

The Luna Choosing Game by Jane Above Story Chapter 61

GET IT NOW

Chapter **0061**

When he found the truth of what happened here, he would act accordingly. Seeing his anger, I could trust

that.

Yet whatever happened, from now on, I would be much more careful who I left my child with.

“Prince Nicholas?” came a soft feminine voice from behind us. His date stood there. She twisted her

fingers together like she was shy, but annoyance marred her face. “Are we continuing our date?”

Nicholas turned to her. “I’m sorry, but –”

“Nicholas.”

The Luna herself approached us then, her own features sharp with anger. At first, I thought she might be

upset on Elva’s behalf, but she only glared at the child in my arms before looking again to her son.

“You will return to your date.”

Nicholas straightened. A direct order from the Queen wasn’t something to be taken lightly, even, I

supposed, when you were the prince.

When he hesitated, her eyes narrowed. “Do you not see the games that are at play here?
? Can you not

understand that the child was never in any danger? This whole farce was orchestrated to
to ruin your date.”

I was so shocked, I couldn’t believe what I had just heard. Surely, she couldn’t be serious?
s? Yet she stood

there firmly, glowering at me like I was the monster here.

“I would never endanger my child! And for such a petty reason!” I couldn’t keep the incredulity
duly from **my** voice. It never occurred to me that I should maybe keep my voice down
when speaking to the Luna, not

when she was insinuating such a terrible thing.

For a moment, everyone looked at me with a wide-eyed gaze, except Nicholas, who had moved a little closer to me and Elva. All too quickly,
y, the Queen recovered, glaring again. This time her glare zeroed in

on the closeness of Nicholas to me.

“Your date, Nicholas. Now.” The **Luna’s** voice held ultimate authority. Nicholas wouldn’t
be able to disobey

stepped away from us, heading **toward** his date. Once he was out of the Queen’s line of
of vision, he

back at me. Though his face was emotionless, I could have sworn I saw concern in his
gaze.

into my shoulder

“As **for** you.” The Queen returned her attention to me. “I have been patient with you. I have
ave been kind. I have waived punishment which would have otherwise been perfectly reasonable.
asonable. But you have continued

to disrespect me.”

She waved her hand toward my window. “Between this debacle and your raised voice, as well as your previous incidents, I would be well within my rights to expel you from this competition. However...

She sighed, like her next words weighed on her heavily. “As your presence is... a necessity, presently. I shall not be able to execute the deserved punishment. Instead, you will sustain the one previously suggested, that I had waived.”

She couldn't mean....

“Piper, on the next stormy day, you will kneel in the rain from dawn until dusk, and reflect on all the atrocities you have committed here. Hopefully, then, you will learn some manners.”

I had no idea how she could be so blasé in the face of my child's near-death. Had she no empathy at all?

this whole thing?

Or did she truly believe, outlandishly, that I had somehow?

What kind of goings-on occurred in this palace for that to be considered the norm?

Yet as outrageous as it was, I had no power here. I had to respect the judgement of the Luna, even if I disagreed with it. To fail to do so would result in the worst punishment imaginable.

Death.

Behind the Queen, Nicholas took a step toward us. I wasn't **sure** what he was planning to do **or** say, but I

wouldn't let him interfere. If he did, he might be punished too.

Subtly, I shook my head and he paused.

With a chill in my heart, I held my ground and lifted my head.

“I understand,” I said, and accepted my fate.

Chapter **0062**

11

The next morning, when I woke up, I headed straight for the window to look at the sky. Fortunately, there

was no cloud in sight. Today, it seemed, I would escape my punishment.

One of these days, however, my luck would run out and I would be forced to kneel in the storm and hope

my body was strong enough to take it.

Elva and I dressed for the day, and hand in hand, we exited our room to head down to breakfast. Just

outside of the room, we were greeted by Mark.

“Piper, Elva.” He turned toward the two guards standing behind him. “From now on, these two will be

personally assigned to you.”

Their uniforms were more or less similar to other guards I’d seen, except these ones had green trim

around their cuffs.

“They are a part of Prince Nicholas’s personal guard,” Mark explained. “You will also **find** that others on

this floor have been replaced, though these two will be outside your door at all times if you need them.”

