

The Luna Choosing Game by Jane Above Story Chapter 31

Chapter 0031

The new

maid made me **so** uneasy that I sent both away whenever I could. Where I had appreciated the steady comfort of the quiet maid's presence and enjoyed the conversations with the talkative one, this new maid seemed to be constantly watching me, even while I dozed.

"Don't you need help babysitting?" the strange maid asked as I ushered them both to the door. I would have liked the quiet one to stay, but couldn't think of a reason that would only excuse one and not the

other.

"I'm perfectly capable," I said and said goodbye at the door.

I was just about to close it when a voice called out. "Piper!"

I knew that voice. Julian.

Maybe I could pretend I hadn't heard him?

I started to close the door again, but he caught it. He wedged his way into the partially opened door and

smirked at me like he knew exactly what I was doing.

"That's not very nice, Piper."

"I don't know what you mean."

His smile only grew. "May I come in? We have a lot to talk about."

I

I wasn't sure we had all that much to talk about, actually, but I couldn't tell him that since he was a

prince. "Fine." I pulled back the door all the way, letting him inside. I left it open behind **u**
s.

Elva was under her blanket fort, **coloring** with crayons.

"What did you want to talk about?" I asked.

You

I blanked. He had to be **joking**, but it was so hard to tell with him. His grin didn't waver one way or the

other. He always just said things and then watched me react.

What about me?

He shrugged and walked to where we'd organized the sewing machines. He **glanced** through some of the fabric swatches. He stopped **on** one, part of which I had used to make Nicholas's wrist guard.

really hoped he didn't make the connection

He peered at it a moment, then moved on. Again, his smile hadn't shifted. He was insufferably good at

being unreadable

"To boost public support, the royal family has recently been investigating the underground trade of

wolves and their gifts," he said. "I'm part of this investigation."

The blood drained from my face. My throat suddenly dry, I had trouble swallowing.

"What does that have to do with me?" I asked, my voice small

He picked up another swatch of fabric, this time satin, and ran in through his fingers.

“Nicholas claims that you left the Academy on your own accord, but we both know that’s not true.”

“I... don’t know what you mean...”

Julian continued like I hadn’t said anything. “You were involved with the underground trade, and left the

Academy out of guilt for what you’d done.”

He wasn’t asking any questions. He already knew. I didn’t know how, but he knew.

“The information I’ve gathered shows that you sold your wolf in exchange for a significant sum of

money.” He lowered the satin fabric. Turning, he looked at me. “This act carries a heavy punishment, if it’s

discovered by the royal family.”

My stomach dropped. Was my secret truly so easy for him to uncover? And if he was so sure about it,

why hadn’t I been cast out already, unless –

Wait.

If it’s discovered by the royal family.

He’d said if.

I immediately stepped toward him. “You can’t tell anyone. Please. Elva needs treatment and if we are

out on the street –”

“You wouldn’t be on the street, Piper. You’d be in prison. Or worse. Elva, however...”

I fell to my knees. "Please, Julian. Don't do this to her."

Julian rolled his **eyes**. "Get up, Piper. Don't act like this."

He walked to **me** and reaching down, lifted me up onto my feet again. "I would just **like** to know why. Your

aren't the type to do underhanded things. I want to know how this happened."

I didn't know what to do. I could lie, but... He already knew the truth about everything else, maybe he

knew this too. Maybe this was a test.

Chapter 0032

The fact was, for whatever the **reason**, he **hadn't** revealed my secret yet. If I played his **game**, maybe **he'd**

continue to keep it.

I pressed my hand to his elbow and nudged him closer to the **door**, further from Elva. I didn't want her to know the truth yet. We'd have our own conversation in time, when she was old enough to understand.

voice low, just in case, I confessed, "Elva isn't mine."

Julian's perfect veneer finally cracked. His eyes widened for a few solid seconds before he recovered

himself. "Really?"

"She's the daughter of my twin sister," I said. The memories burned through my brain, painful and hot."

sold my wolf to pay off Elva's ransom."

"She was being held for ransom?"

"My sister owed too much to so many people. They'd taken Elva as payment. They only gave me so many days... I did what I had to do."

Julian's smile dimmed marginally, but that made his expression no more readable. I could practically see the cogs turning in his brain as he sorted through this new information, but I hadn't a clue yet what he

was planning to do with it.

"Piper," he said, when he had reached a conclusion. "Have you ever considered that your departure from

school and your wolf being taken weren't mere coincidences?"

I hadn't. "What do you mean?"

"What if someone exploited your sister with the implicit purpose of obtaining your abilities?"

He'd surprised me into silence once more. My wolf had been strong, but to purposefully target my sister

just to steal my wolf and my power? That seemed so farfetched.

