

The Luna Choosing Game #Chapter 0611 - Read The Luna Choosing Game Chapter 0611

Chapter 0611

I decided to make my presence more obvious and walked closer to Elva, Nicholas in his wolf form, Night, and Silver. Nicholas shifted back into his human form now, sitting in the grass.

"Piper," he said, smiling slightly, a wolfish grin. He was proud of his wolf form.

"Hi, Mommy!" Elva said. "Nick-lass was showing me his wolf!"

"I saw," I said as I knelt beside her in the grass. "What do you think?"

"So big!" She stretched her arms wide.

"He's an Alpha," I explained. "Their wolves tend to be bigger than others."

"So I can protect my pack," Nicholas added, looking at me. His previous words echoed in my head. He wanted to protect Elva and I so that I wouldn't need to sacrifice to keep her safe. The reminder warmed me from the inside out, and helped wash away some of my earlier worry.

"Mommy," Elva turned toward me. "Can I see Miracle?"

I hadn't shifted in a while. Though I often felt Miracle pushing against my thoughts, and she had given me her strength in my times of fear and strife, I had not allowed her free in some time.

This was for many reasons. Not the least of which was that I was scared I might lose myself again. The call of the wild was strong for me in human form. In wolf form, it was nearly overwhelming. I had made a vow not to disappear again. I didn't want to break that vow.

Miracle had stopped pushing me to. We shared the drive to protect and stay with Elva.

"I don't know..." I said now.

"You haven't run off lately," Nicholas said.

"Miracle has been more reserved," I admitted. But I was still nervous. I knew full well how tempting it could be to just give myself over to natural instincts, especially when things were so stressful.

Not much was more stressful than a looming war.

But with Elva's doe eyes on full blast, I felt myself quickly succumbing to her wishes.

"Night, Silver, and I will be here with you," Nicholas said. "If you start to lose control, we can and will intervene." "Okay," I said.

That reassurance gave me confidence, and I called to Miracle in my mind. She too was hesitant. Though she didn't speak, I could feel her emotions. She didn't want to disappoint Elva any more than I did, nor did she want to abandon her.

"We'll be okay," I assured Miracle.

I felt her calm acceptance as she stepped forward in my mind. Just like that, I gave myself over to my wolf.

One moment I was kneeling in the grass fully human, but in the length of a blink, I was sitting there as a full wolf instead.

My wolf had no near the mass and strength as Nicholas's, but Elva still looked at me with wide-eyed awe.

I leaned forward and licked at Elva's cheek. She giggled as she pressed her fingers into my fur. Nicholas smiled softly, watching us.

The other wolves, who I only now noticed had begun to tense at the mention of my shift, now relaxed again.

The pack is whole, they whispered to each other in contentment.

Peace. Pack. Family. These were things I felt here in the grass with this small group. Safe.

"We are home," Miracle said in my mind.

I began to agree but then I paused.

In the back of my mind, I heard something else...

...Piper...

Was someone calling my name?

I turned my head, but no, the voice was not from anywhere around me. Instead, I could feel it coursing through my thoughts. Whatever was calling for me was doing so from inside my own mind.

*Miracle?" I asked in my thoughts. "Do you hear that?"

"I do," she replied.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I don't know..." She seemed as confused as I was. There should be no one else in our head but just us two.

*Piper?" Nicholas asked. He placed his hand gently on my furry shoulder. "What's wrong?"

Quickly, I shifted back into my human form. In this shape, my confusion must have been even easier to read. Nicholas inched closer to me.

"What happened?" he asked.

I listened, but the strange voice was gone now.

"I heard something, but... it's impossible," I said.

Nicholas brows pinched together as he looked at me with concern.

I didn't mean to worry him, especially when it regarded something I couldn't explain even if I wanted to.

I gave him a small smile. "It's nothing."

His growing frown told me he didn't believe me.

That evening, I received a summons from Julian, requesting my presence in one of the sitting rooms. When I entered, my eyes went wide, taking in the space.

The couch had been shoved to the side to make room for a few desks and a massive cork board covered in pictures and maps.

Julian was pointed at something on the map, speaking with Veronica and Tiffany before him.

He glanced at me and then called me over, "Piper. Come here."

I did as he instructed. One of the maps on the cork board was of the entire kingdom. Some areas had been

circled. Others, crossed out.

"What is all this?" I asked.

Tiffany beamed at me. "Welcome to the task force!"

*Task force?"

Tiffany nodded. "We're helping Julian locate the missing bear princess."

I glanced at Julian, who nodded.

"It's a big job," he said. "Important, too. Definitely one of those all hands on deck situations. I have people in the

field investigating our leads. What I need are more researchers. It's been so long, the only way to track this princess down might be through old rumors."

I didn't know how much I could help really. I had only just recently learned about the story of the lost bear princess. But I could read through old letters and documents well enough. I assumed that would be the bulk of the work, judging from the piles and piles of paperwork towering on top of the desks.

"Whatever we can find will help. No clue is too small," Julian said. "Even if it seems irrelevant." He sighed. "I imagine coroner's reports might be a good place to start. My running theory is that the rebels murdered the princess and then disposed of her body in our kingdom to frame us."

*That's not correct," Veronica said flatly.

Everyone looked at her.

"I know the tales say differently," Julian said. "But we need to keep an open mind."

*I'm not refuting your theory on some baseless opinion," Veronica clarified.

She walked over to where she had set her personal bag near one of the desks. She rummaged through and removed what looked to be photocopies. From a distance, it appeared to be some kind of list. She handed it to Julian.

"What's this?" he asked.

"I've already begun researching, before you asked me to," Veronica explained. "I found a book filled with old

immigration reports in the library. If you look here..." She pointed to a spot on the page. "This shows that the princess was alive when she entered the country."

Julian, looking at the list, was speechless. It took a long moment for him to recover.
"They used the princess's

real identity..."

"Why would they do that?" I asked.

Julian looked up from the list. "The people that took her wanted everyone to know she was here..."

Chapter 0612

"Why would they want us to know they stole the princess?" I asked.

"It's the location that matters," Veronica explained.

"If it was the rebels who kidnapped her," Julian added, "It was likely they intended to start a war, even then." He looked back to the list. "I wonder how my parents were able to smooth tensions over back then, and why they can't use the same tactics now."

"This has been festering for over twenty years," Veronica told him. "Whatever tactics they used might be wearing thin."

Julian hummed in acknowledgement.

