

# The Luna Choosing Game by Jane Above Story Chapter 71

Chapter 0071

I should have known better.

He stood from the bed. “There are many girls here who would make good Lunas. Olivia is perhaps the

strongest of the group.”

I don’t know what I had been expecting, but my stomach still twisted uncomfortably as he spoke

other girls.

“She’s beautiful and cunning. And she has a strong following in the public. Lilliana has the proper

demeanor. And then there’s –”

“Okay, that’s enough. I get the picture.”

Nicholas shrugged, as if to say, you asked.

I regretted that choice.

“Rest now,” Nicholas said. “I’ll send my physician to check on **you**.”

Without another word, he walked to the door and left me.

the

I was

so confused. His rescue had been daring. For a moment, I **had** almost convinced myself that he

still cared for me. But then when he had talked about those other girls...

Perhaps he only saved me out of a sense of duty.  
Maybe he would have done the same for any of the  
girls.

I pulled the covers over my head and groaned. The mixed messages were hard to decipher, and then, I

wasn't even certain what I wanted to be true.

Anna would be able to help me sort through it, but I had no way  
to talk to her. I hoped she was doing

okay. I had no idea how she was paying for my half of the rent with me gone.

She probably found another roommate. I wondered what they were like.

I **wished** I could call her, but that was impossible. Since my phone was confiscated on the first day **here**,

I had no way to communicate with the outside world.

Still, thinking **about** her and **her** steady comfort helped bring me some peace. I tried to imagine what she

**would** say if I could talk to her.

If you are so sure you are going to be eliminated – which, I'm not convinced of, by the way then you

should enjoy every second you are there. Eat that good food. Walk through those gardens. Flirt with those

The last of which, she would say with a wink.

Smiling at her imaginary antics, I drifted off to sleep.

With the doctor's help, and no shortness of luck, I was able to recover by the next day with little more

than a light cold. I had sniffles and a headache, but no fever. It felt like a miracle.

To keep Elva safe from my sickness, she was set up in another room for now with a permanent nanny.

Mark stayed by her side at all times, guarding her.

I wished I could see her, but I'd never dare chance passing my cold onto her. With her weakened

immune system, she would suffer a much worse sickness than me.

My slight illness could not keep me away from my other responsibilities of the game, however, and at

midday, I was called down to the parlor with the rest of the candidates for an announcement.

When I entered the room, the other girls all kept fair distance from me. I didn't mind. I felt too miserable

to deal with any of their dramas today. I really just wanted to go back to bed.

Only Susie came over to see me, though she stood a few feet off to avoid my germs.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm not nearly as bad as I should be." I said. "I'll be fine in a few days

"Good. Elva's been wanting you."

"I miss her too. But thank you for looking out for her."

Near the doorway, Nathan cleared his throat, claiming the attention of the room.

” will now begin with the announcements,” he declared. Everyone inched closer to hear. “In exactly one week from today, the first elimination will be held. This gives you only a few more chances to raise your ranking.”

The girls began to whisper, but Nathan cleared his throat again. He wasn’t done.

“During that elimination, the 9 lowest ranking girls will be sent home.”

His words startled me. 9?

Chapter 0072

“9?” someone gasped.

I agreed, that seemed like so many people to be eliminated all at once!

“9,” Nathan confirmed. “When you are eliminated, you are to pack your bags and immediately vacate the premises. There will be cars waiting to escort you home. There will be no arguments or reconsiderations.”

A rising mumble roused again, as the girls whispered to one another.

Many of them turned to look at me.

“The first one to go...”

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I tried to ignore them.

Soon, they stopped paying attention to me, and instead cast their dagger eyes at each other.

After Nathan’s announcement, many ‘accidents’ seemed to consistently happen amongst the

candidates.

Spilled drinks. “How clumsy of me.”

Tripping. “You should really watch your step.”

Torn dresses. “Didn’t you notice that nail sticking out there?”

It seemed that with the quickly approaching elimination, the girls had begun to turn on one another.

Olivia and Linda were the **most** vicious, though neither seemed to take any action themselves. Rather, they relied on their alliances to defend them and carry out acts of subterfuge. Yet it was clear who the

masterminds were.