Julian hummed to himself, then nodded. "Alright. I won't share this information with anyone for now."

I exhaled in relief.

But I can't guarantee for how long I'll keep it secret."

With the next inhale, my anxiety returned. He'd hold this over my head then, for who knew how long. For:

who knew what purpose.

I was now indebted to Julian, and that knowledge brought me absolutely **zero** comfort.

encourage you to investigate for yourself," Julian said. "You might find there is some truth in my

supposition. If you **can** find out more truth, perhaps it might **ease** the burden of this secret."

As I turned the words over in my mind, trying to decide if they were a threat or not, Julian slid his gaze to

Elva.

"Since she's part of your family line, the child's future abilities would likely be formidable. If they are

anything like yours were, she might become the next target.”

He'd said the words so casually, as if he'd been talking about the weather.

But I heard clearly the danger referenced. Weak as I was, I wouldn't be able to protect Elva if those same people from the underground came for her, as they did for me.

If I could become Luna... maybe I could change her destiny.

I had to protect her, no matter what..

At the very least, I had to stay and find out more. Maybe Julian's hunch was wrong. Maybe everything that had happened to me was coincidence and not meant to repeat **itself**.

But with Elva potentially in danger, I couldn't rest until I was sure.

“Thank you, Julian,” I said. I had no idea his true intentions, but for now, he was protecting my secret and

giving me some information to go on.

His smile stretched wide. Lightly, he corrected, “Prince Julian.”

I blanched. I had forgotten again. Julian was so unchanged since I had first known him, that I forgot too

easily he wasn't that boy from the Academy anymore, but a prince.

He laughed, “I'll let it slide this time.” He leaned in closer to me. “Just for you, Piper.”

His closeness startled me

He stepped away before I could recover. He walked toward the door, but stopped near another figure standing in the doorway

Had someone been about to come inside?

Hello, brother, Julian said Fancy seeing **you** here.”

Chapter **0033**

I'll leave you two to chat, Julian said, tapping Nicholas on the shoulder.

Side by side Julian and Nicholas were of comparable height, with Nicholas an inch or two taller. They

looked similar too, though Julian's features were somewhat softer than the hard angles of Nicholas's

face.

Nicholas wasn't saying anything. His expressionless gaze shifted from me to Julian and back again.

Julian laughed on his way out the door and well down the hallway. I could hear echoes of it long after he

was gone

I thought Nicholas might leave too. Had he only come to look for Julian? Despite Julian's teasing, it seemed impossible that he would have been searching for me.

Yet when Julian left, Nicholas stayed in my doorway, fixed and unmoving like a statue.

Under his unwavering stare, I began to get nervous. Did he overhear something that Julian and I had

talked about? No, we'd been speaking softly. Even from the door, he wouldn't have been able to hear.

So what did he want?

I waited out his silence for as long as I could manage before I finally broke.

"Did you want to talk?" I asked.

He didn't move, nor did not look away. "You are Julian seem... familiar."

Did we?

"You were standing very close just now," Nicholas said.

We had to, with how softly we were talking, but if I admitted that, Nicholas would want to know what we had been talking about. As far as I was concerned, Nicholas could never, ever know my secret.

So I gave a non-committal shrug.

"You were close during archery practice, as well."

He had noticed? I thought he had totally avoided so much as glancing at me during the archery event. Even when I had been with his group, he hadn't said one word to me.

"When did you two become so close?" Nicholas asked.

Oh, he remembered **me** from the Royal Academy.”

I forced a smile, but it was uneasy. I felt like I was walking along a dagger’s edge, and one wrong **move**

would send me further into disfavor with Nicholas.

Though the whole thing seemed ridiculous. He already hated me. Why did he care who I spent time with? Unless he was worried I had turned my machinations on Julian since he himself had rejected me.

“Is that what you were doing just now?” Nicholas’s eyes narrowed, his **focus** intensifying. “Reminiscing?”

I swallowed down my growing nerves. “No, I, um... Julianer, Prince Julian and I had some unfinished

matters to discuss.”

I really hoped he wouldn’t ask more. I would take my darkest secrets to the grave, but if he kept pushing, I was so nervous, I would surely give something away.

I’d never been very good at denying Nicholas. At one point, I would have found a way to give him the whole world.

Fortunately, Nicholas’s gaze slid away from **me** and to the sewing machines I’d had the maids set up in

room. He looked over the machines, the threads, and the swatches of fabric.

my

My *h*

heart leapt. The fabric remnants I had used for his wrist guard were still there. In fact, since Julian’s meddling, they now sat on top of the pile.

Maybe Nicholas wouldn’t notice. He was still in the doorway. He would have to have the eyes of a hawk to properly compare the fabric there to the one on his wrist..

