy. There was even a swatch of leather among the pile.

An idea came to me..

"I think that's enough for today," I said, as the maids yawned and rubbed their eyes.

They agreed and excused themselves for the night.

I tucked in Elva and kissed her goodnight. Then I went to one of the sewing machines.

I worked through the night, shaping and stitching. I had to guess some of the size work, trying to remember the shape of Nicholas's hand compared to mine.

When I finished, the morning dawn crept in through the windows. My eyes hurt and I was tired. But it wasn't the first time I'd pulled an all-nighter. It likely wouldn't be the last either.

I held the item I'd made in both of my hands, admiring the finished product.

A wrist guard, fit for a prince with an old injury.

It had seemed a good idea last night, a way to properly thank Nicholas for helping Elva. Words hadn't seemed like enough.

But now, in the light of day, I hesitated.

He was cold and distant to me now. He seemed to always assume the worst.

Would he suspect this gift to be more than a mere gesture of thanks? Would he think I was trying to ingrain myself into his heart once more?

didn't want him to think that.

Ward worked too hard to throw this gift away. Besides, he'd winced. He was in pain. The gift would help

grip my mind, collected Elva and went down to breakfast in the dining hall. The royal family, as

the room. They only seemed to dine with us during formal occasions

therogen.

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girls were here or not he would

onto his

this same char

I placed **my** finger to my lips when Elva spotted me.

This would be our little secret.

Chapter 0027

During the next official banquet, I stopped just inside the entrance of the dining room. The girl who had

sitting in my seat beside Nicholas.

shoved Elva that first *day* w

Julian, sitting nearest the door, rested his elbow on the table and his chin in his palm. He grinned at me

with a toothy smile, much the way a cat would look at a mouse it had planned to eat. Eventually. After

playing with it, of course.

I

“My brother Nicholas personally invited Kirsten to take that seat,” he said. “It makes sense, I guess. We

are supposed to get to know all the girls here, and he’s already well-acquainted with you.”

Some of the girls around us perked up at that bit of gossip.

“Be truthful,” I said, hoping he’d notice the emphasis and keep secrets instead.

He only beamed wider. “Want to know where Kirsten was sitting? That’s your spot now.”

He **knew** I did, but he still waited for me to say it. He really loved these games of his.

“Yes, please.”

He motioned to the empty seat straight across from him. The one right beside the queen’s chair.

Fortunately, as the King gave his speech later, he mentioned the Luna would not be present for today's event. I immediately exhaled in relief. The girls near me did as well, though less obviously.

"She's so regal and beautiful," one whispered to another. "I feel like a toad being in the same room as

When the King finished and was seated, the girls' gossip began in earnest. None of them seemed to mind that Julian was in earshot. In fact, Julian himself seemed to encourage it, occasionally partaking.

Ituned **it** out for the most part, not truly caring about Prince Joyce's shoe size or the best time to catch Mark alone to ask him about Nicholas.

uned right back in, however, when I heard the girl beside me say, "I can't believe Kirsten is the first one

an invitation

i

to a prince right away." the girl said to me. Typically you would be

The per princes

"Would you like an invitation?" Julian asked her. When she sucked in an excited breath, he leaned forward and said, "I invite you to sit right where you are sitting."

She exhaled, disappointed. When a few of the other girls laughed, she did too, though I wondered if she

meant it.

I frowned at Julian, disapproving. He shouldn't lead girls on like that. He caught my eye and shrugged,

totally indifferent.

"What do you think Kirsten did to earn that favor?" the girl directly beside Julian asked. She looked relieved now, having been nervous a moment ago, at the height of Julian's joke.

"I can tell you," Julian said. His chin was in his palm again, and his eyes were on me. "Kirsten made him a gift,"

The other girls gasped. "Why didn't I think of that?"

I frowned a little. Kirsten had also made something for Nicholas?

I hadn't thought her to be that considerate. Perhaps... I had misjudged her?

No, anyone who would shove a child was worthy of disdain.

||

After the awkward dinner, when I met with Susie in the hallway, I learned I had not misjudged her.

"Kirsten is a bully," Susie said. "Whenever she needed something, she made me wave down the servants." She laced her fingers together. "It was much nicer sitting next to you."

"I'm sorry," I said, hooking my arm around one of hers. Together we walked toward the bedrooms.

The girls had spread out by now, some already headed to their rooms, others going into the common areas to lounge, not yet ready for bed.

I was eager to get back to my room and check on Elva.

"It's **not** your fault," Susie said. "Prince Nicholas extended the invitation to her."

Chapter 0028

Yes, and the other girls seemed to feel nothing but resentment toward her for it.

"*Julian said Kirsten made him a gift," I said, "I wonder what it was."

