

The Luna Choosing Game by Jane Above Story Chapter 51

Chapter 0051

The girls around me were freshening up their Merfolk language. Some were fluent. Others, less so.

Though most seemed to have a baseline knowledge.

My **grasp** of the Merfolk language was rusty, at least. I vaguely recalled some lessons during my days at

the Academy, but that felt like so long ago now.

I hadn't had any need for Merfolk language or traditions in my day to day since leaving the Academy. I

didn't really retain any of that knowledge.

I **thought I might** be able to recall some customs, though the bits of information I was hearing now and

then around me confused with my memories and left me unsure.

Also, I couldn't trust what the girls around me were even saying.

Linda, especially, seemed to be purposefully polluting the water of fact and fiction. My knowledge was

shaky, but even I knew the Merfolk greeted each other with a deep bow, and not a fist bump like she was

suggesting to the more gullible girls.

I tried not to panic. I had been in worse situations. Heck, even lunch hour in the restaurant had often

been overwhelming, with everyone shouting orders and demanding attention,

If I could manage hungry, irritable customers as a waitress, I could handle almost anything.

I had to be careful. I had to try hard.

I really didn't want to have to stand in the rain for a full day.

The girls and I were directed into a line to wait our turn to meet the ambassador. As the line grew shorter and shorter, my anxiety spiked.

The girls leaving the ambassador had mixed reactions. Some seemed pleased. Olivia and Linda seemed particularly confident. But most looked upset.

By the time it was my turn, I was a nervous ball of energy who felt a bit like I was walking into a lion's den.

Yet, instead of a servant to escort me to the ambassador, as had guided everyone else, Mark, Nicholas's Beta, was the one who offered me his arm.

"Allow me to escort you to Ambassador Zale," Mark said.

It was a gift, being given his name. Whether Nathan had said it when he announced the challenge, i

+15 BONUS

"Thank you," I said, accepting Mark's arm.

I noticed right away that he was guiding me the long way around.

"You know, the first time Prince Nicholas met a Merfolk he made a common mistake. Most people in the kingdom believe that Merfolk bow at the waist as a form of greeting."

"That's what they taught us in the Academy," I said. I'd been mostly sure of it.

“Perhaps among some Merfolk, that remains a tradition,” Mark conceded. “However, the royal family and their ambassadors have a much different formal greeting.”

I glanced at him. Surely he wasn’t just going to tell me what it

“They place a hand over their gills on either side of their neck. ‘My life, my friendship,’ they say. It’s a symbolic show of trust and a gesture of sincerity.”

I had never heard this before. For a moment, I wondered if perhaps Mark was trying to lead me astray, just as Linda had fooled those more gullible girls.

But Mark had always seemed an honest type of person. Surely he wouldn’t be so cruel as to want to see me humiliated, or worse.

“Nicholas bowed,” Mark continued. “Fortunately, the Merfolk and the Werewolves have a history of goodwill between our kingdoms. They don’t always correct the incorrect greeting out of politeness but in this case, the royals showed Nicholas the correct way.”

“A hand on either side of the neck,” I said.

“And the phrase,” Mark added.

“My life, my friendship.”

“Correct. Ah, here we are.” Mark led me now to a **waiting** gentleman. Compared to everyone else in the room, he was practically otherworldly. He had a head of wild dark hair, and blue–green scales down the bridge of his nose.

Gills fluttered at his neck, though his chest moved with breath. I remembered reading that Merfolk could breathe both above and under the water.

Today’s Bonus Offer

GET IT NOW

Chapter 0052

In the werewolf tradition, he wore a tuxedo, though with a blue shirt rather than white.

His eyes were deep red as they focused on me.

“Ambassador Zale, may I present Piper,” **Mark** said.

Well, it was now or never. Trust Mark, and presumably Nicholas, or take the chance myself.

Reaching up, I placed a hand on either side my neck. “My life, my friendship.”

Zale’s eyes went impossibly wide.

My heart pounded hard. Had I upset him? Was this a trap? How would I explain this to the Queen?

But then Zale smiled, showing a set of sharp teeth.

“Nice to meet you, Piper. I had yet to meet a candidate tonight who know the proper Merfolk greeting.”

“I’ll make my exit now,” Mark said, backing away. “If you will excuse me.”

In Mark’s absence, Zale stepped closer. He must have been an older Merfolk. I could see now the gray at his temples, and the lines beside his striking eyes.

“Tell me,” Zale said. “How did you come to know our greeting?”

For one wild moment, I tried to think of a lie, but in the end, what could I saw but the truth?