He tapped his finger against the wrist guard. He was still wearing it.

I tried to keep a straight **face**, hiding my **panic**.

“I have to go.” Abruptly, he turned away and walked into the hallway.

I stared after him, confused by both his sudden arrival and his equally sudden departure .

Had he really only come to ask me about Julian?

No, there had to be another reason. But maybe more pressing matters had called him away before it could reveal itself

I was no less confused an hour later.

I hated how much it bothered me, not knowing the truth of why Nicholas had come. And the only way I

could find out was to ask Nicholas himself – something much easier said than done

Even if I found him, he likely wouldn't tell me unless he wanted to.

Chapter 0034

It was hopeless

To clear my head. I suggested to Elva that we go for a walk in the gardens. She eagerly agreed.

Twenty minutes later, **we** were hand in hand among the flowers and the fresh air. The world did seem

more peaceful out here in nature, and I began to let some of my anxieties slip away.

Until I looked up and saw Kirsten coming toward us Her smirk was so smug I could see it across the gardens

Remembering how she pushed Elva, I quickly pulled Elva behind me, shielding her with my body.

“There you **are**. I've been looking for you,” she called to us as she approached,

Where Elva and I had kicked off our shoes to stretch our toes in the grass, Kirsten seemed utterly unwilling to step away from the garden pathway. She stopped at the edge **and** turned her nose up at the sight of our bare feet.

Her smirk stayed firmly in place, however.

“Aren't you curious how I knew where to find you?” She turned around and pointed at a **third**–story room with a balcony. “Prince Nicholas moved me there. It was such a sweet little favor, a mere pittance compared to the gift I gave him.”

The gift she gave him? She meant my gift, the wrist guard.

“What do you want?” I asked her.

“To gloat, mostly.” She shrugged. “And to tell you that you and your little leech don’t belong here.”

“Don’t call her that.”

“Maybe you thought bringing a cute kid **along** might win you some favor with the public? Well **guess** what? That brot isn’t even much to look **at** ”

Behind me, I heard Elva sniffle

“That’s enough,” I said, more forcefully.

“What did I hurt the little roach’s feelings? Kirsten fake pouted. “Are you going to cry? Good. Can’t make you any ugler than **you** already are, dressed in that pile of rags.”

This is my Sniff. Gown Elva pulled her hand away from mine to wipe her face.

+15 BONUS

“Kirsten, I’m warning you Stop talking to my daughter like this”

“Or what? You can’t touch me. But you bet I can turn Prince Nicholas against the **two** of you. All I have to

do is bat my eyelashes just so” She demonstrated, closing and opening her eyes in a quick rhythm.

“Nicklass” Elva’s cries elevated into sharp sobs. Then, all at once, she turned from me and darted

toward the tree line.

“Elva” I meant to give chase, but Kirsten caught my arm, yanking me back.

“Let her go. Maybe she’ll get eaten by a bear and do us all a favor.”

I saw red.

That was it.

Swiveling on my heel, I smacked Kirsten clean across the face with an open palm.

Kirsten released me at once. She was stunned, her eyes wide.

I didn't have any more time to waste on her.

Turning. I sprinted across the grass, chasing after Elva to the tree line. I followed the straight path from

where I'd seen her last, but by now, I had totally lost sight of her.

Panic clawed at my heart.

She had to be okay. What would I do if something happened to her? How would I go on?

She was my whole world.

I sucked in a deep breath, ready to shout my lungs out, calling her name, when I heard a soft snuffle and

a deep voice.

I followed the sounds through the thick tree line, until I popped through to the driveway. Just beyond, I

saw her.

Elva had run the whole way to Nicholas.

He knelt beside her with her tucked into the safe **cradle** of his chest. Mark stood beside, observant and

protective.

Relief **flooded** me so hard, that I felt a bit dizzy. Wobbling, I steadied myself against one of the trees, but the bark was slippery from a recent rain. I fell backwards, out into the grassy meadow.

I hit hard **enough** to knock the wind out of me.

Taking a moment to recover, I was flat on my back when Kirsten came to stand over me, accompanied by Lena and two guards.

Kirsten rubbed her reddened cheek, though her smirk remained just as smug

"You shouldn't have done that, bitch."

Chapter 0035

The guards grabbed me by the arms and yanked me to my feet. Once I was standing, they continued to

grip, as if I might try to run away.

I'm not surprised," Lena said, turning up her nose at me. "It was only a matter of time before this one

started some trouble."

I struggled to maintain my calm. "She wished harm onto my daughter."

Kirsten rolled her eyes. "Please. No one believes that. I am of the highest breeding. My word carries so

much more weight than yours, or that of your spawn."

