

The Luna Choosing Game by Jane Above Story Chapter 41

Chapter 0041

As Nicholas asked out Lilliana, I stood in the back of the crowd of watching girls, my heart down on the

floor.

I had no right to be upset. I knew that. I had given up the right to be upset a long time ago.

Yet I couldn't deny the feeling.

First, Nicholas had returned the handmade gift I made him, and now he was asking another girl on a solo

date.

According to the rules of the competition, solo dates were only supposed to be awarded after a girl performed well in one of the events.

Of course, from what I'd heard, the rules also stated that a prince could ask any girl out at any time, so supposed such a thing wasn't unheard of.

But for it to be Nicholas who asked for the first solo date felt like the hardest pill to swallow.

I understood that the candidates were invited here to the palace to date the princes. So on, Nicholas would pick someone to marry.

He'd already made it abundantly clear that he would never be interested in me.

Not that I wanted him to be. We'd both moved on since then. It wasn't my business who he dated, or who he married.

But looking at him standing there in the entryway to the dining room, holding Lilliana's hand with only the barest touch, he didn't seem happy. That, to me, was the greatest tragedy.

The more I looked at him and his faceless expression, the more he seemed like a shell of the man I once knew. It hurt me to see. I couldn't stand to look anymore.

Needing an escape **for** a minute, I turned away from the spectacle and headed into the gardens for some fresh air.

The sun was just beginning to set over the western tree line. The sky was painted in a palette of orange and purple. It was beautiful.

For a moment, I simply enjoyed the view. I wondered if Elva was looking out the window to see it. We **had** never gotten much time to appreciate nature back in the bustle of the **city**

I hoped she was looking now.

"Are you lost, miss?" a male voice said, suddenly behind me.

I jumped, startled, and turned to face the stranger.

His appearance was immaculate, with not a hair out of place or a speck of dirt on his guard uniform. His

uniform had more stripes and fringe than the other guards I'd seen.

That was because he was the head of the royal guards. Joseph,

He was not someone I had met personally, but I had noticed him when some of the other girls had

pointed him out.

He stared at me with a severe expression. I felt much like an ant under a microscope.

“I’ll ask once more,” he said, voice gruff. “Are you lost? The banquet is inside.”

I just needed a moment to catch my breath.” I tried to offer a friendly smile. I didn’t want to make a bad first impression with the man in charge of Elva and my safety.

Yet the harder I tried to smile, the more his eyes narrowed.

“You should be able to breathe inside the palace just fine.”

“I only meant –”

“I know what you meant,” he said, cutting me off. “Perhaps if you are so uncomfortable here, you might consider bowing out of the competition.”

“I’m not uncomfortable.”

He crossed his arms and continued to stare me down. I didn’t understand his hostility, I’d never even spoken to him before now.

“This competition is no place **for** a woman like you, nor your child,” he said.

Oh Now I saw. He was like Lena, someone who didn’t want me here because of my background and my daughter. People who valued maintaining traditions above all else.

I stood up a bit straighter. I wouldn’t be intimidated by this bully, regardless of his position in the palace.

Chapter 0042

“I have no intention of backing away from the choosing game,” I said,

He stepped closer. “Do as you wish, **but** know this. I will uphold my duty to protect the royal family from any and all threats. No matter in what form those threats appear.”

His words sent a chill up my spine.

I had thought that the guards were sympathetic of me and Elva, but now I wasn’t as certain. If their leader was someone who wanted me gone, maybe the guards were only pretending to be nice.

"I'm not a threat." I said. "Neither is my daughter."

at

"We'll see." He glanced around. "You should go inside now. It's dangerous out here."

The only danger out here was him, but that was enough for me. I stepped around him and headed inside without another word.

During the banquet, I struggled to keep up conversation, too distracted by Joseph's words. Julian gave me curious looks across the table, but I avoided returning them. Just as I avoided glancing down the table to Nicholas at all.

I kept my gaze fixed on my food, replying only when necessary, and couldn't wait until the banquet was finished.

When I was finally free, I rushed back to my room to relieve the nanny. Elva was getting ready for bed. I hugged her extra tightly when I saw her.

From then on, I noticed a change in the guards stationed around me. Gone were those that were kind and understanding to Elva and me. Now, we were glared at whenever we left our room.

Elva was afraid of them. She would try to hide behind me when we got too near them.

Once, toward the end of the **day**, when I was feeling bold, I tried to approach one to ask for information about my talkative maid.

I was met with silence.

"I'm sorry," I said, attempting to be kind "I know it's a bother. But I haven't heard anything about her, and I'm worried."

The two guards at my door just stared ahead, looking straight through me like I wasn't even there.

Unnerved, I returned into my room

I wouldn't forget, though. My maid had been someone almost like a friend, and I wasn't about to let her wither away wherever she was, if there was anything I could do to help.