Fortunately for me, no one took me seriously, and they didn't even bother hiding it.

One girl had been ready to ruin my dress with an opened lipstick case, until she realized it was me.

Sorry, Piper."

"It's fine." I was happy to be considered unimportant enough to be left alone.

The next night, a banquet was held. Yet before we had even sat down, the fighting between Olivia and Linda had reached a boiling point. Though they never **raised** their voices, their sniping at each other had

turned lethal.

"Is that a new dress, Linda? I'm sure I saw it on sale last season.

"Oh, Olivia, you must have trouble telling the decades apart, which would explain your hairstyle."

Olivia and Linda smiled tightly at each other.

Then, Olivia 'tripped' and spilled her red wine all down the front of Linda's mauve gown.

"Oops. How terribly clumsy of me." Olivia held out a tissue. "This might help.

Linda's face turned red. "Why, you!" She moved to slap Olivia, but Olivia ducked out of the way just in

time.

Unfortunately, I had been standing just behind her. That slap was now headed for me!

Yet before it could reach me, Nicholas caught Linda's wrist, stilling her. Her eyes went wide, her face

impossibly redder, all the way to the tips of her ears.

Nicholas was absolutely not impressed.

“You are embarrassing yourself,” he said, and threw her arm down.

Linda sputtered a moment, but never managed to form coherent words. Instead, she just stormed away,

out of the room.

A few of the girls made soft noises of excitement, and for good reason.

Linda was typically considered a front-runner, but here she was, losing her temper enough to be scolded

her time

by a prince. With this poor showing, she might drop far enough to be considered for elimination.

Nicholas looked at me. I was about to thank him for stopping that slap. It would have hurt something

fierce. But he spoke first.

“Be more aware of your surroundings.”

My gratitude shriveled on my tongue. Did he just imply being almost slapped was my own fault?

Thanks for the advice,” I said, snidely, making it clear I was not thankful – at all.

Nicholas narrowed his eyes at me.

Which was exactly when Julian cut in, stepping between us. “Piper, will you sit beside me tonight?”

If Nicholas had been glaring at me, he looked at Julian like he was trying to light him on fire.

1. uh. The sudden question made my head spin. I already sat across from Julian. Why would he ask

me to move closer?

But then he motioned to the chair I would be moving to. My previous spot had put me in direct line of

sight of the Luna

Where Julian wanted me to move would give me two chairs as a buffer. And one of those chairs would be filled by Julian himself, who could easily deflect any hostility from the Queen.

Julian smirked at Nicholas. "You don't have a problem with that, do you, brother?"

Nicholas tugged at his cuffs. "Why would I?"

"I don't know." Julian shrugged. "But if you glare at me any harder, you're likely to burn a hole in my

forehead."

Today's Bonus Offer

Chapter 0073

Nicholas did glare harder then, for a moment. When nothing happened, he turned away and made his

way to his own seat.

Lilliana was still seated beside him, though she didn't say a word as he sat down. If they didn't like each

other, why hadn't Nicholas asked someone else to sit there?

"Shall we, Piper?" Julian asked, a smug grin on his face.

We walked the two feet to our chairs. Julian held mine out for me, then helped push me in after I sat. He

took the chair beside mine.

Sitting like this, I couldn't even see the Queen unless I leaned forward, Relief washed over me.

I still wasn't feeling all the way better. I wasn't sure I would have had the energy to wade through royal

politics tonight.

At least, not the Queen's kind.

Julian was his own mess of royal riddles.

"I did try to talk her out of it," Julian whispered to me. "Your punishment, I mean. I went to take responsibility for the morning I stole you away, but she wouldn't hear of it."

I softly shook my head. "That was only one of the things I was punished for."

"A rule-breaker, huh?" He winked. "A girl after my own heart."

I rolled my eyes. "Be serious."

"Why?" he asked, deadpan. Then he straightened. "Don't look now, but Nicholas is glaring at me again."

I turned my head, and locked eyes with Nicholas, who was leaning improperly far over the table to look

at us.

"I told you not to look," Julian hissed from behind me.