I walked closer to peer down at the list from over his shoulder. The princess was named by title only, but was marked to be escorted by an older couple. A ruse, most likely. A kindly elder couple would be less likely to arouse suspicion of wrongdoing. They were marked as servants of the bear crown.

It's the line after the couples' names that gives me pause. A second infant marked only as 'Baby' crossed the border at the same time. The next person listed didn't cross until a full five-minutes later.

"Julian," I said.

He spotted this discrepancy at the same time as me. "I see it."

"Why would they bring two babies?" I asked.

"Two babies?" Tiffany gasped. She stepped closer to Julian on the other side to look at the list too. "Holy guacamole. Two babies."

"A double perhaps?" Veronica offered. "To help protect the true princess?"

Julian's brow lowered and he appeared lost in thought. "If they were caught, this would allow them to make a switch. Likely the true princess wasn't the one labeled as such but this unnamed infant instead. I'm not certain, and I'm not sure we'll know for sure until we have other answers."

He looked at Veronica, and his softened. "Good job, Veronica."

Her lip twitched in return, an almost smile, and she curtly nodded.

"What we have now is a lead," Julian said. "It's been twenty years, but we can hopefully track down this couple. Even if time has been unkind and they have passed, we should be able to follow their course and find someone who knows them."

He waved the paper around. "We need more leads like this. In these old documents, we might find what we are looking for."

We all agreed and separated to begin our work.

For two full hours, we silently searched through the allotted paperwork. My stack was mostly old phone records. I kept an eye out for the couples' name and anything that looked like it could be coming in or out of the palace.

In the end, I just didn't have enough information to make anything of what I'd been given.

Frustration began to set in. I hated that I couldn't find enough information to crack the case.

The entire war could be avoided if we found the information that we needed. And if the war could be avoided, then my choice would be unnecessary.

I sighed, too loudly I supposed, because Julian noticed and came over to me. He sat on the edge of my desk. "Take five?" he asked.

God knew I needed a break. I nodded and stood.

"The servants set out fresh coffee over here," he said and escorted me to a small table near the entrance of the room, where a pot of coffee set among some teacups.

Julian righted one of the cups and poured me some coffee. He handed it to me.

"Do you want to talk about what's really bothering you?" he asked.

"This is important work," I said and took a sip. The coffee was bitter, but I continued to drink it. I needed the caffeine boost to help keep my mind sharp.

"It is," Julian said. He tilted his head. "But it's not the only thing bothering you."

Curse him and his peak observational skills.

Chapter 0613

"You worried about going home?" Julian asked.

"A little," I admitted. "I'm not sure what the people will think when they see where I come from."

Julian shrugged nonchalantly. "They like you in part because of your humble origins, Piper. You have nothing to worry about."

If only it was that simple. "Not everyone likes me."

He continued to smile but it did not meet his eyes, which sharpened as they peered at me. I was being observed, like a bug under a microscope. I was afraid of what he might see.

I decided to just tell the truth before Julian could start making more observations. I wanted to keep some secrets to myself, thank you very much. Julian had a way of seeing straight through me.

"The King says Bridget and I have split the popular vote 50/50," I said.

"You spoke with my father?"

"He summoned me."

Julian sighed and his smile finally faded. I immediately missed the comfort it brought. "Let me guess. He wants you to back out of the competition."

I wasn't shocked anymore, when Julian made the correct assumptions. "Yes. And to give Bridget my full support, to help unify the nation in case of war."

Julian laughed once, bitterly. "No pressure though, right?" He shook his head as he poured a second cup of coffee for himself. "My parents really need to learn to butt out."

"The King made some good points..." It pained me to admit that, but if he hadn't, I wouldn't still be considering his suggestion.

"Piper." Julian looked at me flatly. "Do you really believe that Bridget would be a good Luna?"

Nicholas had asked me something similar. My answer was the same.

"No."

*Then stop worrying about what my parents think is right, and do what you want."

He downed half of his coffee in one go. Then he set it aside. With his hands free, he placed them on my shoulders.

*Go back to your home and remember what everyday life is like. This place... this power... it's so easy to get caught up in it all and forget who you really are, and what you bring to this competition."

"But I was only brought here in the first place for a PR stunt."

"You stayed because you are you. You bring something no other candidate has, Piper. Certainly not Bridget. But only you can make the decision. Do you fight for people like you to have their voices heard? Or do you hand it all over to Bridget?"

I didn't like the sound of handing it over to Bridget.

"But is it the right thing to want to stay?" I asked him. "Or am I being selfish?"

Julian smiled, honestly this time. It twinkled in his eyes. "Piper. That you even ask that proves how very unselfish you are."

Julian was so sweet to me, so caring and supportive. I very nearly hugged him. I had my arms half-raised between us, in fact.

I stopped abruptly, when my gaze slid to the doorway and saw Nicholas standing there, watching. His face was a

blank slate. I couldn't read him at all.

I couldn't imagine he would be angry with me for hugging Julian, as we were friends. But knowing how Julian felt about me changed things. I didn't want to lead him on, as Bridget had. I wanted to be better than her.

So I kept my hands to myself.

"Nicholas is here, isn't he?" Julian asked. His smile turned sly, though I could see just the tiniest flash of hurt deep within his eyes.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

"Don't," Julian said. He shrugged. "You can't help who you love."

He stepped aside and cleared a path from me to Nicholas.

With a touch of regret in my heart, I began walking that path.

Chapter 0614

In the bedroom, Nicholas and Charlotte helped Elva and I pack our bags for our weekend homecoming trip. I pick out many subtle outfits for Elva and me. Back home, people would notice if we dressed too expensive. It might even have painted targets on our backs.

Elva, however, didn't understand. When she saw I was packing her plain shorts and tees, she crossed her arms, stuck out her bottom lip, and pouted, "I want to be princess."

"You are a princess, honey," I told her. "You don't need fancy clothes for that."

Elva frowned deeper. "It's not the same."

"It is." Nicholas lowered himself down onto one knee so that he could look Elva in the eye.

Elva glanced up at him through her eyelashes. She seemed sadder than anything and it broke my heart. I wanted Elva to have the things she wanted, but it was just too dangerous. We weren't from the best part of town. If we wore fancy clothes around, we would be robbed at worst.

At best, we just wouldn't fit in.

"Elva," Nicholas said. He placed his hand on her little shoulder. She always looked at him like he hung the sun in the sky, and now was no different. "What makes you a princess is not what you wear. It's what's on the inside that counts."

Elva glanced down at herself. "But I'm just a girl..."

"You are a girl with a very special ability," Nicholas said.

"What?" Elva asked.