So the next morning, after making certain the guards were different this time, I asked them.

"Have you heard anything about my last maid? Or do you know where she is being kept? I'd like to see

her if I could.”

One of the guards ignored me entirely, but the other gave me a moment’s attention, even if only long

enough for a passing glance and a handful of words.

“For the sake of you and your child, you should stop asking.”

What did that mean? Was that a threat?

“I only want to make sure she is okay,” I said, but by then the guard had gone back to pretending I didn’t exist.

Later, my newest maid handed me a note Joseph had written me.

I was loathe to open it. I doubted that man could say anything I had wanted to hear. But I couldn’t exactly ignore a message from the head of the royal guards. That would be too reckless. What if it was a serious issue?

I opened the note and read.

I heard you were asking a lot of questions that are none of your business. Keep asking, and it will be bad

for you

He hadn’t signed it, but I had no reason to doubt who this was from.

Joseph wanted me out. He was stonewalling me from any information. He’d changed my guards to stern ones that disliked me.

The threat in this note was clear.

I had to be more careful around him and the guards.

I couldn’t risk my life or freedom, or that of Elva.

Chapter 43

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?

Nicholas.

I

I

Today was the day for Nicholas's solo date, and I was trying my very best not to think about it.

Ever since receiving Joseph's threatening letter, I'd been hiding out in my room as much as I could to

avoid him and the mean-looking guards.

With the First Ball fast approaching, I used the extra time in my room to help my maids work on me and

Elva's gowns.

The dress had to be perfect. The order of introductions for the girls at the ball was to be determined by

the princes' preferences of the dresses.

Once the gowns were finished, pictures were to be taken of them and given to the princes, who would

then select their favorites. Those favorites would be the first ones introduced at the ball, and therefore

given the most time with the princes.

And with the cameras.

A major component of the Luna Choosing Game, was earning the public's favor. I had a small advantage

with the common people, being one myself. But people like Lena and Joseph existed in every class.

I had little reason to believe that even with my slight advantage, I would make it far in this competition.

That didn't mean I wouldn't try.

The two maids and I had split the design for my dress into three separate parts that we had worked on

individually. Now, we were ready to combine the three elements into a complete gown.

We'd already finished Elva's matching dress first.

The quiet maid insisted on doing the final work, as she had the most experience with sewing.

The newest maid began arranging the mannequin for the dresses photo shoot. Elva's dress was not to be included in the shot, since that would ruin the anonymity of the contest.

Elva herself was looking at something outside the window, likely the horses again, with the stables so close.

I

I felt restless, though I wasn't sure why, I kept thinking about Nicholas's solo date, but it shouldn't be enough to bother me like this

Nicholas and I were over long ago.

Still, I paced the length of the room, nervousness and trepidation waging war within my chest. My heart

"Mommy!" Elva called to me. "Mommy, come see!"

Eager for the distraction, I joined her at the window.

"Look." Elva pointed down toward the stables. "It's Nick-lass."

Nicholas and Lilliana stood near the entrance of the stables as horses were brought to them by stable

hands.

Nicholas's horse was a regal black stallion that greedily accepted a sugar cube from Nicholas's palm.

The horse chosen for Lilliana was a brown and white mare that seemed nervous around her. The horse.

kept trying to sidestep whenever Lilliana came too close.

Nicholas, noticing, left his own horse to approach Lilliana. He offered her a sugar cube and gestured

toward her horse. Lilliana shook her head, refusing to offer the treat.

From this distance, I couldn't hear the exact words spoken beyond some mumbled voices, but with the way Lilliana held up her pure white gloves, I assumed she refused to treat the horse to spare her gloves.

ing dirty.

getting dirty.

I wondered how she would hold the reins.

I

Nicholas gave the sugar cube to the horse himself. In his presence, the mare seemed to settle.

Lilliana approached then, and with Nicholas's help, lifted herself up into the saddle.

Nicholas's hands lingered near her waist, keeping her steady.

I remembered the times we had gone horseback riding together. He had helped me then, much in the

same way.

Sometimes, if I let myself remember, I could still feel the phantom touch of his strong hands on my hips.

"I won't let you fall," he'd said then. "Tell me when you are okay, and I'll let **go**."

I had given him a playful smile. "What if I want **to** stay like this?"

I

His eyes had been **fond**, green sparkling brightly under the sun. “Then we should give up on horseback riding for today and return to one of our rooms instead. If you want me to hold you, I’d like to do it

properly

Now, I wondered if he was saying much the same thing to Lilliana, But, no. They didn’t seem to be

talking much at all. Nicholas moved his hands away from her waist quickly **and** without protest.

Even from a **distance**, these two did not seem to like each other ver

speaking. I couldn’t imagine why **Nicholas** had chosen her, out of all the candidates, for his first solo date.