Nicholas stared a moment longer, despite having been caught. Then his gaze shifted to the Queen.

Wait. He hadn't been worried about me being so close to the Queen, had he? But then why hadn't he

asked me to sit near him?

Unless Julian beat him to it.

No, that was impossible. Nicholas had made clear that he had many girls he admired here at this table.

Nicholas sat back in his chair, and I did too.

"He's such a sore loser," Julian said with a sharp laugh.

Before I could ask him more, the King touched his knife to his glass, creating a sharp ringing sound that

drew everyone's attention.

"We thank you all for joining us this evening," the King said, speaking mainly to the cameras. "As you

know, it is only a few more days until the first round of eliminations, and therefore you should be using

your time to improve your ranking."

He cast his gaze **around** the room but never focused on any one girl for **long**. He did, however, frown at



Linda's empty chair for a moment before continuing.

"You will have your chance at our next royal event. Tomorrow we will begin a three-day hunting event."

Oohs and ahs resounded around the table, some girls excited to show off their miscellaneous talents.

Many others seemed nervous, glancing around the room.

I used to have many skills that would have been beneficial during a hunting trip, but I hadn't practiced them in

years. I could still shoot a bow, it seemed, but I doubted other skills would return as naturally.

If they expected anything other than straight aim from me, I'd be in trouble

"Here at the palace, we hunt differently than hunters of modern day. We reached back to our roots, and

use our brotherhood with the wolves to help us."

I frowned. What did that mean?

"As such, each candidate will be paired with an actual wolf for this event."

Suddenly, the tension in the room dissipated, replaced by excitement.

"How rare!" said the girl beside me. "I've heard our inner wolves can connect with actual wolves. I'm

dying to see if it's true."

"It's true," Julian said, smiling wide. It only dimmed marginally when he looked at me. "Oh.. Well, I'm

sure they'll have an alternative for you, Piper."

I felt small and insignificant. Perhaps they had not considered me when they designed this challenge.

They didn't want to consider the alternatives...

Yet, even without looking, I could feel the cold eyes of the Luna upon me.

Chapter 0074

That night, my cold had healed enough that I could finally be reunited with Elva. I ran to her, and she ran to me. When she came close, I scooped her up into my arms and held her. Her arms came around my

neck and she held me right back.

“I missed you, Elva. So much.”

“I missed you, Mommy.

Mark and the nanny eventually joined us and I thanked them both profusely for watching my daughter.

Thank you!” Elva said. “Thanks, Uncle Mark!”

I blinked.

Uncle Mark?

I looked at him and he looked embarrassed.

“I didn’t teach her that, I swear. She started doing it all on her own.”

I had been surprised, but I supposed I shouldn’t have been. After all, it had been a similar sequence of

events that had led Elva to calling Anna, Auntie Anna.

“Don’t worry,” I told him. “Elva has a mind of her own about some things.”

Mark seemed relieved.

“Mommy,” Elva said. “Are we going to meet wolves tomorrow?”

“We?”” I looked to Mark for explanation.

“Prince Nicholas personally invited Miss Elva,” he said.

“It could be dangerous.” I didn’t have an inner wolf so couldn’t speak to the wolves like the others could.

I would have limited warning if a wolf was growing annoyed and might snap.

“Prince Nicholas is aware of your situation,” Mark said. “He’s asked me to relay to you that neither you

nor Elva have anything to fear.

“I want to meet the wolves, Mommy!”

Nicholas wouldn't purposefully endanger Elva. Of that, I was certain. If he said we would be safe, then

we would be safe.

“Okay.” I told her. “We'll go and meet the wolves tomorrow.”

“Yay!” Elva cheered.

Despite Nicholas's reassurances, my nerves continued to be heightened as I carried Elva out past the gardens and into the grassy fields beyond, where the wolves were lined up, ready to greet their partners.

“Down, please,” Elva said.

Slowly, I lowered her down. “Now don't run off. We have to hold hands.”

“I don't want to hold hands.” She stubbornly crossed her arms.

“Elva,” I said, stern.

“Mommy.” She mirrored my tone.

“You don't want to go back inside, do you?”