The two gave me soft nods. They seemed nice enough, much nicer than my previous guards. And if they were personally vetted by Nicholas, then I had little reason to mistrust them.

Despite our tumultuous past, Nicholas seemed fond of Elva. I believed him when he said he would keep

her safe. Really, that was all I could ask.

Then, Mark dropped to one knee to talk to Elva.

“I’m sorry for the things that happened to you, Elva. But I can vow to you that it will never happen again.

From now on, you have my reassurances.”

Elva didn’t reply, just looked at him with wide eyes.

Mark’s smile wavered. “If you are ever scared, and your mom or Prince Nicholas aren’t around, **you** can

ask **for** me, **okay?** Do you know my name?”

Eles shifted to **look** up at me. At my nod, **she gave** him her attention again. “Mark.”

That’s **right**,” he said, smile restored. He rose to his feet. “Are you both headed down to breakfast? May

court your

would be sick, wouldn’t it, Elva?”

Though **she** had calmed down a lot since the day before, she still seemed nervous, especially around the

guards, Mark included.

The subtler differences in their outfits were lost on her. She saw them all as the one who chased her

around and pushed her out of a window.

‘Hopefully, in time, she would come to trust them again. At least, the right ones.

During breakfast, the girls were loudly chatting about the previous day’s events.

The cameras had been banned from the gardens before I had gone out there. The Queen, it seemed, like

to do all of her punishing in private.

This meant that none of Elva’s endangerment made it onto television, thank goodness. However, just

because the cameras didn’t catch it, did not mean the other girls had not heard of it.

Nicholas's date from yesterday – who wasn't Lilliana, much to her obvious irritation was loudly

regaling the story once again, about Nicholas's daring rescue. The story became more elaborate with

each telling.

By the end of the fourth telling, even Elva, who I had hoped was distracted with the waffles on her plate,

corrected her.

"We didn't fall," Elva said, matter-of-factly. "Nick-lass carried me. Mommy, what's a summer... a summer

"A somersault?" I asked.

She nodded.

"It's when you tumble roll."

Well, we didn't do that either."

Some of the other **girls** snickered at the storyteller's expense. She herself became much quieter after

that

Instead the topic of conversation switched to the girls' individual motivations for the games. Most of

the girls could be split into three main camps..

camp one, the girls were after a specific prince. Nicholas, Julian, **and** even Joyce to a lesser extent, had their own little fan clubs. Their attractions to the boys was mostly based **on** appearances, but as the

family had been in hiding for so long, I couldn't fault them for not knowing more yet.

Chapter **0063**

In camp two, the girls were chasing any prince. It didn't matter which one. These ambitious girls just wanted to be Luna. Olivia and Linda were firmly in this camp.

In the third camp, where I belonged, the girls were here involuntarily. Perhaps their parents wanted them to engage in a political marriage,

or perhaps they were simply chosen and couldn't say no. These were the quiet ones, like Susie, and definitely the minority.

One of the more curious girls asked, "What do you think of the rule that we aren't allowed to flirt with

anyone other than a prince?"

"Who else would we flirt with? A guard? Don't make me laugh!" said another girl.

"Some of the Betas are handsome," said Susie. Many people, including me, glanced at her with surprise.

When she noticed, her whole face turned red. Her gaze dropped to her lap. "Never mind."

I thought it was terribly unfair to the girls. So many of us here for just three boys. But I kept my opinion to

myself.

I could practically hear what they would say, What is the point of this if not for the prince? Or, no one

got to be Luna by flirting with a guard.

Meanwhile, Olivia and Linda had been previously whisper-hissing at each other too quiet for anyone to

hear, but now their argument was rising in volume.

The two were considered front-runners by the other girls. Both were from prominent **packs**, and were confident and beautiful.

When they argued, it drew attention.

Both, it **seemed**, had intentions for Nicholas.

"I refuse to settle for a lesser son," Olivia said. "I have told you that, time and time again, every time you

propose this **foolish** alliance."

Prince Nicholas would suit me best, Olivia. My suggested alliance was only offered in an attempt to

p you from being needlessly eliminated.”

would suit you best for the same reason he would
sult me best, **and don't** you dare deny it, Linda

Later's doubting yourself. Any prince you pick **would** have a chance.