Nicholas left her then and mounted his stallion. He waited for Lilliana to bring her mare alongside his horse, and then together they started to ride forwards at a slow pace – which brought them closer to us at the window.

Elva gasped when she realized, “He’s coming over here.”

Then, before I could figure out what she was going to **do**, she shouted from the window, “Hi, Nick–lass!”

She waved both arms.

They both immediately looked up. Lilliana glowered, but Nicholas’s stern expression seemed to soften.

He lifted a hand and waved back.

Elva giggled.

I stood in the window behind her, frozen. It was too late to hide. Nicholas’s eyes quickly shifted from Elva, up to me. His hand was still raised. Was I supposed to return the gesture? Wouldn’t it be rude not to?

Unsure, I lifted my own hand and gave a tiny wave in return.

At once, he lowered his hand, making clear that he had not intended to wave at me.

My cheeks burned as I dropped my arm to my side.

It was awkward and terrible, and I **was** mortified by the entire encounter.

At least he had been kind to Elva, but... what had I been thinking? Not only did I wave at him, but I had

been caught staring!

The moment I saw Elva was watching him and his date, I should have ushered her away to give him

privacy

My own morbid curiosity had taken hold of me. I had wanted to see, and wanted to remember. And now

I was caught in an ocean of embarrassment.

I should have known better.

“He said hi, Elva **said**, with new giggles. She hadn’t seemed to notice that Nicholas’ wave to me had

been less significant than her own.

I was thankful to Nicholas, though, for paying that moment’s attention to her, especially with the way her face lit up so brightly.

“Excuse me,” snapped a female voice from the doorway behind us.

“Ma’am,” said the maids in unison.

I turned and found Lena there, a sour look on her face. She glared at me, then at Elva. I shifted so that I

blocked her view of Elva, and that angry gaze returned to me alone.

Years of customer service jobs had given me the training I needed to keep calm in my voice, even as my

own anger stirred. Who was she to look at Elva like that?

“Can I help you with something, Lena?”

She lifted her chin so that when she looked at me, it was down the sides of her nose.

"I am here to discipline your child, as you seem incapable of doing so."

"I beg your pardon?" An edge cut into my voice.

"There are rules about intruding on another girl's solo date."

Elva peeked out from around my skirt.

Lena noticed and glowered at her.

"And your child has broken those rules."

Chapter 0044

"I should have the girl forcibly removed for ruining Prince Nicholas's date," Lena said, voice sharp. "I'm

sure Prince Nicholas himself is furious."

"Nick-lass is mad at me?" Elva sniffed.

"No," I said at once.

"He should be, if he isn't," Lena snapped. "You are a very nasty little girl, who
That's enough."

"-shouldn't even be here."

"I said, that's enough!" I stepped forward, approaching Lena. "You will not talk to my daughter like that."

"Fine," Lena said, shifting her rage-filled gaze onto me. "Then why don't we talk about you instead, Piper. You know you and your daughter don't belong here but you insist on wasting everyone's time and efforts by continuing to stay."

I could easily defend Elva until my dying breath. It was much more difficult to defend myself.

What she said wasn't wrong, either. I didn't belong here. I was wasting everyone's time. But, while I was here, Elva would get the treatments she so desperately needed.

These past several days, she had been the healthiest she had ever been, and that was only thanks to the care and attention of Nicholas's personal physician.

If we left, Elva would go back to receiving base-level care, and only then if I could afford to pay the bills.

For Elva, I would stay. I would face any amount of humiliation or degradation or indignity . I would waste everyone's time.

"You would do everyone here a favor by leaving, especially Prince Nicholas," Lena said. "He deserves better than to have his every moment intruded upon by you and your... baggage."

Even though Lena was rude and crass, in this, I could understand where she was coming from. Nicholas and the princes had much to lose or gain with this competition, more than anyone.

For Elva and I to purposefully put ourselves in the way of him finding the perfect Luna was unfair.

We'll be more careful in the future," I conceded. "We'll make sure not to bother Prince Nicholas while he is on **his** dates.

Lena grunted. "At least you can see some reason. If I can't convince you to leave, I'm glad you can see how bothersome you are. Hopefully soon, none of this will matter and you will be eliminated."

I knew I would be eliminated the first round, but I felt nothing but disdain for her pointing it out so crudely.

"I'll leave when either the rules of the game dictate it, or the royal family asks me to," I said. "Not before."

Lena narrowed her gaze. "I hope you enjoy your last few days in the palace, then." Without another word,

she turned and marched out the door.

The maids that had stood at attention in her presence quietly returned to work. A subtle look of understanding passed between the quiet maid and I. At least I knew she was on my side.