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“I’m sorry, sir, I wished I could tell you I learned it long ago, but the truth is... I only learned it just now when Mark told me.”

His eyes went wide again.

I shouldn’t have said that.

But then he threw his head back and laughed so hard his gills fluttered,

“Oh, Piper. How delightful you are. Do you have any idea how truth is valued in my culture? I am so used

to your kind attempting to deceive me. To have you here, so honest and open, is a great comfort to me **as** a stranger in a faraway land.”

I’m sorry the others tried to lie **to** you,” I said.

I couldn't agree that I was an overly honest person entirely. If I was, I would have told Nicholas from the start about Elva and what truly happened to my powers.

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+15 BONUS

If Merfolk hated lies, I wondered how they felt about secrets.

“Ah, I remember now. You are the **one** with the child,” Zale said.

“My daughter.” I motioned to where she stood with the nanny at the edge of the crowd. She yawned into

her hand. “Elva.”

He tilted his head a little. “You must be proud.”

Nam” Another truth, from deep in my soul. Even as nervous as I was, I couldn’t stop myself from

smiling.

Zale’s own smile softened.

“Piper, dancing is a bit of a novelty for me. In our merforms, we have no need for steps **and** counting

while enjoying our music. But if you would indulge me, I would like to honor this day with a dance.”

Zale nodded to the King, who nodded back.

“I have the royal family’s permission to dance once with one girl of my preference.”

I glanced behind me. “You haven’t met everyone.”

“I don’t need to meet anyone else. **The** girl who has earned my favor this evening is you.”

When he offered his hand, I accepted it

Together we walked to the center of the dance floor. The others had stepped back to give us room.

Zale had maybe less dancing experience than me, but somehow we both managed. Our steps may have

been wrong, but we made them **wrong** together.

“Perhaps you don’t know,” Zale said, when we were out of earshot of the others. “Perhaps I shouldn’t tell

you.”

I waited for him to decide. I wouldn't press,

The greeting that you gave to me is secret among my kind. As a gesture of goodwill toward your royal family and the alliance we share, I myself taught the greeting to the three princes this afternoon."

Wait. But Mark had taught me that greeting, when he saw Nicholas...

When Nicholas.

Zale smiled at my **obvious** confusion.

One of those princes thinks you are very special indeed. Piper.

Chapter **0053**

Nicholas

I had no idea why I decided to help Piper. She had betrayed me in the past. By all accounts, I should

have been pleased to see her fail.

Yet, when I stood outside the sitting room and heard Lena suggest the traditional punishment for Piper, I

couldn't stand idly by and do nothing.

The thought of Piper kneeling out in a storm, soaked, chilled, and miserable sent an unfamiliar tremor of

rage through me.

I didn't feel strong emotions like that anymore, not since I turned off my heart three years ago. But this

hot anger had been enough to melt through my emotional freeze.

I couldn't be detached, not with this.

Ambassador Zale had taught the royal family the secret Merfolk greeting only a few hours before. The

timing had been peculiar, almost as if he had expected us to utilize this new knowledge to help the girls

with the challenge, if we so wished.

I hadn't intended to teach the greeting to anyone. But that had been before the Queen threatened Piper

over something as trivial as glove length.

An insult to the royal family, the Queen had said. Unlikely. She had always been fickle with such frivolous

things, but never to such an extent that she would exert so vicious a punishment.

This felt purposeful, like Piper was being targeted.

I'd known she'd garnered unwanted attention simply by being here, but to see my own family participate

in the cruelty **made** my insides twist.

We were hoping to earn the favor of our kingdom's people, and yet, the Queen herself was going to

punish one of them for not knowing her obscure, unspoken rules.

Yes, with the future of the kingdom in mind, I could almost pretend that I was helping Piper selflessly, to

continue to garner goodwill with the populace.

However, my heart knew the truth. I sent Mark to teach Piper the secret greeting solely because I

wanted to

Now watching her dance with Zale while everyone else in the room stared in either shock or jealousy.

allowed myself to feel relief

+15 BONUS

With the ambassador's favor, Piper was out of immediate danger. This left me time to ponder over other concerns. Mainly, why didn't Piper's maids warn her about her glove length?

The Queen had implied that it had been Piper's duty alone to know, but we had assigned knowledgeable maids to each of the girls precisely to prevent these kinds of mistakes.

Lena had been the one to suggest the harsh punishment for Piper. Perhaps she was involved.

I looked for her behind the thrones, but she was gone from her usual position near the Queen.

Mark returned to my side with a satisfied look on his face. I nodded approvingly. He did his job well, as

always.