11 won't fell for your flattery if you bellave that, then you go fo

“Oh, dear Olivia.” Linda laughed. “How will you be Luna when I am? Nicholas is the prin
ce for me. With him on my arm, I won't fail.”

Their disregard of Nicholas's choice in all this scratched at my nerves. They acted like h
e was some

kind of prize to be won and not a person.

“I'm waming you, Linda. Back off.”

“Prince Nicholas belongs to me, Olivia.

My outrage spiked and I stood so fast, I knocked my chair over.

“Prince Nicholas is a person! He doesn't belong to anyone.

Olivia, Linda, and everyone else looked at me in surprise.

“He is a person with thoughts and feelings and desires
of his own. Maybe instead of staking claims, you

ask him if he even wants you.”

“**Of** course, he wants.. me.” Olivia trailed off, then coughed politely into her napkin.

The whole of the room had hushed, but they weren't looking at me anymore.

I had the distinct feeling I was missing something

“Hi, Nick-lass!” Elva said.

Oh, no.

Slowly, I turned toward the entrance of the dining room.

Nicholas **stood** there, looking back at me.

I couldn't tell how much he had heard. He was just... staring at me.

I wanted to explain myself, but what would I say? That I hadn't meant it?

I had meant it. I meant every single word.

Nicholas deserved to be treated like the person he was.

So why was he looking at me like he couldn't believe I'd **said** so?

Chapter 0064

Nicholas didn't say a word. He simply turned and left.

"Bye, Nick-lass!" Elva called, before happily returning to her waffles.

Deflated, I corrected my chair and flopped down onto it. None of the girls spoke to me during the rest of

breakfast.

Susie might have, but she was still too embarrassed from her own comment. Her gaze never lifted to

mine.

The longer I sat there in silence, with the girls chattering amongst themselves, the more suffocated I

began to feel in the palace.

The girls' conversations had more or less returned to the same topics as before, as if I had not spoken

up at all. I hated being surrounded by so much vanity and selfishness. It made me worry that I was

becoming that way too.

By the time Elva and I had finished breakfast and were on our way back to our room, I felt like I might

vibrate straight out of my skin. I was uncomfortable and unhappy.

The looming threat of my punishment weighed on my mind too.

Mark was still waiting outside of our room, talking to the new guards. I stopped in front of him and tried

to gather my thoughts.

“Something wrong, Piper?” he asked.

“Not wrong, exactly. But I do have a question.”

He nodded, encouraging me.

“I wanted to go somewhere during my off-time, would I be allowed? Somewhere off the palace grounds. With Elva, of course.”

“Of course! Elva chimed in

be able to arrange something.” Mark said. “But where would you want to **go?**

somewhere I could center myself, and maybe do some **good?** I don’t know. Maybe I’m overthinking

anything I rubbed my forehead.

Mark looked at me curiously, like I was a puzzle yet to **be** completed.

“Somewhere like an orphanage, perhaps?” I suggested. “I could help serve lunch later, and Elva could play with the kids.”

Elva gasped. “Yay! Let’s go there! I want to play!”

Mark’s eyes went a little wide. Had I surprised him? Maybe he spent too much time in the palace too, if he was thinking the worst of everyone like I was.

“I know a place. It should be okay, but...” He looked away.

“But?” I prompted.

He shook his head, then smiled at me. “Never mind. I’ll take you myself. Meet me out front in fifteen minutes.”

“Yay!” Elva cheered, and this time I joined her.

As soon as we arrived at the orphanage, Elva went running to the playground to meet and play with the

other kids.

Mark introduced me to the head caretaker, an older woman who was exceptionally sweet. She shook

my hand many times in a row.

“We’re so pleased to have another helping hand,” she said. “So many generous spirits in the palace.”

Her words took a moment to sink in. Another helping hand?

“It seems even here, I cannot escape from being intruded upon.

I looked up to the open entryway where Nicholas was standing. He stared at me expressionlessly for a

moment, before his gaze slid to Mark.

“Your Royal Highness! **You** didn’t tell me you were coming here!” Mark said, sputtering.

Nicholas’s eyes narrowed marginally, in suspicion.