The newer maid, however, remained suspicious. In Lena's absence, she smiled and smiled, as if the

head maid hadn't just tore me down.

Elva near the window began to cry in earnest. I rushed to her at once.

When I was before her, I dropped to my knees and pulled her into my arms.

"It's okay, Elva," I whispered. I stroked her hair, hoping to soothe her. "The cranky lady is gone now."

“She said such mean things...”

“She did, but it’s not your fault. She’s upset at me, that’s all.”

“And Nick–lass..?”

“We’ll have to give him some space, okay? Not all the time. Just when he’s.. spending special time with

other people.”

I’d only wanted to gently tell Elva that we needed to not bother Nicholas while he was on dates, but Elva

began loudly sobbing and trembling.

I held her tighter. “What’s the matter, honey? It’s only sometimes.”

“Nick–lass... doesn’t... like me... anymore.” Her voice shook, words broken with sniffles and sobs.

Chapter 0045

My whole heart shattered. “No, no, that’s not true. Prince Nicholas likes you a lot.”

Elva pulled away to look up at me with large, watery eyes. “But she said Nick–lass is mad at me. She said

I was naughty.”

“We can’t listen to her, okay?”

Her cupped her face with my hands and wiped away her tears. New ones just kept falling. My anger for **Lena** renewed, and I half wanted to chase her down the hall to give her a piece of my mind.

No one makes my little girl cry like this!

“She’s just a mean lady who doesn’t know what she’s talking about. Nicholas likes you. He’s not mad. He waved at you, didn’t he?”

The words seemed to placate Elva somewhat. Her tears lessened, though her sniffing remained. Her brows furrowed like she was thinking it through.

“He did wave...”

“Because he likes you.”

“...Okay.” Her voice was small. It didn’t seem like I had fully convinced her, but I doubted I could say anything that would.

She would have to hear it from Nicholas himself.

Maybe if I could talk to him alone, I could convince him to spend some time with Elva.

Lena would hate it, and so would the other girls. I’d have to make sure it happened at a time that didn’t conflict with any of his other obligations.

Surely he would meet with her though? If I told him she thought he didn’t like her?

Surely he hadn’t become totally heartless in the past three years?

No, I knew he hadn’t. I had seen the soft-hearted way he’d interacted with Elva before.

He might hate me, but he liked her. He would be willing to do this, I was sure.

I just **had** to get him alone to ask.

The next morning at breakfast, Lilliana was the most popular girl in the room. Every other girl wanted to know every detail **of** her solo-date with **Nicholas**.

attention **seemed to** go straight to her head, and she calmly and smugly answered every question she

was asked, albeit with a haughty attitude.

I

“Prince Nicholas lifted me into the saddle like the princess I am soon to be,” she said. “The horse

chosen for me could have been tamer, however. Something I will rectify when I am Luna.”

Thinking on it now, maybe that poor horse had reason to be afraid of Lillianna when it had first met her.

It had been said that animals had a sixth sense **about** people sometimes.

“We rode along the edge of the property,” Lilliana said. “I felt as if the prince was showing off all that

would soon belong to me.”

As she spoke, I noticed she talked of the property and the palace and what she would fix as Luna. Not

once did she mention qualities of the prince himself, like his beautiful golden eyes or his kindness.

She framed all of Nicholas's qualities in how much it could bring her.

The money. The power. The house and land.

A dark bit of fury collected inside of me. Nicholas deserved someone who would notice things about

him as a person.

Lilliana was all wrong for him. Hopefully he would realize that sooner rather than later.

Around me, the other girls were sharing sharp looks toward each other, and open glares at Lilliana. The

tension in the room thickened as she continued to talk.

The First Ball was quickly approaching.

Among the girls, it seemed as if Lilliana was enemy number one.

I didn't want to harm her, but I too wanted to see her eliminated from the competition.

I wasn't jealous. It was just pure objective fact.

She wasn't worthy of Nicholas.

Chapter 0046

I looked in the mirror, barely recognizing myself. It was the night of the First Ball, and I was dressed in my beautiful, shimmering yellow gown it was sleeveless, with a tasteful V-neck bodice.

One of my maids had tied my brown hair into a tight up do, with a few loose tendrils tucked behind my

Beside me. Elva was a near mirror figure of me, though her dress came up to her **neck**. It shimmered the

same, and she couldn't stop giggling as she spun in circles.

Bright and laughing, she looked like the physical embodiment of sunshine.

I pulled her into a quick hug. "You are a princess, Elva."

As we went to the door, the strange maid stopped me. "Don't forget your gloves." She handed them to

me

1

"Thank you" I was relieved I knew there were traditions **about** gloves and their length. It would have been a faux pas to show up without any

I turned to thank the quiet maid as well, but she was further back in the room and not looking at us

resolved to thank her later instead.