Like now, how quickly he could tell something was off.

“Are you looking for someone?” he asked.

“Lena,” I said.

He motioned toward a discreet servant’s door in a corner of the ballroom. I saw her sneak out there,

sir.”

“Thank you.” I began walking in that direction. Mark, without needing the command, fell in step behind

me.

I pushed through the side door and found a staging area, where the servants were plating the hors

d’oeuvres and straightening their uniforms.

Seeing me walk in, they looked mortified. That hadn’t been my intention,

raised my hands, hopefully in a placating gesture. “I’m only here for Lena.”

At once, they waved me through, not toward **the** kitchen, but to another door that led to a hallway.

In the middle of that hallway, Lena stood talking **to one** of Piper’s maids. The sight rankled my nerves,

This was beyond suspicious.

I’d hoped to eavesdrop what they were saying, but my presence drew attention in every corner, even

here. They both immediately looked at me.

Lena dismissed **the** maid
as I approached. The **maid** bowed to me, then disappeared before I could

object

Fine Let **her** go. The maid was likely only obeying Lena's orders anyway.

What a surprise, **Your** Royal Highness. You must know how improper it is for you to be i
n the servants

"I'm here now." I tired of her empty platitudes. She was obligated to obey my commands
, but the whole

of the palace knew the Luna was the one who held her loyalty.

Chapter 0054

Unfortunately, Lene also had the Queen's favor, I had to be careful here, lest I risk offen
ding my own

mother.

-I

"I have questions," I said.

Lena dipped her head. "Of course. I live to serve, sir."

Behind me, Mark quietly snorted in disbelief. He quickly covered it with a cough.

Lena glared at him.

I cleared my

own throat, drawing her attention back to me. "The traditional punishment has not been

implemented in many years. Why would you believe that it is appropriate in this case, wi
th Piper?"

The palace has not allowed guests in a long time," she said. "That is the only reason the
punishment

has not been used."

She was being misleading. The palace had accepted **guests**, even when the royal famil
y had maintained

its anonymity. No cameras had been allowed. Everyone was searched.

“There have been balls over the years,” I said.

“Which were strictly for the nobility, sir. The guests I’m referring to are...” She seemed to think her words through now, and didn’t say whatever she had been about to.

“Commoners.” I finished for her.

Her nose scrunched in open disgust. “This was no mistake. That girl made a blatant display of

disrespect”

“So if another girl made the same mistake...?”

“Piper and her offspring do not belong here, Prince Nicholas. She’s grown too complacent, bending the

rules however she wishes. This is what would happen if she is selected. Nothing would ever be the same

again”

Maybe it was time for change if attitudes like Lena’s were what the traditions fostered.

“She is a guest in this house, and will be treated the same as everyone else,” I said with finality.

Lena had the gall so try to stand against me. “If you could hear yourself –”

Mark **stepped** forward knowing you are not attempting to argue with your prince. Lena

Immediately, Lena closed her mouth. She paled a little, then lowered her head. “Apologies, sir. My passion overran my manners.”

“Something to correct,” I said. “But not something deserving of the traditional punishment.”

I hoped she could see her own hypocrisy. The traditional punishment for what she had done was much worse than Lena’s. Could she not understand why leniency was important in both cases?

The stubborn clench of her jaw left me doubting. As I walked away, returning to the ballroom, I

wondered just how much of Piper and Elva’s distress had been Lena’s doing.

How could I prove it?

I didn't have time to think of the answer. No sooner had I returned to the ballroom, than Julian found me,

a smug smirk on his face.

"There you are, brother! I've been looking for you."

Those words sent a shot of trepidation through me. Julian only wished to see me when he meant to do me harm—likely a prank at my expense.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "What do you want, Julian?"

"Such callousness for your own brother. It's shameful." His smile only grew wider. "Honestly, though, I

only want you to watch."

I crossed my arms. "Watch what?"

He winked at me. Without another word, he spun away and crossed the room to where most of the girls

were standing.

Was he attempting to upstage me? That wasn't difficult for him, with his boisterous personality. Why did

it matter if I watched or not?

I turned away, determined to ignore whatever show he had planned.

But then Mark said, "Sir." He knew the animosity between Julian and me. He wouldn't call all my attention

back if it wasn't important.

I returned my gaze to my reprehensible brother, only to find him standing directly in front of Piper.

"If I may have everyone's attention," Julian said into a microphone. Where had he gotten that? How **long**

had he been planning this?

My feet were moving before I thought to move them.

My mind was completely devoid of thoughts.

I only knew that I had to get him away from Piper.