I faced Mark as well. He hadn’t mentioned that Nicholas might **be** here.

Mark was nervous under my stare, too. “He comes here sometimes to help, but I swear I didn’t know he

would be here **today**, or I wouldn’t have brought **you**.”

To Nicholas, he explained, “She **wanted to get** out of the palace for a while. She asked if there was an

hanage nearby, where she could help **out**. Of course, I would bring her here.”

A coincidence? I asked.

Mark crossed his heart with his finger.

I turned back to Nicholas, but he was already heading back inside.

The caretaker smiled. “Prince Nicholas is truly a good man.” She patted my arm consolingly. “Don’t be off

-put by the hard shell he wears. It’s the inside that counts.”

Inside, he hated me too, but I didn’t want to tell her that.

“Truly, having you both here is a blessing. Sometimes the kids are more than these old bones can

handle.”

Today's Bonus Offer

Chapter 0065

With a statement like there, I had no polite way of backing out. Not that I would. These kids needed me,

and Elva was already having fun with them, playing on the slides.

Nicholas and I would just have to put aside our differences long enough to help the kids. After that, we

could go back to not getting along as **usual**.

After confirming I would be staying, the caretaker offered to lead me and Mark inside.

"I'll stay out here," Mark said. "Keep an eye on the kids."

I was grateful. If he watched Elva, I knew I wouldn't have to worry.

Inside, I joined Nicholas in the kitchen. He was washing dishes, preparing for the day's main event:

lunch. And what an extravagant lunch it would be, if the piles of containers were any indication.

"Did you bring all this from the palace?" I peeked under the aluminum foil on one of the containers. Inside was at least ten servings of garlic potatoes.

"One of the cooks is particularly fond of me," Nicholas said. "She makes special servings when I ask."

"She must really like you. There's a ton of food here."

"She knows it goes to a good cause. Plus, I make sure she's well compensated for the extra effort."

More money? No wonder she liked him.

Nicholas finished washing a plate then set it aside on a wet stack. Grabbing a towel, I went to his side

and began to **dry**.

This was... domestic. Him washing and then passing the dishes to me to dry. It reminded me of when we

had been dating. How many times had we shared moments just like this?

Even the location wasn't all that different.

"Do you remember at the Academy? We used to help out the kids at the orphanage like this all the time."

I had felt that with all my **good** fortune from being there, it was the least I could do to pay some of it forward and help the less fortunate.

Nicholas had always accompanied me. Often times, he went even when I couldn't.

never stopped," he said.

I wished I could say the same, but after Elva, with her sickness, we couldn't always go like I had used to:

"Once a year, Elva and I help out at an orphanage closer to home. For the holidays."

Nicholas grunted in acknowledgement.

He probably didn't want to reminisce, but it was hard not to.

"You and I had some of our best conversations like this," I said. "Do you remember that time when you

dropped that dish and I caught it? I'll never forget. I felt like a superhero with quick reflexes."

"I'd asked you a question, and you knew you were going to surprise me. You were ready for me to drop

it."

"I was?" I didn't remember that. "What was the question?"

He stopped scrubbing at a dish to glance at me. His face was entirely passive, but his eyes almost

looked **sad**.

I tried to remember on my own.

We'd been—
talking and laughing. Someone had mentioned the future. Had we been talking about kids?

"So what about it? If we had kids someday, how many would you want?" Nicholas had asked me. He'd been holding that dish right in front of his chest. It was wet and he was gripping it too tightly, like he was

nervous.

“Ten, at least,” I’d said with a cocksure grin, only half-joking. If he’d wanted that many, I would have gone

for it in a heartbeat.

His eyes had gone wide. That plate had fallen.

And I had caught it.

Now three years and a handful of days later, we stood in a different kitchen, in a seemingly different life,

staring at each other. Frowning.

The air between us was thick. Just like then, I could tell he was building up to asking me something. But

unlike then, this time I was sure to dislike the question.

“Piper, did **you** break up with me so you could marry and have children with someone else?”

Chapter 0066

I stared at him, startled. Did he actually think that I broke up with him to be with someone else?

He must have, because he returned my stare with one of his own.