Smiling at Elva, I took her hand. "Let's go to the ball, Elva"

Elva gave a toothy grin. "The princess ball!"

We congregated with the other girls in the parlor room, where we waited for the results of the dress contest. The princes' preferences for our dresses would soon determine the order of our introductions.

Every single dress was beautiful in its **own** way. They were a rainbow of colors and materials, but each more spectacular than the last

Linda's skirt was so putty, I wondered how she intended to dance. Though she moved with such ease, she must have been used to it. Others were similar, carefully sidestepping their trains or lifting their long detoad pping over themselves

Every get seemed confident the own gown and I genely wasn't sure who would win

When Notham arrived, at the girls hushed themselves We waited with bated breath as Nathan read the erder of intrins

First, he said. "Divis

Smile **was**

back that reached down to the floor.

"Of course, she would pick the same color the queen always wears whiggest one gest else would have the gall?"

It worked, didn't it?" replied another girl, who seemed to between indignam and S

“Second is...” Nathan checked his notes. “Piper, and Elva”

“That’s us!” Elva cheered.

sens

Second place was a **good** showing. I knew my dress was beautiful, but to have a pries f
or t

a special kind of flattering.

I took Elva’s hand and we weaved through the crowd to stand behine Sla

She offered me a tight smile. “It’s so nice to see the princes be onan

The snide comment startled me, but I somehow kept a straight face Before could think o
f a sep

I

however, Nathan called the third girl, Then the fourth. And the fifth

Elva and I cheered when Susie’s name was called, though she was much further down t
he ine trouge she looked adorable in her pink ruffled gown.

When all of the girls were aligned, Nathan led us down the comdor toward the main calr
oom Beont the ballroom doors was a grand staircase that led down onto a large dancefi
or

The royal family was seated in massive thrones on the opposite end of the room Around
the room were other dignitaries and nobles who seemed eager to meet the girls chosen
for the selection

As we stood at the top of the stair, every eye in the room turned to look an e

Olivia preened under the attention.

Elva and I were much more subdued. I was very nervous but trying to put on a brave fac
e for Bis, wh

was crushing my hand in her tiny grip.

Watch how it’s done,” Olivia said to me with a smirk, as varthan took point behind a man
ding

microphone

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Nathan introduced Olivia, and she descended the staircase with a practiced grace to the sound of

polite applause.

Chapter 46

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**.

Chapter 0047

Nathan waved Eva and I forward close to the edge of the front **stai**

“Now introducing,” Nathan said. per and her daughter

The polite applause abruptly ceased

replaced in its place whispers and murmured in the room.

Mommy

It’s okay.

Remember you an

Elva nodded. She stuck up her little chin, hinging the way her bottom lip wobbled,

Holding tightly to each other’s hand

we began down the staircase

There were many

the crowd looked at the royal family instead.

Julian gave me a thumbs up which put me a bit at ea

Then I locked eyes with Nich

Suddenly the rest of the world faded away There was only Elva and I on this stair, and Nicholas, down. below, staring at me.

He watched m

me

entire time gaze never wavering My heart thundered in my chest. I felt like I was in

I

a dream

Only when we reached the bottom stair and a servant directed us where to go, did I finally glance away from handsome face

I moved to stand beside Olivia as the rest of the girls received their introductions.

I kept glancing up at Nicholas Every time I did, he was looking back at me.

After the final introduction, a string orchestra in the corner of the room began to play. The King and Luna owned the first dance

they moved with the land of grace I could only dream about, as if they danced on a cloud. They must have tied quickly though. After only a minute or so, they returned to their seats.

Once they were seated the roles fulfilled the floor. They were allowed to dance with each other, but not w. The candidates dances are reserved for the princes alone, unless permission was explicitly given by

The ther of the princes dances was chosen at random, but by the end, each prince would have danced

Chapter 0047

Nathan waved Elva and I forward, close to the edge of the front stair.

“Now introducing.” Nathan said. “Piper and her daughter Elva.”

The polite applause abruptly ceased. In its place, whispers and murmurs erupted in the room.

“Mommy?”

“It’s okay, honey. Just remember, you are a princess.”

Elva nodded. She stuck up her little chin, hiding the way her bottom lip wobbled.

Holding tightly to each other’s hand, we began down the staircase

There were many unfamiliar **faces** in the crowd. I looked at the royal family instead.

Julian gave me a thumbs up, which put me a bit at ease.

Then I locked eyes with Nicholas.

Suddenly

the rest of the world faded away. There was only Elva and I on this stair, and Nicholas, down

below, staring at me.

gaze

He watched me the entire time, never wavering. My heart thundered **in** my chest. I felt like I was in

a dream.

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I moved to stand beside Olivia as the rest of the girls received their introductions.

I kept glancing up at Nicholas. Every time I did, he was looking back at me.