He didn't deserve her. He didn't

What am I doing?

I planted my feet, stopping myself in the middle of the dance floor. Fortunately, the dancers had already

stopped to observe the spectacle.

Julian took one of Piper's gloved hands in his.

"Piper, will you accompany me on a solo date?"

Today's Bonus Offer

Chapter 0055

I stared at Julian, disbelieving my ears. Did he really just ask me for a solo date?

Yet everyone in the whole ballroom was looking at us. Julian still held the microphone up to his mouth.

This was definitely happening. It wasn't a dream.

Which meant that Julian was up to something.

"Why?" I asked, before I could think better of it.

A few girls around me gasped. Only then did I realize my mistake and covered my mouth.

Julian also looked shocked, his eyes going wide for a moment. But then, just as quickly, he burst out

laughing.

His good humor seemed to **erase** the surprise of the other onlookers. Everyone seemed to think I had

been telling a joke.

With the microphone lowered, he said to me, "I insist this request is genuine, Piper."

I didn't believe him.

Julian always played the angles. Asking me on a date had to be some kind of move for his benefit, but I

couldn't begin to figure out how. I'd only scratched the surface of the inner politics of the royal family.

He waited for my answer. Everyone did.

I knew he was using me, even if I didn't know how, but I couldn't exactly turn him down. He was a prince,

and this was a competition. I was just a pawn in a game.

So I said, "I accept."

He smiled. Into the microphone, he announced, "She said yes."

The nobles cheered. Most of the girls clapped politely. A few giggled.

"Our date will be tomorrow," he said, no longer speaking to me, but to the waiting crowd.

in the center of the dance floor, Nicholas stood. His face was an emotionless mask, but his golden eyes

blazed as he stared straight at me

I

My heart ached. I wanted to tell him that this didn't mean anything. Julian was only trying to stir up

trouble again, likely just for the sake of it.

But I couldn't reach him without publicly dismissing Julian. I had to stay where I was.

Slowly, I realized that Nicholas didn't need an explanation anyway. We weren't anything to each other

anymore

His fierce, hurt gaze had triggered something inside of me, like a memory response. Every impulse

inside of me screamed to soothe away his worry.

Julian meant nothing like that to me.

Yet, when I looked at Nicholas now, that look had dimmed. Now he seemed entirely blank – bored,

almost. He turned away from me and, even an hour later, had not sought me out again.

The girls, meanwhile, were positively charmed by Julian and his antics. Even after he had sauntered

away from me, they could not stop telling me how funny he was.

“He’s so mischievous, asking you on a date.”

“He had to know it would make everyone laugh!”

None of them seemed to see me as a threat in the competition, which left me feeling relieved. Between

Joseph and Lena, I had more than enough enemies as it was.

Elva, however, found no humor in what had happened.

I sat beside her on a set of chairs lining the wall. Her hands held her dress in bunches. Her bottom lip

pouted out in a frown.

I wrapped my arm around her, but she shied from my touch.

“What’s wrong, Elva?”

“Are you going to marry that prince?”

“Prince Julian?” I asked. At her nod, I added, “No, honey. We’re just going on a date. We’ll probably go to

a restaurant and have lunch. Or maybe walk around a park.”

Honestly, I had no idea what plans Julian had, but I tried my best to help Elva understand what was happening **and** why it wasn’t such a big deal, no matter how Julian had acted.

She only sunk further into herself. “But what about Nicklass? Don’t you like him anymore?”

Heat rose in my face. “Of course, I do, honey, but...”

Chapter **0056**

“Marry him, then.” She nodded, like it was decided. Like it was somehow that easy.

I hated disappointing her. I wished I could let her believe what she wanted.

“I’m sorry, Elva. But Prince Nicholas and I won’t ever be a couple. No matter what.”

She looked up at me with large, vulnerable eyes. “Not ever?”

I shook my head.

“But why?”

Because I broke his heart? Because he thought I had betrayed him? Because he’d returned the gift I’d

made him? Because he was a prince, and I was just a wolf-less waitress?

There were so many reasons. All of which felt like too much information for my small daughter.

“We’re just not meant to be,” I said.

Elva had a **grasp** of fairy tales and happily ever after. Even if she couldn’t understand everything, she

might be able to handle this much.

She must have, because her questions stopped. But then she started to cry.

“But I like him, Mommy,” she said, wiping at her eyes. “If you married him, then he would be my Dad.”

I hated more than anything to disappoint her, but what could I do? I couldn’t lie to her about this, not to

then have to reveal the truth like it was all some cruel **joke**.