“No.” I wished with all of my heart that he would believe me without an explanation, I didn’t want to lie to

him.

But I knew him. So I knew it wouldn’t be enough.

“Then, why?” he asked, voice soft in the quiet room.

I couldn’t tell him the truth. He would hate me worse than he already did.

“Please don’t ask me that.”

His expression hardened. “I can only hope you learned from your mistake. Obviously the man you left me

for wasn’t worthy, if he abandoned you and Elva.”

He had it all wrong. I would have never left Nicholas for anyone else. Who else could compare? Nicholas

had my full heart from the start. Even now, I was still peeling parts of it away from him.

“You were short-sighted, chasing after selfish pleasures.” Looking away from me, Nicholas returned to aggressively scrubbing an already-clean dish. “You left your studies and your boyfriend behind, and for what?”

Gently, I reached over and removed the dish from him before he could break it. He froze, hands halfway into the sink.

I had suspected he'd hated me for my supposed betrayal, but I hadn't realized before just how deeply I

had hurt him

I never thought I deserved him, even before I knew he was a prince. At the time, I had reasoned he would move on quickly, as jealous as that made me.

I had never expected the hurt would stay with him, even **three years** later. Unless, of course, **this hurt**

was only the result of having his ego bruised.

Your hands are calloused,” Nicholas said.

I'd only touched him for a moment just now. How had he noticed?

work hard for what little I have. I do my best to care **for** Elva.”

She's fond **of** you. You're...

It was rare receiving such a compliment from Nicholas, so I eagerly accepted it.

“Thank you, but I feel like I never get to see her enough. I **work** long hours, and being here has kept me

almost as busy. It's worth it though, to see her happy. She had such a great time at the First Ball.”

“And what about you? Were you happy at the ball?”

I gave a small shrug. “At times. But it was tiring too. The political mind **games** in the palace **are**

something else. I’m not sure why anyone would want to be Luna.”

He looked at me. “Most women would want the power.”

I shook my head, “All I want is good medical care for Elva. I wish I could afford it on my own.”

“Things haven’t been easy for you since you left the Academy.”

“To put it mildly,” I said, with a small laugh.

He didn’t as much as smile. If anything, he only looked sterner.

“Someday, perhaps, **you** will explain to me the reasoning behind the choices you made.”

I

“It was a long time ago,” I said.

He returned to the dishes, scrubbing more **gently** this time. Under his breath, he said, “Not to me.”

Nicholas’s dire expression remained throughout our morning together, yet when it came time to serve

lunch to the children, his demeanor visibly brightened.

He could never manage the same vibrant, boisterous personality as Julian, but a smiling Nicholas was

no less bright in his own way. Actually, he was even more stunning

He spoke to the children with kindness, and listened carefully as each one talked to him. He nodded

along at key points, even if the child was only babbling

When one child took more than her fair share of rolls, Nicholas lightly corrected her with a few stern

words. Yet when that same child’s eyes went wet with tears, he secretly sneaked an extra roll onto her

plate when no one but me was watching

The tears vanished into a look of amazement

I shook my head at Nicholas's soft heart, but inwardly, I found it endearing. He would make a great father. He'd likely have to depend on his partner to help with the disciplining though

Chapter 0067

If that partner was me, I would...

No. I shouldn't go down that path, even within the safe confines of my mind.

Nicholas and I would never be together again. I had too many secrets that he would never understand. Even if he knew the truth, even if he'd understood, he'd never agree with the choices I had made.

If he knew what I'd given away, he would never look at me the same way.

When Elva appeared for her lunch, she shouted from across the room. "Nick-lass!" Then she ran through the line, crawled under the table, and threw her arms out wide for a hug.

Nicholas leaned down to oblige. His smile was so warm, my chest ached.

If only Elva and I could have this all the time.

After lunch, and after Nicholas and I finished cleaning up, we joined the children out on the playground.

I pushed some of the kids on the swings, while Nicholas play-chased the children around the grassy lawn. He roared, pretending to be a monster. The children shouted with fake fear, broken with fits of

giggling.

Elva herself often broke the illusion by running up to Nicholas and demanding. "You're not a monster.

You're Nick-**lass!**"

Nicholas swooped her up into his arms **and** spun her around, while she cheered and laughed.