After the final introduction, a string orchestra in the corner of the room began to play. The King and Luna owned the first dance.

Together they moved with the kind of grace I could only dream about, as if they danced on a cloud. They must have tired quickly, though. After only a minute or so, they returned to their seats.

Once they were seated, the nobles filled the floor. They were allowed to dance with each other, but not us. The candidates' dances were reserved for the princes alone, unless permission was explicitly given by the royal family

The order of the princes' dances was chosen at random, but by the end, each prince would have danced

The servants weaved through the crowd of us girls searching for the first dancers.

Julian, however, ignored it all by approaching me.

"What do you say, Piper? Care to dance with me?" Julian asked.

I could only imagine the outrage if I said no. Still, I couldn't help but worry what Nicholas would think. He

had made well known his opinion of Julian and me.

Julian held out his hand. He smirked like he knew I wasn't in a position to say no.

I looked to Elva, but our nanny was already approaching. It had been previously **arranged** that the nanny would be on hand to watch Elva during my dances.

Elva waved as she released my hand. “Do good, Mommy!”

I nodded at her. Turning to Julian, I placed my hand in his waiting one.

Julian pulled me out onto the dance floor, and then into his arms. He danced like a professional, with easy movement and a strong lead.

I spend most of my time watching my feet and counting my steps.

“My brother never took you dancing when you were together?” Julian laughed.

We’d gone out, sure. To modern clubs and dancehalls. I could *do* a two-step, maybe, but these royal

dances were beyond complicated.

None of this I would admit to Julian.

“Don’t interrupt my counting.” I said.

I’m pretty sure you aren’t supposed to order a prince around.”

“Do you want me to embarrass **us** both?”

He sighed. “You are trying too hard. Look up.”

I did, and nearly tripped over my feet.

“Trust me to lead.”

I wouldn’t trust you to walk an old lady across the street,” I said.

At once, he laughed, **loud** and hard.

His laughter gave me a chuckle as well. I was proud for having made such a sound from anyone, even a

scoundrel like Julian.

But then, suddenly, Nicholas was beside us.

I realized we’d stopped **dancing**.

Nicholas scowled at Julian. I’m cutting in

Chapter 0048

Without thought, I placed my hand in Nicholas's waiting one, and let him tug me away from Julian's arms

and into his own

He was good at leading, even more so than Julian, Watching him, trusting his guidance, I didn't need to count my steps anymore.

I simply followed him as we danced around the ballroom.

Despite our closeness, he didn't utter one word. In fact, he seemed mostly irritable, **glaring** at the rest of the world while pointedly avoiding looking at me.

I felt guilty and unsure. Why would he choose to dance with me if he didn't want to?

"We could end our dance early." I offered.

His grip on me tightened: "No"

Okay

wracked my brain for something to get him to speak to me. Or, at the very least, look at me.

Then I remembered, this was the perfect time to mention Elva's fears. Here, I had his ear away from the

other girls

"Elva has been a bit upset," I said.

Finally, his gaze snapped to me "What? Why?"

Lena disapproved of Elva waving at you the other day. Things were said Now Elva believes you don't

like her anymore, no matter how much I try to talk her out of it"

do like her," Nicholas said, indignant

Vamled a little "i know, but it's much harder to convince her."

culas thought on it for a moment, his face stem with concentration

My whole rat med He was treating her worry with such careful consideration Surely he many other

Stangs

ngs to worry about

Thdance with her next he said at least with reality

My fondness for by

ip of I

“The servants might not like the change in whether

“They’ll work around it,” he said. “I’ll apologize later.”

“You don’t have to do that. You can wait for later.”

He searched my face. “I’m already breaking the order, Piper.”

I supposed I **already** knew that, deep inside my brain, but to hear him openly acknowledge it sent me for loop I had to double check to make sure we **weren’t** flying.

There was something about this place, the large ballroom with the live orchestra and everyone in their gowns and tuxedos. It felt magical, almost. Like anything could happen.

Even forgiveness

Nicholas looked especially handsome tonight, wearing a form-fitting black tuxedo with golden, princely embellishments I could have stared at him for hours. I could have danced with him well into the dawn.

But too soon, our song ended and it was time to change partners.

I was disappointed until I remembered his proclaimed next partner.

He held his arm for me, then led me to the edge of the floor where Elva was spinning around with the nanny. After nodding at me, he let my arm drop.

Then he approached Elva. He dropped to one knee. “Princess, may I have this dance?”

Her eyes were wide **as** saucers. She smiled so big she laughed. “Yes!”

Elva wasn’t included in the dance **training**, so she knew none of the proper moves. That mattered little to Elva or Nicholas

He spun her whichever way she wanted to spin, then lifted her up into **his** arms to lead her in the dance. Her legs dangled, kicking a little as she mimicked the steps.