"But-

off

"Save your excuses for the head of the royal guard." Lena cut me off. "He'll be the one deciding a

punishment that will fit this show of disrespect."

The head of the royal guard? Not the King or Queen or the princes?

Lena must have seen the confusion on my face. "Arguments between candidates are too trivial to

bother the royal family about. These matters can be handled by the palace staff."

A knot began forming in my stomach. What punishment could the head of the royal guard dish out?

I wasn't likely to be ejected from the competition without the royal family's consent. As a publicity stunt,

it wouldn't look good to drop me flat before the first elimination. But expulsion wasn't all they could do to

ΠΕ

They could move us to a smaller, windowless room. Or take away some of my freedom of movement through the grounds. Perhaps, they would want me to perform physical labor.

All of those potential punishments I could handle. None of them were what made me feel sick.

My deepest fear was that they would take away Elva's medical care.

That fear alone kept me silent and complacent, as Kirsten laughed in my face.

"Aw, were you hoping Prince Nicholas would save you again? You should know by now, Piper, that you

are the lowest of the low. You don't deserve to breathe the same air as the prince, let alone speak to him."

"Prince Nicholas chooses whom he can speak to," I said, **daring** a soft retort.

To imply that Nicholas would not speak to anyone common was a slight he didn't deserve. His issues

with me had been regarding our shared past, not because of my upbringing.

Kirsten's smile tightened. Her eyebrow twitched, revealing the truth of her barely-hidden annoyance.

"Prince Nicholas only talks to you because he is a good person and he feels bad for you. You can't

honestly think you actually **have** a chance in this competition? Someone like you?"

I had no misconceptions about my place here. I knew I was allowed to stay simply to improve the

reputation of the royal family among the common people.

Yet Kirsten's blatant dismissal of someone like me had me lifting my chin in defiance.

Seeing that she was not breaking me, Kirsten's smile wavered, and her anger grew.

"You will never be Luna, Piper. You are weak and pathetic. You don't even have a wolf! How could a Luna not have a wolf? Outrageous."

"She does

not necessarily need a wolf to be Luna," Lena corrected. "However, what she does need is a

certain poise and respectful demeanor. Neither of which she possesses."

Lena had a strange sense of decorum, to think Kirsten a paragon of virtue and me significantly less so..

I should have continued to hold my tongue, but the injustice of it all had my blood boiling. What had I ever done to deserve such bullying?

It wasn't as easy to defend myself as it had been to defend Elva, but for Elva's sake, as well as my own, I

had to try

"Prince Nicholas will see through you soon enough," I said to Kirsten. "You stole credit for that

handmade gift, but how long will that **goodwill** last? Eventually, you will reveal your true self."

—

I stole nothing, you oh. Oh, I see."

Chapter 0036

Her fury, which I had caused to heighten for a moment, quickly smoothed out again. Her grin returned,

wide **and** sharp.

"I should have known you were the one who **made** that sad little gift. It was so simple, so... fashion-

backwards. I had been ready to apologize for its very existence, before the prince made his small mix up."

Nhad spent hours crafting that wrist guard for the prince. I had purposefully made the design simplistic, knowing Nicholas would prefer it that way. Flashy clothes were never his style.

That Kirsten didn't know that only showed how little she understood the prince she chased.

"If you wanted him to know it was from you, you should have given it to him directly," Kirsten said. "That

you didn't only shows that you knew he would reject it. Just like he'll reject you, very soon."

"You shouldn't have taken credit —"

“It’s too late, Piper. No one will ever believe you made it. Not now. Not against my word. Although...” She

tapped her finger to her chin and looked at Lena. “I think I know a fitting punishment.”

“Oh?” Lena lifted a brow.

“She should continue making gifts for Prince Nicholas, Kirsten said. “Gifts that I would then give him, of

course. Only one gift might arise suspicion eventually. But many gifts would surely lead me into his good.

graces.”

She turned her sharp grin on me. “And then I will be Luna.” She laughed. “Maybe I’ll keep you making

gifts, locked down in the dungeons. My little secret.”

A crunch sounded from behind me, in the trees.

Suddenly, Lena’s whole posture shifted. She lost her spiteful arrogance and became small.

The guards continued to hold me, but their grip loosened.

Only Kirsten seemed unchanged, her vicious eyes searing into mine. “Then I can **get** rid of your brat –

“**You** will be doing **no** such thing.”

I knew that firm, male voice.

Kirsten’s eyes went wide. She straightened. “Your Royal Highness!

Turning my head, I watched Nicholas push through the trees and come to stand beside us. Holding his

His face was a mask of cool indifference as he took in the scene before him, looking from the guards, to

their hands on me, to Kirsten, to Lena standing behind.