Soon, I would be eliminated from the competition. I’d had a good showing tonight, but that didn’t mean !

would get to stay. Everyone knew I’d be the first to leave, including me.

After, Elva and I would be forced to leave. From then on, we’d only ever see the princes on television,

unless they went back to being recluses. In that case, we wouldn’t even see their images.

I couldn't **pretend** like our future held any hope of maintaining this lifestyle, including keeping Nicholas

around, even as a friend.

"I'm sorry," I said, and pulled Elva into my arms.

She wrapped her arms around my neck and cried into my shoulder.

I gently rubbed her back to soothe her. "We'll be okay. No matter what happens.

+15 BONUS

Later, after the ball had ended and Elva fell asleep in my arms, I carried her back to our room and tucked her into bed.

I had thought the maids would have left us for the night, but the quiet maid stayed nearby, as if waiting

for me to finish

Stepping back from the bed, and Elva sleeping within it, I motioned the maid closer to the door. We spoke in quiet tones.

"You can get some rest," I said. "I don't need anything more tonight."

I tugged at my offending gloves. I hadn't forgotten the apparent betrayal of my **maids**, who surely knew about the Queen's rules for glove-length and had not warned me.

"She gave you the wrong gloves," the quiet maid said.

I blinked at her. "What?"

She pointed to the gloves I'd scrunched up in my hand. "Those are not the gloves I made for you. I don't know where those came from, or why they exist. I swear to you that I made the gloves the correct length."

News of my lecturing from the Queen must have traveled fast in the servants' corridors. It likely wouldn't take long until the entire palace knew of what happened.

"You have to be careful, Miss Piper," the quiet maid said. "I don't know why the other maid gave you the wrong gloves. Maybe it was an accident, but..."

"I

"You don't think so," I said.

"No"

So the other maid had purposefully meant to sabotage me. But why? For what purpose?

I was already going to be the first one to go home. Why make things even worse for me?

The quiet maid glanced around, like an eavesdropper might be listening at the door. "Someone might be out to harm you."

A shiver ran up my spine.

Today's Bonus Offer

GET IT NOW

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Chapter 0057

Julian showed up with the nanny early the next **morning**. Fortunately I was an early riser and had just

finished changing into my day clothes.

He held out a spare cup of coffee. “You ready? We have to be quick to get out of here before anyone

notices.

cast him a doubtful look. “Before anyone notices?”

His smirk came too easily, like he always had one ready. “Did you want the cameras to follow us?”

I didn’t, but, “Isn’t that just part of the game?”

“No wonder you always got along so well with Nicholas. He sticks to the rules, too. Don’t you find that

boring? Where’s your **sense** of adventure?”

He watched me with a piercing gaze, almost like he could see straight into me, down into the secret

parts I tried to hide.

“Piper, when was the last time you let yourself live a little? I mean, really cut loose and let go?”

I didn't have an answer. It certainly had not been in the past three years where breaking the rules had

meant potential homelessness or sickness. I hadn't had the money for anything thrilling.

When everyday was a struggle for survival, the desire for anything beyond food, water, and shelter felt

like a novelty that I couldn't afford.

Julian's growing smile was dangerous because it was so convincing. Trust me for a good time, it said, though made no promises for afterwards.

I **hadn't** forgotten Nicholas's warnings. Julian was a playboy. But I wasn't eloping with him. We were

simply **going** on our date.

“Live on the wild side, Piper,” he said.

I checked behind me. Elva was still sleeping. The nanny settled into a chair, ready to needlepoint.

I looked back at Julian and the excitement he proposed.

“Okay, I said, and he laughed in delight.

in led me down the servants' passages, routes rarely covered by the guard. His Beta, Brian, played **ance for us once** or twice, stopping to ask guards questions while we slipped behind their backs

Brian was likely used to Julian's antics. He didn't even need orders to catch up to us afterwards, or to

then scope out the hallways ahead of us.

When we finally made it to the massive garage, I was amazed by the vast collection of cars stored there.

I didn't know much about them, but they were beautiful and shiny. Mostly sports cars and convertibles,

they must have been incredibly expensive.

“This one’s mine,” Julian said, leading me to a sleek red convertible with a black top. The inside was

covered in black leather upholstery. When Julian turned over the engine, it purred.

I fastened my seatbelt just in time, because **in** the next moment, Julian was flooring it. The car went 0 to

60 in 3 seconds. The tires screeched on the garage floor.

I held on for dear life.

Quickly we were through the door Brian had shoved open and outside. We served around the oval

driveway, kicking up gravel as we made our way to the exit.