I'd never heard her so happy in her life. I could have cried bittersweet tears, so happy that she had this,

so sad she would lose it.

Finally, Nicholas let the kids tackle him down to the ground.

Mark called from the sidelines, "Do you need assistance, sir?"

Nicholas pointed at him. "Ah, there! A new monster approaches, even more harrowing than the last!"

The kids immediately took to the new game, running and play-fighting with Mark.

With them distracted, Nicholas **rolled** up off the ground and walked to me near the swing set. He patted

away much of the grass debris from his pants, but the back of his shirt was covered in it.

"May I?" I **asked**, motioning to his **back**.

"Is it bad?"

"Don't make promises," he teased, then turned his back to me. I brushed away the grass and dirt.

Only when I had finished did I realize the potential weight of what I had just done. I had touched him so casually. We had teased each other.

For a brief moment, everything had felt just like it had three years ago.

Nicholas must have noticed as well. His posture shifted, straightening. His smile slipped away.

"We should head back soon," he said.

I agreed. We needed to end this fantasy as soon as we could. It was too dangerous, wanting what we

had once but could never have again.

We needed to return to our reality. A prince and a commoner, with a canyon of secrets and

misunderstandings between us, too large to cross.

"We can ride back together," Nicholas said.

"Thank you."

The ride home, we sat mostly in silence. Elva slept soundly, having worn herself out with play. She was

curled into Nicholas's side, with his arm wrapped protectively around her.

Outside, clouds were beginning to gather. In the distance, the sky was dark.

The fear I'd pushed down for the day began to once more coil within my chest. Tomorrow would likely

be the day of my punishment.

"Looks like rain," I said.

Nicholas's jaw clenched.

"Guess there's no escaping it." I laughed a little.

He glared at me. "It's not amusing."

"I have to laugh, or I won't survive. What would you rather I do? Cry?"

"No" He frowned deeply. "I'd rather you not have to do this at all."

I wasn't entirely surprised by his words. After all, I knew the kindness in his heart. I'd seen it today, when

he'd played with the children. Still, I hadn't been sure it would have extended to me.

"I thought you would have enjoyed seeing me punished," I said.

His gaze fell away from me.

"If you believe that, then you never really knew me at all."

Chapter 0068

I awoke the next morning to the sound of thunder outside my window and pounding on my bedroom door. I'd barely gotten out of bed when the door burst open and a slew of Joseph's guards flooded in.

"Mommy!" Elva shouted as she hid under the covers.

"At least let me get dressed," I said, holding up my hands.

The guard closest to me shook his head. "Orders are orders." He grabbed me roughly by the arm and

dragged me toward the door.

met

In the hallway, Joseph's guards were arguing with Nicholas's. Mark was running toward me.

"Mark!" I called to him. "Elva's in there!"

"Don't worry. I'll watch her!" he called back. He tried to come closer to me, but one of the guards roughly

shoved him. "Hey!"

"Mark, please." I was worried he might start something. "Elva!"

Mark grit his teeth, but stepped backwards, letting the guards and me pass.

"Keep her away from this! Please!"

"I will," he promised.

In my nightgown, I was dragged through the hallways. It was early, just before dawn, but many of the

girls peeked their heads out of their doors to see the spectacle.

The cameras were nowhere to be seen. Likely this was not something the royal family wanted the public

to see.

On the ground floor, near the back door, Lena had her arms crossed.

"Please, let me change," I said, hoping to appeal to her sense of decency. If I went out into the storm in

my nightgown, it would soak straight through.

Lena sneered. "You should have thought of that this morning."

When would I have had the time? Somewhere between being startled awake and dragged into the hall?

Yet I knew talking back to her would get me nowhere. I had no power here.

The guards shoved me forward, out into the gardens. They forced me down to my knees in the grass.

“Don’t move,” one of them warned. Then they disappeared somewhere behind me.

I was facing away from the palace. I couldn’t see what happened behind me.

This view was better though, I reasoned, looking out at the flowers and the trees.

Cold rain pelted down on me like tiny, frozen daggers. After only a few minutes, my nightgown was entirely damp, clinging to me like a second skin,

I wrapped my

my arms around myself. They hadn’t said I couldn’t do that. It was all I had to fight my growing chill.