Only his eyes gave away his inner fury, gold flashing.

“Mommy!” Elva tugged at Nicholas’s hand. She pointed at one of the guard. “Let go of Mommy, your

meanie!”

The

guard frowned at the girl, then looked up at Nicholas, who was watching him expectantly.

“Well?” Nicholas asked. “You heard her.”

At once, the guards’ hands fell away from me. They’d held me roughly for some time now, so I wobbled

unsteadily when they released me so quickly.

I wasn’t **truly** in danger of falling. I just needed to readjust my footing.

Even so, Nicholas closed the distance between us in a heartbeat. He placed a steady hand on my

waist, and kept it there even after I repositioned.

This close, I could see the green flecks **in** his eyes, bright under the sunlight.

“Are you hurt?” he asked me. His eyes drifted down, as if looking me over. Quickly, his gaze found mine

again.

“No,” I replied in a whisper, afraid to speak too loudly and pull **us** from this rare moment of peace.

Thank you.

He shook his head once, a dismissal of my gratitude.

“Is she okay?” Kirsten’s whiny voice sliced through the air. “I’m the one who was wronged!”

“Hush, girl,” Lena hissed, but it was too late.

Nicholas lowered his hand away from me, and shifted his full attention onto Kirsten.

“Kirsten” His voice devoid of any and all emotion. Dangerous. “I have one question for you.”

She swallowed thickly. “Yes, Prince Nicholas?”

He lifted his right hand, showing the wrist guard. “Who made **this**?”

Kirsten paled

Chapter 0037

Nicholas waited for Kirsten to answer, even while she hesitated. Slowly, he lowered his hand that had

been displaying the wrist guard down to his side.

She shifted nervously from foot to foot. She laced her fingers together.

“Well... you see...”

As she struggled, Elva moved into the space between Nicholas and me. She took both of our hands.

Looking down at her, I could tell that Nicholas had wiped her tears away. She wasn't crying anymore,

though she still seemed uncertain, half-hiding behind my skirt.

Nicholas continued to wait.

Kirsten was visibly sweating. Finally, she said, “1—I did, of course.” He attempted a giggle,

forced, painful sounding. “Why would you think otherwise?”

“Because I heard what you just said.”

“You... did...?”

but it was

“You lied to me,” he said, his voice perilously monotone. “You made me believe you had done me a

kindness, when truly all you had done was attempt to cheat me.”

Kirsten began to tremble. “It's not like that, Prince Nicholas. I swear to you

“There is no excuse for what you've done. You are wasting my time.”

“But, Your Royal Highness —!”

Nicholas looked at both of the guards, one and then the other, as if measuring their mettle by sight

alone. At once, both guards lowered their heads.

"I imagine you two were only doing what you were told," he said, flashing a quick glare in Lena's

direction.

She flinched.

Her obvious discomfort gave me more satisfaction than I wanted to admit.

"As such, you may remain on **duty** for now," Nicholas **said**. "You have the following orders.

The lifted their heads again, coming to attention.

"You are to escort Kirsten to her room to gather her things, then you are to see her off the property. Lena,

I trust you can help arrange for a car to take Kirsten back home."

"Yes, Sir," the guards said **quickly**.

"Yes, Sir," Lena said, much slower.

"H-home. ?" A look of confusion twisted Kirsten's features. "Why would I be going home?"

"Because you are eliminated, Kirsten," Lena said, stepping closer to her. "Do not disgrace yourself with

further questioning of your prince."

Kirsten did not see Lena's words for the clear warning it was.

"That can't be! It's weeks yet until the first elimination!"

The royal family has the right to eliminate anyone from the competition at any time," Lena said. "Please

control yourself."

"No! That's **not** fair." She hurried forward too quickly. Her heels sunk into the grass, and she stumbled

down onto her knees. "Piper... Piper, tell him."

She crawled to me. Reaching out, she tugged at the hem of my dress.

“Piper, you have to tell him. We’re friends, right? Tell him.”

Nicholas looked at me.

I didn’t know what to say. I hadn’t expected Kirsten, who had always been such a bully to turn into a

simpering, pathetic mess when threatened in return.

I also hadn’t expected **Nicholas** to wait for me to say something. Like he valued my opinion on the

matter. I **had** done nothing to earn that right, especially in his eyes.

He still thought I had betrayed him all those years ago.

Now he watched me, waiting to see if my judgement matched his

Kirsten was a sad sight. Exaggerated sobs wracked her body, though her makeup remained pristine.

She had no real tears. She was faking this display

If she had been genuine, I still would have deferred to Nicholas’s judgement, but I would have felt a lunge for quit about it for a moment or two.