“No.” She pouted now.

I held out my hand and waggled my fingers. She sighed dramatically but finally took my

Together we walked across the field.

Nathan directed each girl to their assigned wolf as they approached. I was no exception.

hand.

The wolf he led us to was sitting politely on the grass. It watched us approach, then tilted its head

curiously.

“Hello, Mister Wolf!” Elva announced.

I held her back at a safe distance.

“Mommy, don't be rude.”

“Hello, Mister Wolf,” I said with much less excitement.

Around us, the other girls were flourishing with their wolves, talking **as** if having a full conversation. Only

a few were too impatient, and earned a growl. Nathan made **note** whenever that happened, likely lowering

the score of those girls

My wolf laid down in the grass. It blinked slowly, like it was bored.

I **had** to make a good impression or I wouldn’t last long.

Keeping Elva safely behind **me**, I inched closer to my wolf. I held out my hand for the wolf to sniff.

“I’m sorry.” I told it earnestly. “I lost my inner wolf a while ago. I can’t communicate with you

others.”

like the

I had no idea if it could understand me, but it made me feel better to talk. At the very least, it seemed to

calm my own nerves.

The wolf looked at me a moment, before focusing on my hand. Then it leaned forward and sniffed.

Pride shot through me. It was a small victory, compared to everyone else. But for a wolf—less like me, this was a huge step forward.

After sniffing me, the wolf looked away again, disinterested. I supposed that was better than anger.

Today’s Bonus

Chapter 0075

“Mommy, look at Susie!”

Further down the line, Susie had become something of a spectacle, engaging with her wolf far better

than she ever had with humans. And the wolf seemed to adore her, bouncing playfully. Even other girls'

wolves had come closer to her, curious.

I watched her for a while as she gently spoke with the wolves, then pet them as they let her.

Susie eventually noticed me looking and waved.

During a break, Susie excused herself from her pack and came over to us. "How is it going?"

I gave her a sad kind of smile. "Okay, considering." I glanced at my wolf, who lazed in the grass, then

back to Susie. "Susie, can you ask my wolf their name?"

Her eyes lit up with excitement. "Of course!" She approached my wolf calmly, who raised its head. She

didn't say much. Mostly she just closed her eyes, like she was speaking inside of her mind, or maybe her

heart.

I remembered what it felt like to have a wolf. That strong inner presence had given me confidence and

courage on many occasions. I did my best to mimic what I had once been, but I felt the hole inside of me

as vividly as if a physical piece of me had been carved away.

"She said that you can call her Silver," Susie said, stepping back from the wolf.

Silver, a beautiful name for the large gray wolf with vibrant blue eyes.

Rosie leaned closer to me. "Give her some time. She's not unsympathetic to your situation, just

disappointed. She wanted to be able to bond with you like the others..."

"I understand." I looked down at Silver. "I would have liked to bond, too."

Across the field, the three princes greeted their own wolves. They were larger than all the rest, and

seemed to have adopted their paired princes' personalities.

Joyce's sat near his side, tipping his head against Joyce's leg. Julian's dipped into a playful pose, its

tongue lolling out. Nicholas's stood regally at **his right side**, moving as he moved, though neither ahead

nor behind. An equal.

Nicholas and his wolf came toward us then, Elva **tugged** at my hand.

I gave Nicholas an uncertain look.

"It's safe," he assured me.

I released Elva's hand and she bound forward. She was shorter than the wolf, and had to look up at it.

"Hi, Mister Wolf!" she said excitedly. She paused a moment. "Oh. I'm sorry. Hi, Mister Night."

Mister... Night?

Concerned, I turned to Nicholas, but he was watching the pair, a hint of awe in his eyes.

"Your daughter is talking to the wolf," Nicholas said "Such promising abilities in one so young."

Dread curled in the pit of my stomach. "You mean.. the wolf's name is Night?"

"Yes."

A fitting name for a wolf with a pitch black coat.

Elva giggled, like the wolf had told a joke. The wolf stepped forward and licked Elva's cheek. She giggled

harder.

Nicholas smiled a little. "Night is fond of her."