I didn’t know how long I kneeled there. The cold had set in. The wind had picked up.

Lightning struck a nearby tree and I jumped.

My tears flowed freely, with the rain to hide them. I was cold and tired and miserable, but I couldn’t give

1. up.

That’s what they wanted me to do. They hoped I would give up and leave.

But I wouldn’t. I couldn’t. Elva needed her medicine. Julian and I were going to expose the underground

trade. And Nicholas...

Seeing Nicholas yesterday. The way he smiled. His kindness when playing with the children.

I knew we could never be together again like we had been in the past, but I’d enjoyed being around him. Compared to my other reasons to want to stay, this one was entirely selfish.

But I wasn’t ready to say goodbye to him again.

Not yet.

The rain continued to pour minutes, hours later. Time had no meaning out here.

I hoped someone was taking care of Elva **and** keeping her away from the windows. I didn’t want her to

see me like this.

She had been frightened this morning. Had anyone calmed her?

Surely Mark would have. If not Mark, then Susie? Or maybe even Nicholas.

She shouldn't be punished like I was. She'd been through far too much in her young life already.

After another lapse of time, I heard arguing behind me. I knew those two voices.

Nicholas, I would recognize in a crowded room. Joseph, took me a bit longer.

"You cannot interfere!" Joseph shouted. "This is tradition!"

"It's a barbaric tradition, and you all are well aware of it," Nicholas snapped, tone sharp. "If this was any

kind of acceptable, you'd let the cameras in to see."

"She disrespected our Luna," Joseph countered.

"I don't have time for this."

"Your Royal Highness, stop!"

Today's Bonus Offer

Chapter 0069

Footsteps sounded behind me. I turned to look, but my movements were sluggish. Nicholas was beside

me before I ever saw him arrive.

Something warm draped over my shoulders. I **looked** down and found a thick, waterproof coat wrapped

around me.

Come on. I'll help you inside." He took me by the elbows and began to lift me.

I weakly pushed him away. "No. I won't give up."

"Piper."

I shook my head as fiercely as I could, until I was dizzy. "They want me to quit. I can't give up."

“To hell with them. Piper, look at me.” He touched my cheek with his palm and physically turned my face.

toward his.

I’m glad he did. I wasn’t **sure** I’d be able to do it on my own. I was so very tired.

His golden eyes were fierce, fiery with anger. Even the flecks of green burned like a forest fire.

Was he mad at me? Why? I had trouble thinking clearly. But I couldn’t give up. For Elva, I had to...

“Piper, who will take care of Elva if you get pneumonia and die?”

His words were a shock to my system. Pneumonia? Death?

“You can’t leave her alone, Piper. She can’t lose you like this.”

Desperation was thick in his voice, despite the determination hard in his eyes.

He was worried for Elva. That made sense. And he was right. I could feel the chill in the depths of my

bones. If I stayed out here for much longer, I might not make it through.

I tried to speak, but no words came out at first. I tried **again, and** it came out a whisper.

“Please help... me.

Wrapping his arms around my waist, he helped me to my feet. I leaned heavily into him as we shuffled

together to the door.

Lens and Joseph both glared at us as we passed them.

The Queen will **hear of** this,” Lena said behind us.

Nicholas ignored her, **and** I was too tired to do much else but follow him.

He led **me** all the way to my bedroom, where my maids waited with clean, dry clothes.

“Where’s Elva?” A shot of panic struck through me.

“She’s in Susie’s room, which faces the other side of the building.” Nicholas said. “Mark is standing

quard.”

Relief washed away the fear quickly. Too quickly, probably. I

When we reached the bed, I plopped down onto the side of it.

d even to remain upright.

“I’ll leave you in the care of your maids,” Nicholas said, unwinding his arm from around my waist..

I snatched his wrist before he could fully pull away. “Don’t leave.”

The words came out unbidden. I didn’t know why I said them. Maybe it was lingering fear. Maybe I was

too tired to hold myself back from what I really wanted.

Either way, I couldn’t take it back.

As he looked at me, the fire in his eyes softened to a warm glow. “You need to change out of those wet

clothes.” He glanced at the door, then back to me. “I will return when you are dressed.”