As it was, I held no sympathy for her

Her cruel words to Elva **were** unforgivable. Especially with no apologies given.

Looking at Nicholas, I gave him a small nod.

His features did not change but an understanding crossed his eyes. He waved at the guards. “Carry out

those orders. Now.”

As they had earlier done to me, the guards grabbed Kirsten by her arms and yanked her back onto her

feet.

“Wait! No, wait!” Kirsten shrieked. The fake sadness vanished and fury replaced it in an instant. She struggled against the guards. “Let me go! I’ll claw her eyes out! This is your fault, Piper! Your fault!”

Her shouting persisted, even as the guards carried her away. “You can’t do this to me! Don’t you know

who I am? I am of high breeding! You can't treat me like this!"

Chapter 0037

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His features did not change but an understanding crossed his eyes. He waved at the guards. “Carry out

those orders. Now.”

As they had earlier done to me, the guards grabbed Kirsten by her arms and yanked her back onto her

feet.

“Wait! No, wait!” Kirsten shrieked. The fake sadness vanished and fury replaced it in an instant. She struggled against the guards. “Let me go! I’ll claw her eyes out! This is your fault, Piper! Your fault!”

Her shouting persisted, even as the guards carried her away. “You can’t do this to me! Don’t you know

who I am? I am of high breeding! You can't treat me like this!"

Chapter 0037

Nicholas waited for Kirsten to answer, even while she hesitated. Slowly, he lowered his hand that had

been displaying the wrist guard down to his side.

She shifted nervously from foot to foot. She laced her fingers together.

"Well... you see..."

As she struggled, Elva moved into the space between Nicholas and me. She took both of our hands.

Looking down at her, I could tell that Nicholas had wiped her tears away. She wasn't crying anymore,

though she still seemed uncertain, half-hiding behind my skirt.

Nicholas continued to wait.

Kirsten was visibly sweating. Finally, she said, "I did, of course." He attempted a giggle,

forced, painful sounding. "Why would you think otherwise?"

"Because I heard what you just said."

"You... did...?"

but it was

"You lied to me," he said, his voice perilously monotone. "You made me believe you had done me a

kindness, when truly all you had done was attempt to cheat me."

Kirsten began to tremble. "It's not like that, Prince Nicholas. I swear to you

"There is no excuse for what you've done. You are wasting my time."

"But, Your Royal Highness —!"

Nicholas looked at both of the guards, one and then the other, as if measuring their mettle by sight

alone. At once, both guards lowered their heads.

"I imagine you two were only doing what you were told," he said, flashing a quick glare in Lena's

direction.

She flinched.

Her obvious discomfort gave me more satisfaction than I wanted to admit.

"As such, you may remain on **duty** for now," Nicholas **said**. "You have the following orders.

The lifted their heads again, coming to attention.

"You are to escort Kirsten to her room to gather her things, then you are to see her off the property. Lena,

I trust you can help arrange for a car to take Kirsten back home."

"Yes, Sir," the guards said **quickly**.

"Yes, Sir," Lena said, much slower.

"H-home. ?" A look of confusion twisted Kirsten's features. "Why would I be going home?"

"Because you are eliminated, Kirsten," Lena said, stepping closer to her. "Do not disgrace yourself with

further questioning of your prince."

Kirsten did not see Lena's words for the clear warning it was.

"That can't be! It's weeks yet until the first elimination!"

The royal family has the right to eliminate anyone from the competition at any time," Lena said. "Please

control yourself."

"No! That's **not** fair." She hurried forward too quickly. Her heels sunk into the grass, and she stumbled

down onto her knees. "Piper... Piper, tell him."

She crawled to me. Reaching out, she tugged at the hem of my dress.

“Piper, you have to tell him. We’re friends, right? Tell him.”

Nicholas looked at me.

I didn’t know what to say. I hadn’t expected Kirsten, who had always been such a bully to turn into a

simpering, pathetic mess when threatened in return.

I also hadn’t expected **Nicholas** to wait for me to say something. Like he valued my opinion on the

matter. I **had** done nothing to earn that right, especially in his eyes.

He still thought I had betrayed him all those years ago.

Now he watched me, waiting to see if my judgement matched his

Kirsten was a sad sight. Exaggerated sobs wracked her body, though her makeup remained pristine.

She had no real tears. She was faking this display

If she had been genuine, I still would have deferred to Nicholas’s judgement, but I would have felt a lunge for revenge for a moment or two.

As it was, I held no sympathy for her

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who I am? I am of high breeding! You can't treat me like this!"

Chapter 0038

Lena pressed a hand to her face.

"Lena, we will speak about your part in this later." Nicholas said, dismissing her.

"Yes, Sir." **Lena**, keeping her eyes on the ground, quickly turned and walked back toward the palace.