Nicholas smiled at her so kindly my chest ached. "You have a big heart. Carry that with you, feed it and protect it, and you never need the fancy dresses to show you are a princess."

Elva's mood shifted somewhat, lightening. She smiled.

As Nicholas started to stand, Elva added, "I will still get to wear dresses though... right?" Softer, she said, "I like the dresses."

Nicholas laughed, just a little. A rare sound from him, I wished I could bottle it and listen to it again and again, whenever I was sad.

"When you return to the palace, you can wear all the dresses you want," he said. He glanced at me. "If it's okay with your mom, of course."

Elva turned her doe eyes on me in a flash. As if I would deny her.

"Of course," I said.

"Yay!" Elva cheered.

Charlotte chuckled from the door to the closet. She was holding a few outfits. She smiled as she brought them to the two suitcases on the bed.

"Are you sure you won't need more than this?" she asked. Even knowing my background, she seemed uncertain with my choices.

I supposed I could understand why. I imagined all the other candidates dressed fancy and formally at their own mansions and estates. But those candidates weren't going to a two-bedroom apartment in a bad part of town like Elva and I were.

"I'm sure," I told Charlotte. She nodded without further pressing and carefully folded the chosen clothes. As I went to help her, Elva tugged on Nicholas's sleeve.

"Will you come with us, Nick-lass?" she asked.

The question was genuine, with hope in her eyes.

Nicholas patted her head. "I wish I could, princess. But it's against the rules for me to stay."

"Oh," Elva deflated.

"But," he said, and she perked back up. "I will make the trip with you and your mom, and then be there when time is up to bring you back here again. How does that sound?"

"Great!" Elva said.

"Good," Nicholas said. He glanced up at me. "How does that sound, Piper?"

Now, it was my turn to smile, grateful for the gesture. It would help, knowing that he would be there in a few days to rescue us again.

I knew I needed to think in better terms of my home. That very soon, very likely, I would be living there again permanently.

But it was difficult to imagine a future now without Nicholas.

I knew that was going to make everything hurt worse when I was ultimately dismissed but I couldn't help it. Nicholas noticed my shift of mood. Leaving Elva to her toys, he walked closer to me. He gently traced his hand down the length of my arm and then kissed me lightly on the lips.

"It's going to be okay," he whispered. "I will be there to bring you back. I promise."

I could believe him. I didn't know how to properly convey that it wasn't this trip I was worried about.

He was so kind to worry, so sweet to care so much. I didn't want to ruin the moment with my fears, so I kept them to myself.

A servant carried our luggage out to the car, despite my many failed attempts to offer to do it myself. Nicholas would likely offer himself, but he currently held Elva in his arms. She was quite clingy now that we were actually leaving.

I understood the sentiment. I didn't want to leave him either.

When we reached our car, the servant piled the luggage into the trunk. We were only taking two bags so it didn't take long. Around us, many of the other candidates were bringing along several more bags. Lilliana was even bringing a folding wardrobe.

Nearby, Mark opened the backseat of a sedan for Susie to climb inside. They weren't touching but they looked at each other with such open longing, that it still felt intimate.

I hoped no one else noticed. Glancing around, it seemed as if most people were busy worrying about themselves.

With Elva in her booster seat, she patted the middle seat for Nicholas. He glanced at me and I nodded. Then he dipped into the backseat of the sedan and buckled himself in. I took the remaining seat, the one nearest the open door.

The sedan was spacious and luxurious, a town car. It had a partition dividing the back of the car from the front, but the divider was currently down so we could see the driver and the windshield.

The driver looked back at Nicholas, and Nicholas gave him the go-ahead. With that, the car veered forward and through the back window, we watched the palace get smaller and smaller until it was out of sight.

Nicholas held Elva's hand the entire way, while his other arm was wrapped around my shoulders.

"I can't wait to see Aunt Anna, Elva said. She kicked her hands as she looked out the window, watching the world pass by.

Nicholas lifted a brow looking at me.

"A dear friend," I explained to him. Not an actual aunt, I didn't need to say out loud.

He nodded.

"It will be nice to catch up with her," I said. And while this was true, and I did miss her terribly, I couldn't generate quite the same excitement level as Elva.

I wanted to see Anna desperately, no lie there. But I wished it had been, to bring her to the castle. Returning home like this.... As much as my brain tried to protect me from thinking overmuch about how this could be the future...

I couldn't help but worry.

It felt so much that Nicholas was taking me back to my previous life just to leave me there.

Chapter 0615

As the car entered the neighborhoods that I recognized, I grew more and more tense. Nicholas squeezed me tighter, likely trying to offer what comfort that he could. But there was little comfort to be had.

I didn't mind the smaller place. I didn't even mind the harsher lifestyle.

But I didn't want to do any of it anymore, without Nicholas

I would, of course, if forced to. I would give my all to raise Elva to the best of my ability, no matter the environment. And now that the Oracle had cured her of her curse, we didn't necessarily need to be at the palace, since Elva didn't need such intense medical care.

I wanted Nicholas, Elva, and I to be a family. Full stop. It didn't matter where.

Finally, the car came to a stop in front of our old apartment building. A camera crew was already set up outside, waiting. There, standing among them, chatting them all up, stood Anna. She looked much the same as when I had last seen her.

God, I missed her so much. I didn't even realize how much until this moment.

Nicholas cupped my face and lightly kissed me on the lips. The windows were tinted, the cameras wouldn't be able to see.

"I will see you soon," he said. His eyes were creased with worry, his mouth heavy with sadness.

I kissed him again, offering comfort as he tried to do for me. "Soon," I promised.

Nicholas nodded and turned to Elva. He kissed the top of her head.

I sucked in a sturdy breath, then exited the car. The cameras were immediately on me. The crew pushed Anna back behind them, even though she was the one Elva and I were here to

see.

I knew what was happening here. Likely under the King's orders, they wanted to catch me at my worst so the footage could be sliced to make me look like a real loser. Dr worse, a bitch.

I couldn't let that happen. So I committed to keep my best forward at all times. With my head raised high, I walked around the car and opened the door enough for Elva to hop out, while keeping Nicholas hidden. No one needed to know of Nicholas's favoritism but Elva and me. After Elva was out of the car, I closed the door. Then, holding her hand, we gently ushered through the camera crew until we were neared to Anna. Elva tugged on my hand, rushing us closer. Anna let out an excited shriek.

Then, at once, we all rushed toward each other and joined in a three-person hug. It was so nice to be reunited. God...

"I missed you," I said to Anna, who said the same to me.