His soft heart, it seemed, did not only extend to the children.

With his assurances, I released his wrist and he promptly left the room.

The maids helped me undress. One patted my body with a towel while the other blow-dried

was far too exhausted to do anything for myself.

my hair. I

When I was mostly dry, they helped me into a pair of warm flannel pajamas. Then they guided me further

up the bed and under the covers

“Prince Nicholas?” I asked the quiet maid before they could move too far away.

“He’s probably gone,” said the other one.

“Til check,” the quiet maid said and went to the door. “She’s decent now.”

“Thank you.” Nicholas entered. He must have been waiting just outside the door.

As he walked toward me in the **bed**, I could now see his own breach with decorum. His hair was damp.

clinging down onto his **forehead**. His suit coat was missing. His white shirt was soaked, revealing the lean

yet solid torso beneath.

But I had no time to admire him.

When he reached my bedside, he said, "I think you should withdraw from the competition."

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My eyes went wide. As poor as I felt, I still pushed myself upright on the bed – until he placed a hand on

my shoulder and eased me back down.

"I won't give up," I told him. "I can't."

"I wouldn't ask you to, except for your own safety, Piper. If you truly don't care about being Luna, like you say, then you should care more for yourself. The people here only want to do you harm."

"It doesn't matter what happens to me. Can't you see? I will stay. I'll do anything they want to make sure

that Elva continues to get the best medical care."

"Even if this happens again?"

"Even then."

Crossing his arms, he let out a quiet sigh. "I'd forgotten how stubborn you could be."

"Only with important things."

I felt a bit strange with him standing so rigidly beside the bed while I was within it. I motioned toward the

edge of the bed.

"You can sit if you want."

"I shouldn't," he said. Yet after a moment, he propped himself on the very edge of the mattress, as far

from me as he could be. "You asked me not to leave. Why?"

Truthfully, I wasn't entirely certain. I had just wanted him near. "I don't want to be alone."

"I'm sure your maids would sit with you."

"I don't trust my maids."

His piercing gaze focused on me again. "The gloves."

I nodded. "They knew my gloves were too short, but they sent me ahead without a word." I smoothed out the blankets on my lap. "Though I guess, even if I had been warned then, those that want to do me

harm would have found another way."

That's why I thought you should leave."

No. I'd never let them win like that, by scaring me off. "I don't know why they can't just wait **for** the

elimination. Everyone knows I'll be the first to go."

"You seem certain."

"I know I'm only here as a publicity stunt. I've served my purpose."

He hummed in acknowledgement but didn't reply.

I was finally beginning to warm up, and with that warmth, sleepiness followed. In my exhaustion, my

usual filters fell away, and words came much easier.

"You can't be happy with the way **things are**," I said.

He gave me a curious look. I had to explain.

"Dozens of women competing for the attention of three men is so ridiculous. And in front of cameras?

How are you ever supposed to find someone you love?"

"The cameras are essential," Nicholas said. "The royal family needs a strong public image. The fate of

the kingdom might depend on it."

“But couldn’t you invite the public into your lives after you found the right person for you?”

He looked away. “None of us have found our mates on our own, Piper. The selection is a necessity.

I refused to believe that someone like Nicholas would **have** trouble finding someone to love who could

love him back. He wasn’t perfect, but even his flaws were endearing

“The choosing game may seem superficial,” he said, “but it is accomplishing two tasks. Finding mates

for me and my brothers, and winning over the people’s hearts.”

“I suppose it has accomplished a third task as well.”

His **gaze**

returned to me. “What’s that?”

“It’s helping Elva.”

For the length of a heartbeat, he gave a soft smile. It was too quickly gone. “I’ll gladly take that as an

accomplished third task.”

Even with his face returned to its passive normal, I felt more at ease with Nicholas now. Maybe he was

starting to

finally believe me when I **said** that I was **only** here for Elva, and that I had no desire to be Luna.

Maybe he was starting to respect me again..

I **snuggled** deeper

into my blankets. I was feeling bold, and maybe a little flirty. “So, how’s the first task

going? Have any of these girls managed to catch your eye?

I wanted him to tease me. **Maybe** he would flirt back.