A camera crew was shooting something there, maybe **a** promo. It was entirely ruined as we flew through it.

Then, we were out on the street, with the palace and the responsibilities that went with it well behind us.

“You can slow down now,” I said, when it was just us and the open road.

“Don’t become **a** bore, Piper. We’re just getting started.”

He made a sharp corner and I squeezed my eyes shut.

“I’d like to live to see the rest of my life,” I said through clenched teeth.

With a dramatic sigh, he finally lifted his foot off the pedal, and the car slowed to an acceptable speed.”

Satisfied?”

Yes.

I released the seat I’d been gripping, white-knuckled, and returned my hands to my lap.

Maybe at one point in **my life**, I would have been impressed by such antics, but that had been before I

had a daughter waiting for me to come home.

I’d thought my answer might displease Julian, but he just laughed.

as wonder you and Nicholas ever broke up,” he said. “If he was here right **now**, he’d probably throttle

or putting your into any kind of perceived danger,

My heart can “He doesn’t care about me like that anymore

Chapter 0058

Julian looked at me sideways for a long moment. “Oh my God, **you** actually believe that .”

A blush warmed my face. What was he implying? That Nicholas still cared?

No, knowing Julian, he was just trying to stir the pot again. I couldn’t trust anything he said or implied.

The road started to turn, and Julian, still looking at me, was missing it..

on

“Eyes on the road, please!” I shouted.

He corrected just in time, laughing all the while.

He slowed the speed considerably when we entered a town. He weaved the car through the streets.

before stopping in front of an old brick warehouse.

“Here we are,” he said, turning off the engine.

“I thought we were going on a date?”

“That was just an excuse to get you alone,” Julian said with a shrug. “I have a lead in the investigation,

but I need your presence to see if it’s a solid one.”

“And you couldn’t tell me this before?”

In a flash, his wicked smirk returned. “Are you disappointed?”

Rolling my eyes, I exited the car.

The location certainly seemed seedy. Empty, abandoned, and with poor lighting even in the day, this

could easily be a place for shady dealings.

Julian stood from the driver's seat and turned toward me.

Do you feel anything?" he asked.

Like what?"

Anything

frowned at him. I didn't know what that meant. "I feel the same as always."

moment, his good mood slipped, **and** he seemed almost disappointed.

He returned to the driver's seat

Yep. If this was a true lead, you would have been able to tell." He turned over the engine.

I fastened my seatbelt. "Tell how?"

Hand on the gear shift, he looked at me. "You would have felt your wolf."

I was left stunned, silent, as Julian guided us through the town streets back the way we had come.

"Even though your wolf was taken from you," he said after a while, "you should still be able to feel it if it

was close. It's attached to someone else, but it will always be yours. It calls to you."

Was that true? I couldn't remember much from when my wolf had been taken. The pain had been far too

great and had lingered for days afterwards.

The memories I did recall from that time were filled with nothing but hurt.

"What will it feel like?" I asked.

"You'll know when you feel it." He glanced at me. "You have to promise to tell me if you ever feel

anything strange, Piper. If it's close, we can know to act. Else, we're just guessing.

7 will."

On the way back to the palace, Julian did stop and buy me breakfast at a fast food drive thru. As he passed **me** a bag of breakfast sandwiches and hash **browns**, he said, "Don't say I never gave you anything."

I knew Julian had his own reasons for wanting to uncover the underground operation that was buying

and selling wolves and abilities, but seeing him work so diligently today helped me see him in a new light.

He wasn't quite as carefree as he pretended to be. I wondered what he was really like, under the

boisterous laughter and jokes.

Regardless, knowing we shared a common goal, made it easier to open **up a** bit around him, despite my

better judgement.

Sol accepted the fast food bag with a grin. "You sure know how to treat a girl. Are you th is nice to all

as or am I special?"

driveway leading to the palace, Nicholas was walling standing right

stared at Julian through the windshield

as the

me **closer**.

Julian smirked like he had no plans to stop.

My heart nearly jumped from my chest. "Julian!"

At the last minute, Julian slammed on the brakes. The car screeched to a halt, just in ti me. Nicholas hadn't even flinched. "Get out of the car, Piper."

Today's Bonus Offer

Chapter 0059

Quickly, I exited the car, Julian sighed, threw the car into park, and got out too.

“Over here, Piper,” Nicholas said, motioning to the space beside him. Obediently, I went where he

directed.

Softly, he asked me, “Are you alright?”

The question startled me a moment. I wasn’t sure why he cared. But I assuaged his concerns. “I’m not

hurt.”