"I missed you both so much," Anna said. She kissed my cheek and then the top of Elva's head. "It hasn't been the same without you."

The driver removed our bags and set them unceremoniously on the curb. If we lived in a place with servants, those servants would see to our bags. As it was, we were now left to our own devices. This, especially, I did not mind. I was no closer to being accustomed to having someone waiting on me hand and foot.

"Thank you!" I called to the driver as he returned to his driver's side. He nodded in acknowledgement, started the car, and then drove away.

When I turned back to Anna, I noticed something off. Now that our initial excited greeting had worn off, she was having trouble looking me in the eye.

"Anna?" I asked. "What is it?"

"Oh, well.." She looked down as she worried her bottom lip with her teeth. I recognized that as her embarrassed look.

"Did something happen?" I asked.

"Things have been tough, with the two of you gone," she said. "The royals were paying a stipend for a while, for me to keep your room open. But I don't know if the checks got lost or if they were stolen, but then just... stopped."

Anger scratched at my chest. Why would they stop paying Anna? I had to look into that as soon as I could.

"I'm sorry, Piper," Anna said. "But I had to get another roommate to make ends meet. They took over your old room. I'm so sorry!"

"We don't have our room?" Elva looked up at me for confirmation.

"It's going to be okay," I told her. To Anna, I said, "It's okay, Anna. We weren't here. You did what you needed to, to survive. Of course, that is okay."

Elva seemed worried. I squeezed her shoulder to show her it would be okay.

The only question I had was, "If the new roommate is in our room, where did you put our stuff?"

We hadn't taken everything with us, only a few necessities. We'd left the rest behind.

Anna led us into the apartment, though she assured us that the key still worked.

Our stuff, it seemed, three cardboard boxes stacked against the wall in the living room behind the television set.

The cameras came close to catch my reaction. Knowing they wanted me to get angry, I kept my face carefully schooled in indifference.

In truth, I was upset. Not because Anna had to move forward with her life, but because my entire life up until this point fit so perfectly into three cardboard boxes. That was it. Three boxes, the entirety of my existence.

I swallowed hard, pushing down the part of me that wanted to break a little, and looked at Anna. "Which one has Elva's toys?" I knew she would want to see those again.

Elva perked up right away.

Anna smiled too, relieved. "I'll show you."

The toys, thankfully, were in the top box. Together, Anna and I lowered it down to the floor and opened the flaps so Elva could scavenge inside. There were a few books on top. With those out of the way, underneath were all of Elva's toys and blankets and clothes.

She laughed as she pulled a stuffed frog from the box. "There you are, Mr. Frog! You were gone so long!"

Watching her, Anna and I sat on the nearby couch. The cameras were recording our every move, so we couldn't talk as candidly as I would have liked. I still wanted to catch up some.

"Honestly," Anna said after a few minutes of talking, "Not much has changed overall. Other than the new roommate. Life goes on more or less the same. I've enjoyed watching you on television, though. It looks like so much fun at the palace."

I wanted to tell her the truth, that there have been some ups but also some major downs. But

I can't get into talk of Jane or even badmouthing Bridget with the cameras watching.

"It is," I said, with a tight smile. Anna knew me well enough to know what that meant. I wanted to tell her the truth but couldn't. She glanced at the cameras, then back to me. She sighed and nodded, understanding.

"Well, there is one thing that I want you to see," Anna said, changing the subject.

"What's that?" I asked, looking around.

"You will need to dress up for it," Anna said.

"Dress up?" Elva asked.

"I want to take you somewhere, but you can't be recognized." Anna smiled at me, mischievous with her secrets.

I narrowed my eyes in suspicion. "Where?"

Elva and I dressed in our frumpiest clothes. Elva wore a hat with covers that went down over the ears. I tied my hair up and wore one of Anna's wigs. It was darker than my own hair color, with bangs that hid most of my face.

I barely recognized myself in the mirror. I doubted anyone else would be able to.

Dressed in our disguises, Anna led us toward a familiar restaurant - the one I used to work at. I side-eyed her as we walked.

"I really don't know about this," I said.

I knew this event wasn't being broadcast live. They had yet to even air the idea about the homecoming, so as to garner the biggest surprise, and the biggest reaction, of the unsuspecting being visited.

Even now, after Anna had revealed her plan, the camera crew asked for time to get to the restaurant first and develop a type of cover story for their presence. That way, the spotlight would not be shone on our mysterious arrival and identities.

The cover story? The camera crews were just trying to interview people about Piper at the restaurant where she used to work.

When we entered the restaurant, people were in a long line to talk to the camera crews. They didn't notice our entrance at all, nor the second camera that was trained on us the moment we entered. The cover story and distraction appeared to be working.

Most of the tables were full, but we found a free booth nearer the kitchen.

"I've never seen the place this full," I said. "Well, except during the lunch and dinner rushes." It was late now, just after dinner. There shouldn't be so many people.

"It's always like this now," Anna said. "Especially on nights where the competition is on TV,"

I didn't understand. "Why?"

Anna smiled slyly. "Listen to some of those interviews, and you'll get it."

I was confused, but did as she said, turning my attention to where the producer was interviewing some restaurant patrons.

"I come here once a week," the woman currently being interviewed was saying, "Sometimes more, if I can scrounge the money together. Anything to be here, where Piper worked and lived. She's going to be our next Queen, you know?"

"You support Piper, then?" the producer asked.

"Of course!" The woman scoffed, like she was insulted by the idea that she could be supporting anyone else. "Everyone who comes here does. She's our girl, for sure!"

A round of cheers went up around the dining room.

I heard what the woman said and I still struggled to believe. Everyone was here in support of me?

"This has become something of a fan club home base for you," Anna said. "Everyone here is your supporter."

The waitress came. She recognized Anna but didn't know who I was. She must have started after I left, because I didn't recognize her either. She brought a coloring book and crayons for Elva, took our order, and left.

I exhaled in relief when the encounter was done. Elva busied herself with her crayons, not seeming to pay anyone else any mind.

"You won't find anyone here who doesn't fully support Piper," said the man being interviewed now. "The only argument you'll find around here is whether or not she should select Prince Nicholas or Prince Julian to be her husband!"

At once, some rabble began, half the room uttering Nicholas's name, while the other half spoke Julian's. This, it seemed, was a point of contention among the regulars and newbies alike.

Anna lowered her voice. "Prince Nicholas has my bet," she said with a wink.