"A heartfelt one, I assure you," said a voice from beside me. I jumped. Susie half-hid behind me. But it

was only Mark, Nicholas's beta. "The **prince** asked me to check on Elva."

I accepted his explanation and we continued walking

"Somehow Miss Kirsten learned of one of the prince's old wounds and made a personal gift for him," Mark explained. "The prince found the gesture warm and thoughtful. He was very appreciative."

There was something in the way Mark explained it, voice monotone almost, like he didn't think the same as his prince.

"Is there reason to doubt her sincerity?" I asked.

“No,” Mark said straight away. After a moment, he added, “But the prince’s discomfort isn’t obvious. I hadn’t taken her to be so observant,”

Then he glanced at me and blushed. “I shouldn’t have said that. It’s unfitting of my position to talk disparagingly about any of our candidates.”

“I heard nothing disparaging,” I assured him.

“Neither did I,” Susie agreed.

He seemed grateful, but he said nothing **more**.

The next day, an archery lesson was given by the princes. We were separated into three groups, with one of the three princes leading each group.

I was grouped with Nicholas. After an hour, he hadn’t looked at me, much less at the target where I’d been hitting my marks. None of the other girls in the group seemed confident which way to even fire, if they held the bow correctly at all.

of their efforts were so poor that I wondered if they were performing a show, pretending to be bad To get the prince’s attention.

I

cared to admit that I didn’t receive so much as an approving nod from Nicholas bored

His group had been laughing the entire time. Only a few of the girls had even attempted to shoot a target, and even then, only when Nathan had looked over, a stern scowl on his face.

Julian waved me closer. “Shoot with me.”

“A challenge?” I asked. “What will I win?”

His **grin** was wide and eager. “What do you want?”

The girls of his group swooned. One fanned herself.

I couldn’t help it. I laughed.

Abandoning Nicholas’s group, I joined with Julian’s. We had our challenge.

Julian hit the bullseye. He would. The princes were well-trained in archery.

I went next, firing my arrow. It hit the target directly beside Julian’s.

“Guess this means we tied,” he said.

His easy attitude and the girls’ overall joy made the afternoon pass quicker. In a way, it reminded me of the more fun days at the Royal Academy. How many times had Nicholas and I goofed off like this? Completing challenges and trading kisses.

A sense of nostalgia pulled at me, and I turned to look at Nicholas.

He was instructing Kirsten, his arms around her, guiding her into a proper stance.

My heart twisted a little, until I noticed he was wearing the wrist guard I’d given **him**.

So he had accepted the gift after all?

over

As he stepped back from Kirsten, she brushed her fingers handcrafted gift.

My group quieted down a moment, likely waiting for Julian to tell another joke. It was long enough for me **to hear** Nicholas’s next words.

lifted his **right** wrist, gesturing to the wrist guard. “Thank you again, Kirsten, for **such** a useful gift.

dropped my bow

thanking Kirsten for the gift I had made for him

Anything for you, Prince Nichojas

Chapter 0029

I wanted to storm over there and demand Kirsten apologize **for** accepting thanks for a gift she hadn’t

given. But I couldn’t do so without revealing to Nicholas that I was the one who had given it. If Nicholas

knew the truth, he’d assume the worst.

He’d think the gift **was** disingenuous, and that I was just **chasing** after his crown.

I didn’t want nobility. I didn’t want to be his wife, or girlfriend, or whatever else.

I

I only wanted medical care for Elva. So I kept my mouth firmly shut.

Julian plucked my dropped bow off the **ground** and handed it to me. "Something on your mind, Piper?"

His knowing smirk returned tenfold.

I wasn't in the mood for his games anymore.

my room.

I turned in my bow and went back to my

After a group lesson with the dancing instructor, all of the girls rested in the parlor, accepting water and

towels from the servants.

Nathan stood nearby, loudly discussing the proper rules for the First Ball. The princes would each take a turn dancing with all the ladies. However, the order was randomized, for fairness.

Some of the girls bemoaned the randomness. "I never have any luck."

Others, like Kirsten, seemed confident that things would pull in their favor.

"Don't forget that Prince Nicholas invited me to sit next to him at the banquet," Kirsten said. "I wouldn't be surprised if he pulled a few strings to dance with me first as well."

"It's supposed to be random," someone hissed.

Kirsten rolled her eyes. "Nothing is ever random."

I did my best to ignore her, still irritated over Nicholas's gift.

To calm myself, I **focused** on Elva instead. I lifted her and twirled her through the air. She **giggled** in delight. The sound soothed me like a balm over my wounded heart.

"Will there be candies at the ball?" Elva asked, when I'd stopped spinning.

"I bet they'll have all kinds of deserts. Candles and cakes. And the gowns, Elva...."

"More pretty dresses?" Elva asked.