That pleased me as well. Of course, I was proud of my little girl and her immense talent.

But with that pride also came fear.

Julian had warned me of this. For a girl her age to show such talent, she would surely become a target of the underground market, just as I had. No, worse than me.

**They** had snared me when I was almost an adult. Elva was just a child, barely older than a baby. She

wouldn't stand a chance against them.

Nicholas faced me and the good humor disappeared from his face. "You're pale."

How could I explain to him the potential dangers, when he didn't even know my secrets? Would the same people that came for my inner wolf come for Elva's as **well**?

Today's Bonus Offer

Chapter 0076

I worried about Elva all day, about her abilities and the dangers that those might bring. I was so

distracted with my thoughts that I didn't notice Elva was beginning to not feel well until she took my hand and I felt how clammy her palms were.

"Are you not feeling well, Elva?" I pressed the back of my hand to her forehead. She was **burning** up. \* Why didn't you say anything?"

"You get sad," Elva said.

She was such a considerate child, trying to protect me. But my whole heart broke, knowing she didn't

feel like she could depend on me.

"I love you, honey, but you have to tell me right away when you don't feel good, okay?" I scooped her into

my arms.

The day's events had ended. We were on our way back to our room anyway. Now, carrying Elva, I rushed

there as fast as I could.

Mark caught sight of me right away. "What's wrong?"

“Send for the doctor, please. Elva has a fever.” I tried to keep the fear from cracking my voice but it s

made it wobble uncertainly.

Mark glanced at Elva and his face went rigid. “Right away.” He waved for one of the two guards at my

door.

Trusting him to take **care** of it, I entered the room **and** lowered Elva down **onto** the bed. With the quiet maid’s help, we changed her into her pajamas and got her comfortable under the covers.

I didn’t know what to do, other than what I always did: stay by her side, wait for the doctor, and pray.

The **hunting** event was supposed to last for two more days. Tomorrow was the most vital – the hunt

itself. if I missed it, I would lose what little ranking I had. I had almost no **hope** I would be able to stay in

the competition anyway, but now, with Elva sick again....

**She** needed diligent care. The kind we’d never have back in our small apartment with Anna.

I had to put in more effort. I had to try to survive the elimination. What if she didn’t recover this time?

**What** if she needed twenty-four hour care?

couldn’t lose. I couldn’t

Nor could I leave her side, however, especially long enough to disappear on a hunt. What if **she** needed

me?

There was **only** one thing I could do. It was desperate and reckless, but for Elva’s sake, I would try

anything.

Mark returned with Asher’s personal physician. As she began to inspect Elva, I pulled Mark aside.



“Please tell me where I can find the royal family.”

His brows were lowered in concern, but he still lifted one at my question. “What do you intend to do?”

“Beg,” I said.

Mark explained to me that on non-banquet days, the royal family took their meals in the dining room

early, so as to be alone before the girls were to dine.

The guards outside the door of the dining room did not look at all pleased to see me, but I held my

ground.

“I humbly request to speak with the royal family.

Their eyes narrowed.

“It’s important,” I insisted.

“Is that Piper I hear?” Julian called from within the room. “Let her pass.”

The guards seemed unhappy with the demand but still stepped to the side, allowing me through.

Inside **the** dining room, Julian lifted his wine glass in greeting, a big smile on his face. I knew he’d likely

only let me inside for the spectacle of it.

No one else at the table looked at all so eager to see me. The Luna, especially, glowered. The King

seemed mostly bored. Nicholas’s expression was impassive. Joyce was reading a book on the table. He

didn’t once lift his gaze.

“Now that I was here, with most of them looking at me, my nerves heightened and I lost my voice a

moment.

The King cleared his throat. “What was so urgent, Piper?”

My apologies.. so many apologies for Interrupting you. But,

Chapter 0077

I had prepared for this, but the lie I had planned still felt so ridiculous, I struggled to say it. Surely they

would see straight through me. Then what would I do?

“I can tell that there is a sudden storm coming in, I forced out “Tomorrow. It will ruin the hunt. I

humbly ask, for the sake of the event, that you postpone for a day.

The King had no reaction.