This entire endeavor was still difficult for me to wrap my mind around. On one hand, I already knew through Charlotte and others that I was popular in the competition. But it was very different to be told you were popular and to actually be in a room full of people adamantly supporting you.

It felt... surreal. Like I was living someone else's life right now.

The producer slowly regained control of the room again. To the man, he asked, "What would you do if Piper dropped out of the competition?"

"Dropped out?" the man said with disbelief. "Why in the world would she do that?"

The producer tilted his head. "Some might say that she doesn't have the proper experience to be a Queen..."

"Bullshit!" the man bellowed. Others chimed in their discontent as well. "Piper would be the best queen. She's the only one over there who knows anything about what life's really like. She wasn't raised with some silver spoon, with servants waiting on her every whim. She's a real person."

"She's one of us!" someone else added.

"That's right," said the man. "She knows what it's like to struggle. She can actually advocate for us over there in that perfect golden palace."

Something warm filled me, listening to his words. Susie had said something similar.

I didn't want to let any of them down. They all put so much stock in me. What if I couldn't live

up to it?

Surely someone else would be a safer choice.

Someone other than Bridget.

I sighed. Gods, there was no good answer to my predicament.

Much later, after we returned home and it became late, the camera crews left us for the night. Elva fell asleep. And Anna and I could finally speak privately.

I told Anna the abridged version of what happened, leaving out none of it, not even about Jane, or the oracle, or Bridget's terribleness. An hour or two later, I wrapped up by telling her about the King's demand that I back away from the competition and throw my support behind Bridget.

For the sake of the kingdom, he had said.

"Piper," Anna replied. She was speechless for a long moment. It was a lot to take in. "You can't actually be considering backing out? And for someone as terrible as Bridget?"

"I don't want the country to lose the war because of my selfishness." Anna considered my words. She shook her head. "It would be more selfish to turn your back on everyone now. You saw those people at the diner. You really think they would be willing to shift their support to Bridget? They'd know you were being coerced. It'd just make everything worse."

Maybe. I had to admit their words were compelling. But... I couldn't be responsible for losing the war. If the King really thought it would help..

"You are running," Anna said.

I blinked, startled. I looked up at her. "Running?"

"Things are tough, and you are hiding," Anna said. "You've run from your destiny for so long,

you don't know how to stop."

"What are you talking about?"

"You, Piper." Anna sighed. "You gave up your life to support Elva. I'm not judging you. But now, you have a chance to return to the path of greatness and you are shirking from it. You've given up for so long. I'm not sure you know how not to."

Anna met my eyes again. Hers burned with a determination I wasn't certain I'd ever seen in

her before.

"You have always been destined for greatness, Piper. I've known that since the moment we

met. You can't turn your back on it anymore. You can't give up. You can't hide. You have to

face the threat of failure and you have to overcome it."

"Anna..."

"You need to be queen, Piper."

Chapter 0617

Anna's words stayed with me all through the night. I was haunted by them, even as I eventually drifted off to sleep on the air mattress.

Was I truly considering the King's demand because I wanted what was best for the country? Or was I simply hiding, pushing off responsibility to return to a life of normalcy?

Bridget would make a lousy queen. I knew that.

Anyone would be a better choice.

Even... me?

Could I be queen?

I had labeled the idea as outlandish straight from the start, so much so that I barely considered it even when I tried to think critically about it.

I was constantly making excuses: I knew so little of politics. I knew so little of royalty. Everyone looked down on me. No one would take me seriously.

But these were just excuses, I was realizing now. Anna was right. I was running away.

I needed to do better. I needed to think about how I could actually contribute as a queen, and showcase those abilities. No more hiding. No more putting myself down.

If I wanted a family with Nicholas, I had to earn it.

The thoughts and worries stayed with me even when I woke up again. I had a dreamless sleep, though I felt rested. My body must have decided enough was enough and shut off my brain.

I was resolved to lie on the air mattress until Elva or Anna woke first, but a knock sounded on the door. It was soft at first, but with a growing urgency the longer no one answered.

I wasn't sure who it could be. It seemed too early for the camera crew, and Anna hadn't said she'd been expecting guests.

Crumbling, Anna emerged from her room and slunk herself toward the front door.

"I'm coming! I'm coming!" she shouted, when the knocking continued. "Someone better be dead, to get me up this early."

She unlocked and pulled open the door. The grumbling immediately ceased.

"Oh, shit," she said instead.

Worried now, I pulled myself out of bed. From the living room, I could easily see the front door. The apartment was still dark, with black out curtains hanging over the window, but the hallway light was on. So I could clearly see Nicholas standing in the doorway.

I rushed to stand up. I was self-conscious in my pajamas, but Nicholas had seen me at my worst. I tried not to worry as I hurried forward.

"Piper," Anna said as I came closer. "I think it's for you."

"Let him in, Anna," I teased. "Can't have a prince standing in the hallway. What will the neighbors think?"

Nicholas smiled when he saw me. "They'll surely think, there goes the neighborhood."

Anna backed up and invited Nicholas inside. I flipped on the kitchen light as he entered and we both went in there.

"I'll keep an eye on Elva..." Anna said. She was looking at Nicholas with wide eyes. I can't imagine she ever expected to have an actual prince on her doorstep. "So you two can talk. "Thanks," I said.

Nicholas nodded. "It's a pleasure to meet you..."

"Anna," I told him, when Anna just looked at him wide-eyed.

"Anna," he finished with a smile.

Anna immediately began to giggle, like it was an impulse, or a reflex.

Nicholas grinned wider, pleased with himself.

Anna backed out of the room. "Yes... uh.. same!" She fled. "No one is ever going to believe me," she said when she was outside the door.

Alone now, Nicholas turned to me. "Piper," he said.

"I missed you," I said at once, my own reflex. I couldn't help myself. It had been less than a day, but his absence had been noted. His presence had been missed. I hated that I couldn't call for him if I needed him.

We'd only been apart a short time, but he had been so far away.

It was reassuring having him near. It calmed some part of myself, deep down, that felt strung out by the distance. That part of me hummed happily now.

Nicholas held open his arms for me and I immediately went within them. He closed his arms around me and I felt like home again.

We stood like that for a very long moment. Out in the living room, I heard Anna waking Elva and shuffling around, cleaning no doubt. She'd worry about having a royal in her apartment.

I kind of worried about it too. What must Nicholas think, being in my former home? It was smaller than anything he was used too. It even seemed smaller to me than it had been before, having lived in the palace for so long.

Undoubtedly, he had questions. I braced myself for his judgement as we pulled back.