Elva, who had been hiding behind my skirts, peeked her head out. "Is it over? No more loud yelling?"

"I

"It's over," I told her, but then looked up at Nicholas, whose tight expression had not relaxed. "I think."

"Mark"" Nicholas called out

Mark emerged from the tree line. He had been close and ready. Likely he had planned to jump out if he

had been needed.

Nicholas lowered himself down to one knee to speak to Elva. "Elva, do you mind playing with Mark for a

minute while I speak with your mother?"

Elva seemed unsure. She looked up at me.

I smiled and nodded, giving her support.

"Okay..." Slowly, she walked over to Mark, who held out a hand for her. She kept looking back at us

though, **as** if she didn't trust us alone.

When they were out of earshot, Nicholas's piercing gaze shifted back to me.

He held up his right wrist, showing me the wrist guard I'd made. The one he now knew I had made.

"Why didn't you give this to me directly, Piper?"

I worried my bottom lip with my teeth. I thought of lying, or simply avoiding the question. But he already

knew the truth.

“I wanted to thank you for helping Elva,” I said. I motioned toward the wrist guard. “This was just a small gesture.”

“Forgive me if I struggle to see the sincerity in that.” He lowered his arm. “It’s much more likely that you are using your previous knowledge of me in an effort to bring yourself in to my good graces.”

“That’s **not** true. If I wanted it that way, I wouldn’t have kept it a secret.”

You knew I would discover the truth eventually.

“No, I didn’t. I just wanted to help you.”

Nicholas’s accusations tried at my patience. He thought so little of me now. Whatever moment we had

shared earlier seemed tarnished now.

He didn’t take my denial seriously. He merely shook his head.

“I knew you’ve been chasing after me, but I didn’t expect you to now have Julian up your

Julian? What did Julian have to do with anything?

“He’s not up my sleeve,” I said.

up your sleeve.”

“He’s interested in you, though I’m not sure why. I suppose your beauty would be enough to catch his

eye, but he usually avoids anyone with too many strings attached.”

My... beauty?

Focus, Piper.

I opened my mouth to deny Julian’s attraction, but Nicholas cut me off before I could begin.

“Keep your distance from him.”

I stared at him in confusion. Was that an order?

Quickly, my frustration returned. How dare he try to dictate who I spent time with?

“Prince Julian can look after his own affairs,” I said. “You don’t have to protect him from me.”

*Julian does not love honestly.” Nicholas’s lips twitched into a frown. “He pulls women in, makes them fall for him, and then goes on to the next. It’s all just a game for him”

Now, I was even more confused. It almost sounded like Nicholas was trying to protect me from Julian.

Not the other way around, **as** I had originally thought.

I was stunned But Nicholas hated **me**, didn’t he? Wouldn’t he want Julian to break my heart? Not that I was giving my heart to Julian to start with, but Nicholas didn’t know that.

I had no **idea** what to say to that, so I just stared.

He lowered his own gaze away, down to his wrist, where he began to undo the ties of the wrist guard.

Thank you for this gift” once loosened, he slipped the wrist guard from his arm. “But I can no longer

accept iLTM

What? Why not?” I thought it helped him.

He held out the wrist guard to me. His eyes found mine **again**. The flecks of green within his were so

dark, they looked almost entirely black.

“I have plenty of these.” he said. “And I refuse to owe you any more favors,”

Chapter 0039

Nicholas

What

I said hadn’t been a lie. I did have other wrist guards, made by artisans and leatherworkers from all across the country.

Yet none of them had been quite as meaningful as the one handmade for me by Piper. Hers was more comfortable too.

I wasn't sure how she could remember the size of my wrist without having examined me, but she had crafted the guard to fit snugly but not too tightly. Just how I preferred it.

Did she perhaps remember when I had complained about other wrist guards in the past?

It seemed unlikely.

When I had first found the wrist guard, I had disregarded the thought that Piper had been the one to give

me this gift.

Yes, only one here who had prior knowledge of my condition. But when she had broken up

She was the

with me three years ago, she had done so without warning. And seemingly without remorse.

She left me, dropped out of the Academy, and disappeared straight off the planet. None of our mutual friends had been able to get a hold of her. My own calls never went through, but I had simply thought

she'd blocked me.

Now she was here. And she had given me this gift.

I only wished I knew what it meant.

In the moments where I thought that perhaps she gifted it with honest intentions, a sense of pleasure

spread within me.

But then I remembered when I'd gone to her room to ask her about it, I had found her with Julian. They had been talking in hushed whispers, their heads bowed toward each other as if they were sharing an

Intimate moment

A darkness had quickly replaced any pleasure, and I had carried it with me like a shadow until now, when I could finally return the gift to its **creator**.