Nicholas nodded at me, then rounded on Julian. His voice was thick with fury.

“How could you do something like this? You broke all the rules. Do you not care at all that you’ve potentially endangered Piper’s candidacy for the games?”

Julian rolled his eyes. “It was just a bit of fun, Nicholas.”

“At her expense. You have nothing to lose. She could be punished for your little act of rebellion.”

My stomach twisted uncomfortably. I hadn’t thought of the consequences like this. I’d just followed

Julian. Was I truly at risk of **being** expelled?

“It’s not that big of a deal. I doubt anyone noticed.”

“Everyone noticed you zoom out of here first thing in the morning. They even caught your act on

camera.” He waved toward the front gate, where I remembered seeing the camera crew earlier.

Julian glanced from Nicholas to me, and then back again. His smile turned cat-like.

“Just a short while ago, Piper was telling me that you didn’t care about her anymore. Yet here you are,

coming to her rescue like a perfect knight in shining armor.”

Nicholas stiffened. “I don’t care.”

I lowered my head.

“Then why so serious, dear brother?” Julian asked.

“It wouldn’t be right for any candidate to be disqualified because of your careless actions.”

“Any candidate, huh? So if it was Lilliana I had out here, you’d still come running?”

Julian shook his head. “You are such a liar.”

A felt a crackle in my chest. I knew I wasn’t special to Nicholas anymore, but to have him confirm it

hurt no less each time.

again and again

“Just let it go, Julian,” I said. “Please.”

Nicholas glanced at me, but his expression was unreadable. When had he begun to shield his true self so defensively? He hadn’t been like this when we’d dated.

“Fine. For you, Piper,” Julian said. “And Nicholas, if Piper gets into any trouble for this, I’ll take the blame,

alright? So you can relax.”

Looking between Nicholas **and** me, Julian laughed again, like everything was a big joke.

When his Beta Brian approached us, Julian tossed him the keys to the car and started walking toward

the palace.

Nicholas ushered me to the side of the driveway, and Brian drove the car back to the garage.

With Nicholas **and** I alone, I began to feel nervous. I rubbed a hand up and down my arm.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Don’t thank me.” He kept his gaze at something over my shoulder, refusing to meet my eyes. “I would

have done the same for any of the girls.”

“Oh...” The words cut me **more** than I should have allowed. I tried to hide my hurt reaction, but I wasn’t as trained at concealing my emotions as he was.

The only thing I could do was escape. “If you’ll excuse me...

Only when I was walking away did I noticed I had addressed Julian without his title again. Sometimes, with the way he acted, it was so difficult to think of him as a prince.

But neither Julian nor Nicholas had corrected **me**, so maybe they hadn’t noticed...

I really hoped they **hadn’t** noticed,

Inside the palace, I hurried toward my room, but I was waylaid by Lena, who walked directly into my path and stopped, hands **on** her hips

There you are. Finally. There won’t be an escape this time.”

When do you mean?” asked

She smiled, smug. “You’ve been summoned to speak with the Luna. Follow me. She is in the gardens.”

I should check on Elva first.” I hadn’t seen her since she was sleeping. Reasonable or not, I always

worried about her health. Mornings were sometimes difficult.

One of Lena’s brows rose high on her forehead. “You intend to keep your Queen waiting?”

When she put it like that, I supposed I didn’t have a choice. I would have to trust the nanny to alert the

physician if something was wrong.

“No.” I corrected. “I’ll follow you.”

Lena led me through the palace toward the grand glass double-doors that led out into the gardens. As

we weaved through the flowers and bushes, I noticed she was taking me closer to the stables.

The Queen and her entourage had arranged a tea party in the flower field near the horse paddock.

Servants had brought out cushioned chairs and a table. Even a table cloth.

In front of the stables, Nicholas was meeting a girl. Was this another solo date? When had that been

arranged?

And why would the Queen choose to meet with me here? It felt like a trap somehow, though I was fairly

certain she wasn't aware of my past relationship with her son. She never brought it up before, if she was.

Regardless, being in line of sight of Nicholas on another date felt like punishment on its own. I braced

myself for whatever further hurt the Luna would now unleash.

The Queen made me wait, standing there in the grass, while she sipped at her tea. When she finally

lowered her teacup, she just stared at me for some time.

In the distance, I heard the sharp, forced giggles of a girl attempting to be cute on her date.

"Do **you** know why I called you out here today, girl?" the Luna asked me.

I kept my gaze down respectfully. "No, Your Majesty."

"So that wasn't you in the passenger seat of Julian's car this morning, while he was off doing who knows

what?