Whatever harshness I had expected to see in his eyes was not there. Honestly, I should have known better. Nicholas had never been the judgmental type. He was the kind of guy who worried about everyone, and helped out at the orphanage in his spare time.

As he gazed around this place that I used to live, he seemed more curious than critical.

"Will you give me the tour?" he asked.

I looked around. "This... is the kitchen." It was small, but it had all of the major amenities. Stove, fridge, oven, coffee pot. Not much to report on there.

When I led him out into the living room, we could hear Elva and Anna talking in Anna's room. Elva was asking Anna if she was a princess.

Nicholas glanced around the living room with interest. His gaze snagged on the boxes in the corner. "What are those?"

I shrugged. "That's my whole life."

Nicholas looked at me sideways.

I quickly explained. "Anna had to get a new roommate. Which, I need to talk to you about that later. But, with the new roommate, Anna had to pack up all me and Elva's stuff. This is... it." Nicholas walked closer to one of the boxes, the one that had held Elva's toys. He spotted one of the books that had been on top, that was now set to the side.

He lifted it. My heart dropped. I hadn't noticed before. It was our yearbook from when we had been at the Academy - when we'd been in love.

As he opened it, a loose photo fell out of the book and fluttered to the ground. Coming closer, I grabbed it and we looked at it together.

It was a photo of us from back then, smiling as we tilted our heads toward each other.

We both looked so happy back then. Peaceful.

"This was my favorite picture of us," I said, dipping my head to hide my embarrassment. "I never could part with it."

"I loved your smile," Nicholas said, looking at the photo. "It was the first thing about you that drew me in."

"Oh?"

He smiled. "You were so pretty back then... Though nothing compares to the beauty of the woman you are now."

"Nick..."

Nicholas set the yearbook aside and stepped closer to me.

"I know I shouldn't be here," he said. "I tried to stay away. But I couldn't hold myself back from seeing you. I'm drawn to you, Piper. Like we're connected to a single thread. It hurts me to be too far from you."

He felt the same as I, then. That things weren't quite right without the other.

Nicholas cupped my face in his hands and leaned down and kissed me.

Nearby, a door opened.

Chapter 0618

Nicholas's lips were soft. His touch light, a barely there caress, as he held my face so near to his own.

I didn't register the sound of a door opening at first, so fully engrossed as I was with the man in front of me. It wasn't until I fluttered my eyes open and saw a figure walking past, that I startled into wakefulness.

It was a girl I didn't recognize, wearing an oversized hoodie and shorts. She had wireless headphones over her ears with the music blasting. She must have been the new roommate because my old bedroom door was opened.

I held my breath, expecting some kind of reaction to seeing a prince and a woman she probably didn't know kissing in her living room, but the girl seemed totally unfazed.

She walked into the kitchen, retrieved a drink from the fridge, and then walked straight back into the bedroom without looking at us sideways.

Nicholas and I were in a frozen state of surprise, only broken once the girl closed her door. Then we looked at each other.

We were both confused and surprised. The romantic mood, however, was broken. Nicholas lowered his arms to my waist and kept them there, keeping me closer than too far apart.

"We should get Elva and Anna out here," Nicholas said. "I would like to spend more time with them."

I lifted a suspicious brow. "Why?"

Nicholas smiled. "I want to hear all the details of your life."

"They aren't all pretty..." I reminded him.

He shook his head. "It doesn't matter. I want to know everything about you, the good and the bad."

He was so sweet, I couldn't resist pressing myself up onto my tiptoes and kissing him one more time. Briefly, this time, so that we would not be interrupted. Then, I lowered myself back down.

"Elva will be happy to see you," I said. "Elva! Anna!"

They stumbled out of the other room so fast, it was as if they had been listening at the keyhole. Anna, I imagined, had been doing just that. Elva probably mimicked her without realizing what exactly they had been doing.

My cheeks burned red. "Anna..."

She shrugged, showing only a limited amount of shame. "I'm not the one kissing a prince in the living room!"

Elva gasped. "They were kissing?!"

I gave Anna a hard look. This time she did look apologetic. Sorry, she mouthed.

I sighed.

Fortunately Nicholas's very presence was enough to distract Elva from any further thoughts about why Nicholas and I might have been kissing.

Elva rushed to Nicholas for a hug. "Why are you here?" she asked, looking up at him.

"I wanted to make sure you and your mom were okay," Nicholas explained.

That seemed reasonable to Elva, who nodded.

Nicholas's presence was just as much of a surprise to the camera crew. The producer paled fiercely when he stormed into the apartment, ready to throw out orders about lighting and placement and what Anna and I should talk about, only to see Nicholas sitting on the couch.

"I'd rather not be recorded as being here," Nicholas said. "If you didn't mind, we should keep my presence a secret."

"Uh... yes, your Highness," the producer said. They'd met before. The producer had been around. But something about Prince Nicholas's presence this time seemed to upset him. Maybe because now he couldn't just do whatever he wanted, treat us however he wanted without ramifications.

It was a sad fact of life that people in power would want to treat those of us without this way. We shouldn't have needed Nicholas around to have some agency. Still, I was grateful for his presence. Now I wouldn't have to be so on-guard that the camera crew might try to capture my every bad moment.

Over the course of the day, interviews were given, as well as a few shots of Elva playing with her toys, and Anna and I hugging. Nicholas had to hide for each of them.

Once, when I knew he was hiding in the kitchen, I sneaked in there to find him. He was leaning against the counter, a carefree smirk on his lips. He had a devilish look that didn't full suit him.

"Why, Nicholas," I said, careful to keep my voice low. "Why in the world would you look at me like that?"

"Why do you think?" he teased. I sneaked closer then, and he smiled as, after checking no one was locking, leaned in and kissed me.

It was as strange in the living room as it was here in the kitchen. Never in my wildest dreams would I have thought I'd have Nicholas here in my modern life. When I had left him at the Academy, I had thought I'd never seen him again.

Yet here he was, even as a prince, sneaking secret kisses to me behind the backs of the cameras.

The kiss didn't last long. It couldn't, really, with the dangers lurking so near. We couldn't risk the cameras catching us together.

Nicholas kissed his way to my ear.

"I can't wait until I get you back to the palace," I lightly swatted his arm.

Then I leaned back to look at him. "You came all this way..."

"I told you," he said. "I couldn't stay away. I had to be close to you."

I didn't want to dare hope, but... the inability to stay away from each other for long periods

was a feature of the mating bond.

But surely... I couldn't dare wish that Nicholas, a prince, would actually be developing a mating bond with me.