Julian spoke up instead. “There wasn’t anything about foul weather on the news, Piper. Are you sure your

intuition is correct?”

“I’m positive.” It was a desperate gamble. Sudden storms could happen, but I was more likely to be right

back here begging forgiveness tomorrow night.

It’d be worth it, to make sure Elva was okay.

I couldn’t keep the worry from my face, but fortunately no one seemed to notice. Or maybe they thought

it was concern for the event.

Nicholas, though, watched me a little closer. I avoided his gaze, but I could feel the weight of it on me.

He knew **me** best. If anyone could see through me, he would be the one. After all, he knew I’d never had

premonitions about the weather before.

“Father,” Nicholas said, addressing the king even while his gaze stayed on me.

I braced myself, ready for him to call **me** out.

“We should postpone the event a day.”

I blinked, surprised.

The King looked at his son. "Oh?"

propose a deal." Nicholas **stood**. "Piper, if it does indeed rain, then I will allow your daughter to ride on Night, the wolf. She had seemed quite interested in that earlier today. If it doesn't, then you will lose ranking and be responsible for the barbecuing for the 3(rd) day's event."

Interesting." Julian cald. "Don't you think **so**, father?"

The King considered it. "Such a thing certainly might entertain the viewers

It's a win—

win, as far as I can see, Julian continued. "If we don't postpone, and it does indeed rain, then

"Yes." The King nodded. To Nicholas, he said, "Good job, Nicholas."

"Thank you, father," Nicholas said. He did not sit down.

"Thank you, everyone," I said with a small bow. "Your kindness knows no bounds."

"We'll see," said the Queen, colder than the rest.

I turned toward the door, ready to exit.

"Please excuse me," said Nicholas behind me.

As I left the dining room, he was suddenly **at** my side. I didn't say anything, thinking he just needed to go

the same way as me for a time.

When

n we reached the stairs, he said, "Stop ignoring me, Piper.

Startled, I stopped and turned to him.

"I know something is wrong. You never would have concocted such a wild story otherwise." His face.

was stern but there was **a** hint of concern in his eyes. "Tell me. Why did you really need to postpone the

event?"

I could cry with worry but I held it back, needing to be strong. "Elva has a fever."

With Nicholas beside me, we rushed back to my room, where the doctor was speaking softly with Mark.

When we entered, she turned to me.

“Your daughter’s illness is severe. I treated it as best I could, but I can do no more until her fever breaks.

She’s in too fragile a state.”

Fear coiled around my heart. “I don’t understand. She’s been doing so well.”

“Has she been recently exposed to anything? Anyone with a sickness, perhaps? Such as a cold.”

All warmth left my body. I’d had a cold. I only just reunited with Elva.

Could I have done this to her? Did I give her this cold?

**My knees** went weak. Nicholas gripped my arm, helping me stay **upright**.

But the weight of the guilt was too much. I **had** done this to my daughter.

I would never forgive myself

This is my fault.”

Chapter 0078

Nicholas

As I watched, Piper seemed to crumble in on herself. The guilt and the worry pushed down on her

shoulders and made her small. It didn’t suit her. She was strong, a fighter, yet fear for Elva tore straight

through her.

I had known the child a few short weeks, and already I was in agony, watching her cry and shake with

fever. I could only imagine how Piper felt. To watch her daughter be sick now, and so often, must have

been a special kind of torture.

Holding Piper's arm, I turned her into me to offer her the physical support of my body. She clung to me, likely about to fall if I did not hold her upright.

I may have been angry at Piper for all that had occurred between us. She had betrayed me once, for reasons I still didn't fully understand, when all I had ever done was love her.

Yet seeing her like this, so scared for her daughter, I could not help but soften to her.

"It's not your fault," I told her. "It could have been any illness. Even someone with a cough could have sent the germs her way."

"But I was sick." Tears clung to her eyelashes. They made my chest ache. "I should have waited to see

her until I was sure. I was just so eager. I missed her so much."

I moved my hand up and down her back in long, soothing strokes.

"It's not your fault," I said again, more firmly,

She shook her head, unable or unwilling to hear me and take my words to heart.