“He’s going to make such a great father,” one of the girls said, swooning.

I couldn't help but agree. He was so sweet and gentle with Elva **and** her fragile little heart that I began to tear up

Twished Nicholas could have been in her life from the start. Maybe she wouldn't have known so much heartache if she had a father figure like him to keep her safe.

To keep us both safe

shook the thought away. Whatever relationship I could have had with Nicholas was long **gone** But maybe he'd be willing to keep being friends with Elva?

Chapter 0049

No, that was a foolish notion. He was kind to Elva because he was a kind person. At the end of the day, Elva and I were going to be eliminated from the competition.

We'd leave the **palace**, return to our little apartment with Anna, and never hear from Nicholas again, We'd probably see him on television sometimes, with updates on his new family.

It might hurt to see, but that was life.

Dreams were dreams. Reality was reality.

I couldn't have both.

"It's so nice of Prince Nicholas to spend so much time with you and your daughter," said one of the other girls to me

"Looks good for the cameras, too," said another girl, pointing as a cameraman came close to Elva.

Odd, I hadn't really noticed them before.

Neither, apparently, had Nicholas. Because the moment he spotted the camera following Elva, he swung her the other way, out of the camera's line of sight.

"You don't think he's doing it just for show?" said the first girl.

"Not exactly, no," the second girl relented. "It just shows off a side of him people don't get to see. I'm not sure why he's trying to hide from that."

I knew Elva and I were only here as a publicity stunt. But even so, Nicholas was not the type of person to take advantage of that. He danced with Elva because he didn't want her to be sad. That was that.

"Well, it's fun to see while it lasts," another girl said. "Hope you are enjoying yourself too, Piper. We all know you'll be the first one out."

I **gave** her a polite smile but didn't say anything. I knew I'd be gone soon as well as any one, but it still hurt to hear other people say **so**.

"Oh? Are those guards headed this way?"

I looked up where the other girls were staring. True enough, a pair of **guards** was weaving their way through the crowd, coming right for us.

What do you think they want?" I asked

The guards came closer. I waited for them to go by, but instead they stopped right in front of me.

"Miss Piper one asked

"Looks like they're here for you," whispered one of the girls into my ear

Yes that's me." I told the guards

They watched me with blank expressions. These must have been more of Joseph's guards, the ones

who didn't like me. I wondered what happened to the ones who had initially been kind to me. I hoped they hadn't been fired.

Follow me

One of the guards began to walk **away**. The other waited for me to follow the first, then fell in line behind

1. me.

It was unnerving, **like** I was being arrested or something. But how could **that** be?

I searched out Elva and Nicholas. They were still dancing, now with her standing on his shoes. He paused, though, when he spotted me. His eyes narrowed as he took in the sight of my armed guard.

The guards led me away from the ballroom and into a side, sitting room. The Queen herself **sat** on a plush sofa, bracketed by a pair of older women nobles, Lena stood behind the sofa, to the side.

"The Luna will speak with you," the guard said, and motioned for me to move **inside**.

I nervously hovered in the doorway, unsure of the proper procedure for approaching the Queen like this. Thankfully, she spotted me right away and said, "Enter, girl. Come and stand before us."

I obeyed at once, and moved further into the room. I stopped in the center of the room, standing before

the sofa.

The Luna touched her chin. Her disapproving scowl slid from my face down to my gloves.

I tugged at them, self-conscious.

Tell me, girl, the Queen said. "Why have you chosen to insult me tonight?"

Chapter 0050

My throat went dry. "Your Majesty, I had no intention of "

"Whatever your intention, you have still insulted me," the Queen **said**.

I straightened at the shortness of her tone.

I was terribly confused. What had I done that was offensive? Was it because Julian, Nicholas, and I had broken the order of the dances?

But she didn't even seem to be watching them, if she was hiding away in here.

"The poor child looks confused, Your Majesty," said one of the women sitting near the Queen.

"She's common," said the other woman. "Maybe she truly doesn't understand how she has disrespected you."

The Luna considered her friends' words. "Is that the case, girl?"

I didn't much care for their patronizing tone of voice, but I could deny the truth to their words.

I nodded.

The Luna looked to the woman on her left, then gestured to me.

"It's your gloves, child," said the woman.

I looked down at my gloves. They were clean. The seams were straight.

"They are too short," continued the woman.

All the other women dressed in formalwear wore their gloves up over their elbows. I could see that now, glancing around

Mine stopped mid-forearm.

“You have disrespected me and my family,” said the Queen. “We have accepted you into our home. We have clothed **and** fed you, and given you a chance in the selection. And this is how you repay us?”

I bowed my head low. I’m terribly **sorry**, Your Majesty. I had no idea that –”

“A Luna accepts responsibility. You say you didn’t know. Were you hoping to pass your punishment off onto your maids? Or perhaps your tailor?”