"Piper!" the producer called, and too soon I was called out of the comfort of Nicholas's arms

and the warm fuzziness of my thoughts.

"Go," Nicholas said and kissed my cheek. "I'll never be too far."

When it came time to say goodbye, Anna had warmed up to Nicholas some. They shook hands, and she told him, "Please take care of her for me."

"I promise," Nicholas said.

"I'm right here," I reminded them. "I'm capable of taking care of myself."

"It doesn't hurt to have someone looking out for you," Anna said. "Especially when that someone is a prince."

The cameramen then waited for Nicholas to leave. Once he was gone, the producer indicated it was time for me to say goodbye to Anna myself.

Anna and I hugged. She turned into me, and keeping her voice low, whispered so the cameras could not hear. "When you are queen someday, don't forget about us little people you left behind."

I would never leave Anna behind. Especially if I, as Queen, had the means to bring her with me.

She knew that, so she grinned at me.

"I know you'll make the right decision," she said to me, but didn't clarify further. Did she mean with Nicholas? Or with the King's demand?

Maybe she meant both.

"I won't disappoint you," I said.

Her smile softened. "You couldn't, no matter what you do."

But we both knew that wasn't true. If I walked away, if I hid, as Anna called it, I don't think she'd ever forgive me.

She'd certainly never let me live it down.

"I mean it," I said.

Her grin widened. "Alright." She was pleased.

Now I just had to live up to my words.

Chapter 0619

On the ride back, my thoughts were buzzing. Everything I learned this trip, combined with the things Susie told me before I left, mixed with my own wants and desires, filled my heart with hopes and worries both.

I needed time to sit with these thoughts, sort through them all, and determine what I should do with them. I was leaning toward action. Towards turning down the King's request and standing up for myself, and for the kingdom that deserved a better queen than Bridget.

But to be so bold was a struggle. If I was wrong, it could cost many lives. If the King was wrong, lives would still be forfeit.

It remained a difficult choice. I wished I could speak to Nicholas about it, but I didn't dare with Elva sitting on the other side of him in the car.

Besides, I wasn't sure where I would begin. Nicholas was even more entangled in this decision than I was. While I was certain he didn't want to be married to Bridget, I didn't want to assume that he would rather be tied down to me.

Ug! I didn't know! It was all so confusing.

Regardless of my choice, I didn't want to tell him until I was sure of it. I absolutely did not want to make life more difficult for him.

Nicholas sneaked me a sideways glance as we journeyed in the car.

Catching my eye, he lifted a brow, as if asking me, You alright?

I nodded.

He didn't seem to believe me. He reached his hand toward mine and laced our fingers together.

The action gave me comfort and I closed my eyes.

I cared so deeply for Nicholas. I wanted to make the correct choice.

The person I needed to talk to most, to bounce my thoughts around with, was Susie. I needed my best friend.

Returning the palace, I couldn't wait to talk to Susie. I went with Elva to our bedroom and helped her settle down for a nap. When Elva was resting soundly, I left her in the care of Charlotte and the nanny and left the room.

Once I was in the hallway, I rushed toward Susie's room. The door was closed. That was not all that unusual. I knocked on the door as I pushed it open.

Mark stood inside, near the desk. I quickly glanced, but he was the only one in the room.

Some of Susie's things were gone. It was almost as if she still hadn't returned from her trip, but that couldn't be. I had been told I was the last to arrive.

When Mark looked at me, I could see the worry in his eyes.

"Have you heard from her?" he asked me, which was just what I had been about to ask him. I shook my head. "I take it, you haven't either?"

Mark dropped his gaze down to the desk again. Sitting atop it were the paper and pens Susie used to write her letters. She also kept a diary. That was missing too.

"I haven't heard from her since before she left for home," Mark said.

Oh, that didn't bode well.

No, I couldn't give into panic. It was too early in Susie's pregnancy for her to show. Her family shouldn't have any idea she was pregnant. They shouldn't have any reason to keep her from returning

"I'm sure she's fine," I said, to lift both our spirits.

"Yes," Mark agreed, though his heart didn't seem to be in it. His gaze stayed lowered on the floor.

Elva awoke from her nap around lunchtime, and together, we went down to the dining room for lunch. The room felt empty without Susie, but I kept our usual seating regardless. I sat across from Veronica and Tiffany, with Jessica nearby. Lilliana, Olivia, and Bridget sat at the far end of the table.

"You can't blame them," Bridget was saying loudly. "With a scandal like that, of course they want to keep the entire family at home. What sort of shame she would face coming back here, even if she isn't the one who's pregnant."

I sat so quickly, I nearly toppled my chair.

"Who?" I asked.

Bridget looked at me, surprised. As did everyone else at the table. After everything that happened, I'd seemed to make it my personal job not to talk to Bridget. I ignored her as much as I good.

Even Bridget seemed to understand the need for distance. She didn't push me into conversation. She'd been keeping just as much distance from me, lately.

Ever the talented actress, Bridget recovered from her surprise quicker than the rest. "Susie, of course. Didn't you hear? it's a huge scandal. It's all anyone is talking about."

She was purposefully being obtuse to build up suspense. I didn't have time for that. I looked to Veronica for explanation. It was Tiffany who answered.

"Someone in Susie's family is having a child out of wedlock," Tiffany said.

"No one actually believes its Susie, Olivia said, side-eying Bridget. "She's far too quiet."

"It's always the quiet ones," Bridget said.

No one else seemed to believe her.

Lilliana shook her head. "It's disgraceful to talk about such things so openly."

Tiffany continued, "Her family won't let her come back because of the scandal. They think Susie even being here would only bring attention to them. At least, that's what the rumors say."

"And they're right," Bridget said. "She would bring attention to her family by continuing to be here. Surely someone would ask questions, and the poor, quiet girl wouldn't know how to answer them."

At the same moment, I glanced toward the door and saw Mark storming past. Had he overheard? I'd never seen him as angry as I had in that flash of his face walking in front of the doorway.

"Elva, stay with Veronica," I said. Veronica nodded, and Elva agreed.

I hopped to my feet and hurried out the door to speak to Mark. As one of the few in on the secret, I knew I was one of the few who could help calm him down.

Mark was moving quickly. I had to race to keep up.

I almost called for him to stop, but then I saw who he was rushing to speak with. Nicholas stood at the end of the hallway. He stopped as Mark approached. I continued to close the distance, so I was near enough to hear Mark's words.

"I need to request time off," Mark said.

Nicholas lifted a brow. "Of course. But slow down a little. What's wrong? What happened?"