Piper accepted the returned wrist guard, but her face fell. I steeled myself against the sight of her upset. yet even after three years, it still tugged at my heartstrings.

I wanted to hate Piper, and there were certainly moments in which I did. The hurt of her disappearance

still burned. And now her reemergence with Elva brought its own questions.

Had she cheated on me and gotten pregnant? Was that why she had left me?

And why was she suddenly so close with the brother she knew I despised?

There were too many questions between us. Too much raw heartache lingering from the past.

I kept my face carefully measured. I didn't want her to know how much she still affected me. How, ever

since we had parted, I had never been able to love anyone the same way I had loved her.

Piper's gaze lowered. She held the wrist guard gently in both of her hands. What would she do with it

now? Clearly it had been crafted only for me.

Regret filled my heart. I wanted it back.

But I couldn't re-accept it. Not without looking like a fool once again.

And the way she had talked with Julian....

Anger twisted in my heart. She knew I disliked him, maybe better than anyone. Why would she choose to

spend time with him?

What I was feeling wasn't jealousy. It couldn't be. I'd buried all romantic entanglements to her deep

within myself long ago.

It still felt a lot like jealousy.

"If you will excuse me," I said and motioned for Mark to return with Elva.

When they came close, I began walking away before Elva could request more of my time. I'd feel obliged

to give it.

If Elva **had** been mine, I would have been the most indulgent father. She was everything I wanted in a

daughter – curious and sweet, with a big smile. She looked so much like her mother.

But Elva wasn't mine.

Piper had moved on so quickly.

With these old hurts resurfacing, I hurried to get away as fast as I could without making it look like the retreat that it was.

Chapter 0040

Piper couldn't think I was running away from her, despite that being exactly what I was doing.

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If she knew she'd likely use it against me. I continued to suspect that she was only here for nefarious

His presence couldn't have been a coincidence, despite what she said.

Mark caught up with me in the driveway near one of the royal family's cars. He'd been my Beta a long time. There weren't many things I didn't tell him about.

Piper included.

"She's not like how I pictured her," Mark said now. "When you mentioned her before, I thought she might actually have cloven hoofs and a tail. A devil, for sure. But meeting her, she seems... nice."

"Don't be deceived." Like I had been.

couldn't let

Piper get her hooks into me again. Yet even as I thought it, I could feel my dormant attachment to her pushing against the outer edges of my heart, trying to make its way back in.

Mark seemed pensive, like he wanted to say more but held himself back.

I didn't like that. He was my Beta, but he was also my friend and confidant. He was the only person around me anymore with whom I could talk to without having to wear the mask of the perfect prince.

"You can speak your mind," I told him.

He nodded. "You've been different since she's arrived. Almost more... open, I suppose."

I disagreed. I still hid my true thoughts away from the world.

Mark was adamant though. "No, seriously. Around her, your emotions come out more easily. You're more present in the moment, instead of just standing there going through the motions."

I leveled him with a flat look.

His expression became sheepish. "You told me to speak my mind."

You can, I said. That doesn't mean that I have to agree."

See for yourself. Next time you are around her, watch how fast your emotions trigger, especially when compared to when **you** are with literally anyone else."

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"Ridiculous."

That couldn't be true. I wouldn't allow it.

I refused to **fall** into Piper's **trap** again. She'd just leave again.

But Mark wouldn't lie to me. For him to say these things, meant he had to be seeing the m.

Piper was dangerous to me, if she was making my emotions more clear.

I was a prince. I didn't have time for frivolous entanglements like love. That wasn't an indulgence I had

allowed myself since I hid my identity to attend the Academy.

I knew then, what I **had** to do. Even if it made me feel sick.

That evening, I made my move. With Mark's reluctant help, we had dwindled down the perfect candidate for what I planned to do

Her name was Lilliana. She was petite and soft-spoken. Her demeanor was flawless, she never looked or

acted out of place. She seemed a bit demure for my tastes, but then, this **wasn't** about love.

This was about what would be best for the kingdom.

She'd be a good Luna, I reasoned. I ignored the way that thought made my stomach knot.

As the girls arrived for the banquet that night, I approached Lilliana.

The rest of the girls immediately hushed, watchful.

I held out my hand for Lilliana's. She gently placed hers in mine, touch light as a feather.

"Lilliana," I said

"Your Royal Highness," she replied.

My words caught in my **throat** a bit, I had to clear it to force them out.

"Would you do me the honor of accompanying me on a solo date?"

She had no outward reaction of emotion. Her face remained ever-calm.

Of course, Prince Nicholas I would be honored"

I was a prince My duty was to my kingdom, **and** nothing else. Certainly not my heart.