“No,” I said, ashamed. She was right. The fault should fall on me alone. I would never want to see

Even if I did wonder about why my maids hadn’t warned me.

I lowered my head further. I personally accept whatever punishment you deem fit.”

I hoped my compliance might ease my sentence. If the Queen wished to have me expelled from the

palace, it would be so.

I couldn’t risk Elva’s health. Not yet. Not when she’d been doing so well.

“Your Majesty, if I may,” Lena spoke up.

The Luna waved her forward. Lena came around the couch to stand beside me.

She was in her typical uniform, a high neck navy blue dress with a simple black belt. But tonight, even she wore gloves, though their length was hidden under her long sleeves.

I wondered what Lena would say. I couldn’t imagine she would speak up in my defense.

Lena cleared her throat. “As you consider what is to be done with this fool girl, I would like to suggest the traditional punishment for such an offense.”

The Queen hummed thoughtfully.

“A harsh punishment, indeed,” said the woman on the left.

The one on the right added, “Fitting for the crime.”

The woman on the left watched me. “She’s confused again.”

“Explain the punishment, Lena,” the Queen said.

“Gladly.” Lena glared at me. “For the tradition punishment, the offended would be forced to kneel outside the palace for the length of an entire stormy day.”

I hooked my hands together to keep anyone from noticing my trembling.

This wasn’t a death sentence, exactly, though in those conditions, I would sure end up sick and exhausted. Hopefully the punishment did not include a withholding of medical care.

“Certainly a thing to consider,” said the woman on the right.

“Perhaps..” the Queen began. Everyone hushed to listen.

Perhaps, in the spirit of the competition, we allow the girl the chance to redeem herself.”

“Magnanimous decision, as always, ma’am,” said one woman, with the other quickly agreeing.

Only Lena seemed put out. She didn’t say a word but her frown was heavy.

+15 BONUS

“The scope of your redemption, girl, will depend on your performance for the rest of the evening,” the Queen said. “If you wish not to receive the traditional punishment, you must strive to show the qualities

of a Luna. Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good.” She waved me away.

I hurried toward the door and rushed through it. Suddenly, I stopped to avoid walking straight into Nicholas. How long had he been standing here? How much had he heard?

“Where’s Elva?” I asked.

“With Susie and the nanny.” He pointed to where Elva was happily dancing and Susie was attempting to mimic her wild moves. The nanny stood nearby, watching.

Embarrassment swelled within me. If Nicholas had heard what the Queen had said... If he knew the punishment I faced..

Maybe he would be happy to see me humiliated, cold and soaked through out

I wanted to run away, but that would only seal my fate.

in the rain.

No, the Queen had given me the chance to redeem myself. I had to take it. I had to be my most regal self for the rest of the evening, to appear a perfect Luna.

I didn't really know how to be anyone other than myself, but surely I could fake it until I made it, right? I had enough practice being around nobility.

Immediately, I squared my shoulders and lifted my head high.

Watching me, Nicholas's brow pulled together.

"What are you doing?"

His confusion deflated me somewhat, but I pushed the bad feelings down. His reaction only meant that I had to work harder.

"Acting noble," I said.

The response made him frown.

+15 BONUS

I didn't want to hear what else he might say, so gathering as much dignity as I could squander, I told

him, "If you'll excuse me, Prince Nicholas."

I quickly retreated away, back to the group of girls. Most will still waiting for their turns to dance. Julian was continuing to pick people at random. Nicholas hadn't even started his list yet. Only Joyce was sticking to the plan.

Fresh rumors were abuzz among the waiting girls. Initially I worried they might be about me, but I quickly exhaled in relief when no one said my name.

Instead, they were talking about the real challenge of the evening. An ambassador from the Merfolk kingdom in the south was present tonight.

The Merfolk were shifters that lived primarily in the ocean, and therefore didn't offer many opportunities for diplomacy. Any Merfolk presence here tonight was a major show of comradery between the two kingdoms

To allow a Merfolk into a challenge to help determine the next Luna, was an even greater extension of that friendship.

Yet the presence of the Merfolk himself wasn't the only news I'd missed.

In my absence, Nathan had explained to the girls that making a good impression with the ambassador would earn them a good score for the evening.

In the corner of my eye, I watched as the Queen and her entourage returned to the ballroom. The Luna returned to her chair beside the King, while the two women returned to the crowd of nobles.

Lena stayed near the edge of the royal family thrones, with the other high-ranking servants, ready to be called upon.

I had to meet this Merfolk, I had to make a good impression. I had to win this challenge.

This was my only chance to avoid punishment.

Across the room, Nicholas continued to watch me.

For a moment, looking at him, I could almost convince myself that he looked concerned.

For me?