I nodded. "So many. And yours will be the prettiest of all." I pulled her in and kissed her cheek.

"Like a princess," Susie **said** from beside us. Elva smiled at her.

“We’ll have to look like princess to attract the attention of the princes,” said one of the girls.

“What kind of dress do you think they’d prefer?” asked another.

The theme for the First Ball was ‘Blessings of the Moon Goddess.’ What that meant was open to

interpretation.

Most of the girls seemed to be leaning toward the classic look of the Moon Goddess. They’d wear dresses in shiny silver or white, with teardrop-shaped headpieces.

Kirsten halted all friendly conversation by saying, “I’m not sharing what I’m going to wear. Why would I give my competition any chances to outdo me?”

The girls quieted after that, looking at each other suspiciously.

Gradually, the group of us disbanded, and I returned with Elva to our room.

My maids were hard at work on my own gown.

“Can’t we make it shorter?” the talkative maid suggested. “A short dress would accentuate Miss Piper’s graceful figure.”

The quiet maid disagreed. “You know the royal family disapproves of inappropriately-dressed women. We can’t even make the gloves too short, let alone the hemline.”

The talkative maid begrudgingly agreed. They both looked at me.

“What do you think, Miss Piper?”

Honestly, I didn’t have a clue. I hadn’t been aware of any of the fashion trends even when I’d attended the Royal Academy.

Still, I knew enough to know that I wanted to stand out. “What about a bright color?”

The talkative maid gasped in excitement. “Yellow. We could make it yellow!”

The quiet maid pondered it a moment. “The color of harvest, appropriate for the current season.

“And it represents the true blessing of the Moon Goddess!”

Chapter 0030

They both nodded, finally in agreement.

They removed the dress they had been working on and **added** it to the scrap pile.

“What are you doing with that?” I hurried to the discarded dress.

“It’s all wrong,” the talkative maid said. “The color’s too dark, and it’s not shapely enough. We can do better.”

“Don’t throw it out.” I held the dress protectively to my chest.

They both looked at me. “Why not?”

“It’s beautiful, and you both worked so hard on it. Let me keep it. I don’t have to wear it to the First Ball, but I’d like to wear it at some point.”

They glanced at each other.

“It’s up to you, Miss Piper,” the talkative maid said. “Everything in here is a gift to you. If you would like to keep it, that’s your decision.”

I smiled, relieved. I really didn’t want such a beautiful gown to go to waste. I went to the closet and hung it inside.

As I admired it, hanging among the other beautiful gowns, Elva came running into the room.

“Mommy! The scary guards are here!”

“What?” I rushed **out** of the closet. Elva followed, but I made sure to keep her behind me.

Three guards were in the room. One stood at the door while the other two closed in around my talkative maid.

“I didn’t do anything!” the maid called out.

I nodded to the quiet one, who took hold of Elva’s hand, keeping her safely out of the way. Then I hurried forward.

What is the meaning of this? I insisted.

The **third** guard, the one by the **door**, stepped **forward**. “Apologies, ma’am, but your maid **has** been accused of stealing royal dress materials,

it’s not true, Miss Piper, I swear!”

“She says she didn’t do it, and I believe her,” I said.

The guard seemed sympathetic, despite his harsh words. “It’s not up to you, ma’am. She’ll need to be investigated.”

“So investigate her. You don’t have to take her away.”

The guards each grabbed one of the maid’s arms and tugged her toward the door.

“We do,” the guard told me. “She’ll need to be interrogated –

“Interrogated! That’s outrageous. You can’t take someone away without knowing for sure they are at fault.”

The guard shook his head. “We can if it is on palace grounds. These are palace affairs. I’m sorry, ma’am, but this is just how things are done. Please stand aside.”

The maid was pale, with wide frightened eyes. Still, she said, “Don’t get involved, Miss Piper. I’ll be okay.”

“But –”

I’m innocent, right? When they figure that out, they’ll let me go, and everything will be okay.” Her voice trembled. I didn’t know if she believed what she was saying.

I wanted to fight for her, but I didn’t know what to say or do.

“Don’t risk Elva,” the maid said, and I froze.

She was right. If I made too many waves, Elva might be in danger again,

I’m sorry,” I said.

She gave me a sad sort of smile. “I’ll be back before you know it.”

Then the two guards tugged her away. The third guard remained.

“A replacement maid has been assigned to you, with this new absence,” the guard said. He stepped out **into** the hallway and waved someone closer.

A woman followed him back into the **room**.

At first glance, she appeared friendly enough, smiling peacefully. **She** curtsied to me and **introduced** herself.

I'm looking forward to serving you," she **said**.

But I found it strange. Surely she had passed my other maid being taken away down the hall. What kind of person would be smiling so calmly after having witnessed such a thing?