Nicholas hadn't heard the gossip then.

"Mark," I said, making my presence known. "She wouldn't want you to do anything rash. We have to think about this clearly."

"I am thinking clearly," Mark said to me. "I am thinking more clearly now than I ever have in my entire life."

Nicholas still didn't understand. He looked to me for answers.

"Susie didn't come back," I said. "The gossip says that her family is keeping her from doing 50."

"They know about the baby," Mark said with such certainty.

"It's a rumor, Mark," I said, "Nothing more."

Mark shook his head. "They know and they are keeping her there."

Finally, understanding crossed Nicholas's features. He lowered his brow. "So when you request time off..."

"I'm going to get her and bring her back," Mark said.

Chapter 0620

"Mark," Nicholas said in his cool, authoritative tone. Mark lowered his head, deferring at once, even as his jaw stayed clenched. "What exactly is your plan?"

"I don't have one," Mark said. "Not beyond throwing myself at her parents' feet. But I will spirit her away if I must. If..." For the first time, his voice wavered. "If that's what she wishes..."

Even as her friend, I couldn't be sure what Susie would wish for. She loved Mark, of that I was certain, but what kind of life would they live on the run? Susie wouldn't care for herself. It's Mark she'd worry for. His reputation. His future.

"I made a mistake," Mark continued. "I foolishly let Susie believe that she and our unborn child aren't the most important things in the world to me. I let her stew in her confusion and unhappiness, when all I should have done was properly take responsibility for our child."

"That is your end goal here?" Nicholas asked.

I had so many questions of my own, but I left the actual asking of questions to Nicholas. As Mark's employer and alpha, he was the one with the power here. My worries were only in concern of Susie.

Nicholas seemed to be asking the questions I wanted to anyway. It was nice to be in such alignment with him.

"Yes," Mark said, "I recognize that having a family will interfere with my Beta duties. I know that I will be asked to resign-

"They will not let you in to see her," Nicholas said. He fully ignored Mark's previous words. "I will do whatever I have to -

"Not if you go alone," Nicholas said.

Mark ceased at once. He looked up at Nicholas with widening eyes. "Sir, you can't mean to..." "I do," Nicholas said.

My heart brimmed with warmth, as I recognized what Nicholas intended to do.

"We will go to retrieve Susie together," Nicholas said.

Hope filled Mark's eyes. It was rare for him to show so much emotion to anyone other than Susie. My heart went out to him.

"Thank you, Sir," he said.

Nicholas nodded. "And Piper, you must join us. A good friend of Susie's might be able to see her, even if they deny me audience."

"They wouldn't dare," Mark said.

"I'm sure they will personally attend me," Nicholas said. "But I am equally sure they will try to keep Susie away from me, if they do in fact, know the truth of her condition." He sighed. "We will have to be ready for all options."

"I would be more than willing to go," I said. "Susie is a dear friend. I want to help however can."

Nicholas nodded.

Mark gaze me a grateful glance. "Thank you."

"We'll go this evening." Nicholas said. "After dinner. We'll arrived unannounced so they cannot have enough time to move her."

Mark straightened. Now that there was a plan in motion, he seemed more confident, more determined. He had a direction and now he would follow through.

We made plans to meet at the front door after dinner.

"I will make the necessary arrangements at once," Mark said. Softer, he added, "While keeping the finer details under wraps."

"Very good," Nicholas said.

Mark gave Nicholas a courteous bow, then gave a shallower one to me. Then he disappeared down the hallway.

Nicholas turned to me and gave me a small smile. "The way you were chasing Mark... Did you intend to tackle him in the hallway?"

Nicholas was teasing me. It was nice to find a little humor, where we could.

"If that's what it took," I said, playing into it. I slowly grew serious again. "Susie would be furious with me if I let him do something rash."

Nicholas hummed. "Good thing he has us to watch out for him then."

I agreed. After everything Mark had done to keep me and Elva safe, the very least I could do in response was help protect him and Susie and their future together.

Thoughts of tonight's excursion kept me distracted though many conversations throughout the afternoon. Veronica and Tiffany understood, though they did cast a few worried glances at each other.

Elva kept asking me, "Mommy, what's wrong?"

"I'm okay," I assured her.

Eventually, we were alerted by a servant that Nathan was holding another meeting in the front sitting room.

Theld Elva's hand as we went with Veronica and Tiffany toward the room. We must have been the last to be informed, because the other candidates were already there and waiting.

Nathan didn't bother going on the stage this time. He just walked into the center of the room.

"Attention!" he called. None of us were really talking so it didn't take much for him to become the center focus of the room.

"I have spoken with the King," he continued. "It has been decided that we should no longer

push off the inevitable. The date has been set for the elimination ceremony."

Murmuring sounded around the room. When could it be?

"The date will be in two days' time," Nathan said.

That murmuring became sharp gasps instead. Everyone looked around.

"That quickly?" Tiffany gasped.

"What does that mean, Mommy?" Elva asked, tugging my sleeve. "Do we have to pack again?"

"Maybe," I told her. "We have to wait and hear the rules."

"I know this urgent scheduling may come as a surprise to some of you," Nathan said. "But with the current hardships facing the kingdom, surely you can all agree that a Queen and strong Luna is needed sooner rather than later."

The King was taking action, then. He was pushing my hand. Two days. That was all I had to make my choice. Do I fight to stay, possibly being eliminated in the ceremony and dividing the nation? Or do I back out of the competition, throwing my support behind Bridget for the

good of the kingdom?

Two days left to decide.

"The competition will occur as before. One candidate will be removed from each prince's consideration," Nicholas said. He nodded toward Jessica. "The ceremony will not include Prince Joyce, meaning you are safe for the moment, Jessica."

Jessica nodded. She smiled but tried to hide it.

She didn't know that Joyce was missing. That an elimination ceremony did not matter for him because he was unlikely to marry any of the candidates, even if he did return in time.

I wouldn't steal Jessica's happiness though. She'd discover the truth in time.

Beside me, Veronica frowned even deeper.

We were both worried for her.

But, Jessica and Joyce aside, I had my own concerns as well. If the elimination ceremony was to cut the count to two people per prince, where did I fit in?

At the last elimination ceremony, both Nicholas and Julian had chosen me. Did I belong to the Nicholas candidates now, or the Julian ones?

Maybe the King didn't feel the need to think that through, as he had for Jessica. After all, likely by his thinking, I would be gone before that kind of decision would matter.

He expected me to back out. That much was clear.

I just needed to decide what I wanted to do.