Nicholas hadn't been lying then. Everyone really did know.

That was me, I admitted.

The Queen tutted as she shook her head. "You allowed yourself to be caught in **one** of Julian's reckless

ones. You should know how to guide her partner **out** of trouble, not follow him into it

She lifted her teacup and took another long sip. She let the words hang between us for another long

moment before proceeding.

"Julian is still in his wild phase. He will need **a** strong woman to help keep him on track."

I had no interest in being the strong woman Julian apparently needed, but I decided not to say so. Let her think whatever she wants. She would anyway, regardless of what I said.

I'd met people like her before, at the restaurant. People who had never in their lives been told no did not understand that their opinions could be wrong. To have it pointed out only ever upset them.

"This is the second time you've come before me," the Queen said. "If there is a third time, then—"

Elva! Elva, hold on!"

That was Nicholas's voice!

I looked over to where he was rushing toward the palace wall. Up above, in the window of my room, Elva was hanging over the edge, holding on for dear life with her thin little arms

My heart stopped.

I screamed. "Elva!"

She was slipping.

GET IT NOW

Chapter 0060

Panic struck through me. Adrenaline surged through my veins.

Seeing Elva hanging from that window took years off my life.

I rushed forward at once, forgetting the Luna now behind me forgetting all else.

My child was in danger!

As I ran closer, I held out my arms, ready to catch her if she fell.

Nicholas was already in action, climbing up the vine-covered trellis set alongside the palace walls.

"**Hold** on, Elva!" he called up to her. "I'm almost there."

"Nick—lass!" Her sharp, frightened cry pierced into my heart. Tears stained her cheeks as she looked

down at him.

“Hurry, Nicholas!” I wanted to join him, but I feared too much weight would destroy the trellis. It already

creaked under his weight alone.

Suddenly, another figure appeared in the window, trying to grab her. She shuffled as best she could away

from those grabby hands.

At **first** I felt relief. Someone was there! They would save her!

But then I noticed those hands weren't trying to pull her up. They were trying to push her.

“Leave me alone!” Elva screamed.

“Jump, Elva. Right here, I'll catch you.” Feet planted on the trellis, Nicholas opened his arms **wide**.

Wasting no more time, Elva let go of the ledge.

My heart stopped.

But then Nicholas caught her. He enclosed her in the safety of his arms, and I could breathe again.

Carefully, **he** carried **her** down the trellis. I met them at the bottom. Elva turned in Nicholas's arms and

reached out for me with both hands. I immediately cradled her to me.

Nicholas stayed close, leaving his hand on her back.

Elva's loud sobe wracked through her body. She was a trembling mess.

+15 **BONUS**

Mommy Mommy...

“It's okay. I'm here. We're both here.”

She turned from where she was hiding against my shoulder to check for Nicholas.

“You're safe now,” he told her, voice gentle.

She sucked in a loud, wet breath.

I looked her over, making certain she wasn't injured. But other than being afraid, she seemed okay.

"Can you tell us what happened, Elva?" Nicholas asked. "How did you end up in the window?"

"Like the horses," she said, sniffing. "I was looking and then... a guard.." She buried her face against my

shoulder again. "He chased me."

Nicholas and I locked eyes. His burned with fury.

"What happened to the nanny?" I asked.

"That mean lady made her leave."

Nicholas's brow furrowed, confused, but I knew exactly who 'mean lady was.

"Lena," I mouthed to him.

Elva **wiped** her **nose** with her sleeve. "I told him I didn't want to play... but he chased me... Then at the

window. Mommy, he pushed me."

Her face crumpled up. "I want to go home."

My entire heart shattered to pieces.

"You don't have to leave. It's going to be okay, now," Nicholas said, looking from me to Elva and back,

like he was telling us both. "I'll get to the bottom of this and never let anything like this happen again."

The fierceness of his tone gave me hope, yet doubt still harbored in the corners of my mind. He might

mean it, but would **he** be able to actually stop it?

had thought staying here would help Elva because of her access to medical care. But if someone was

trying to actively hurt her...

We could go back. I'd work as many jobs as I would need to, to keep her safe.

abled my en, pulling me from the spiral of my thoughts and returning me to the hern

+15 BONUS

If I let myself believe him, and I wanted to, then I had no reason to be afraid.

Yet in the sudden absence of that fear, my anger flourished.

Why would Lena send the nanny away? Why would the guard attack Elva? Were they each acting alone, or was someone behind the scenes, pulling the strings

I saw my own rage reflected in Nicholas's eyes. That gave me a measure of comfort.

Today's Bonus Offer