When Elva pulled through, I would try again. For now, I understood Piper's worry made reason difficult to accept. Even bad things were easier to comprehend when there was a cause and effect. Chaos made

things scarier.

"Thank you, doctor," I told the physician, who nodded at me.

"I will check on her several times throughout the night," the physician said. "When her fever breaks, send for me, and I will be able to do more." "tu

Thank you," I said again,

"Thank you," said Piper, voice muffled against my shoulder.

The physician left. Mark and the maid stayed nearby. I nodded to Mark and he moved a chair from the

table over to Elva's beside. Gently, I led Piper there and helped her sit down. Immediately, she reached

out **and** cradled Elva's hand.

With her situated, I walked back to the table to retrieve a second chair. Mark was at my side at once.

“Prince Nicholas?”

intend to stay,” I told him. “Go and alert my family’s servants of where I’ll be if I’m needed.”

Mark saluted. “At once, sir.”

As he exited the room, I motioned toward the maid. “You may leave as well.”

“If I’m needed..” she **said**. Bold of her to attempt to stand up to me. Yet it only made me appreciate her,

as someone who cared about Piper and Elva.

“I can handle it from here,” I said, softer. “They will need you rested in the morning.

The maid accepted this. After one last glance over Piper and Elva, she turned and left the room.

With the servants dealt with, I returned to Piper’s side, carrying a second chair. I placed it beside hers

and sat down upon it.

Piper glanced at me, eyes wide with surprise. “You’re staying?”

“If it’s alright,” I said. Did she want to be alone? In that case, I would wait for Mark to return and then I

would-

“No, it’s fine. Just... unexpected.” She looked at me like she had never seen me before.

Was it so unusual, to care for the welfare of a child? Specifically the child of a woman I once loved with

the entirety of my heart?

I didn’t think so. So I didn’t say anything.

Eventually her surprise passed, and she seemed more at ease. Her gaze returned to her daughter, whose

quiet sobs had eased into a restful slumber.

“Does this happen often?” I asked.

Too often. Though less now than in the past. I know the medicine and regular checkups have been helping her. If only I hadn’t been **so** careless...”

I didn’t want her to focus on that, **so** I tried to steer the conversation away. “Do you and Elva have a place to stay out there?”

Chapter 0079

“We were renting an apartment with a friend of mine, Anna. I worked hard for that life. Sometimes I even,

well... I’ve let more experiences happen than I should have, for the sake of a paycheck.”

My hands ached. Looking down I realized I held the wooden armrests of the chair in a white-knuckled

grip. I attempted to loosen my hold. “Were you harmed?”

“Not for the lack of effort on their part,” Piper said. “My boss at this last job was particularly vile, but your

guards came to retrieve me at just the right moment.”

My grip returned tenfold. The wood creaked.

I wanted to tell her that she was safe now, and that people like that would never be able to touch her again. I wanted her to give me this vermin’s name so I could chase him down and have him locked in the

dungeon.

I considered yet doing the last one, when Elva’s condition wasn’t quite so dire. But the previous I could

I

not promise.

With the first elimination coming up, I did not know if she would continue to be allowed to stay at the palace. And the minute she was beyond these walls, I could not protect her without drawing unwanted

attention to us both.

If and when she left, I had to let her stay gone.

For now, I would do what I could. I sat in the chair beside Piper's as we held vigil through the night.

In the early morning hours, Elva's fever finally broke, and Piper was able to relax. I rose to send the guard

to alert the physician.

When I returned to Piper, she was fast asleep. She must have been so relieved and so exhausted, that

the moment she knew she didn't have to worry anymore, her body sunk fast into necessary sleep.

Slowly, as not to wake her, I hooked an arm under her knees and the other around her back, **and** lifted

her up against me. I carried her around to the other side of the bed and lowered her down within it.

Gently, I lifted the covers up over her tired body and **tucked** her in.

I returned to my chair and watched over Piper and Elva both until the physician arrived.

Mark came to collect **me** in the morning. When I saw him enter the room, I stood, leaving the physician to her **work** and approached him.

"It storming?" I asked him. The weather forecasts had predicted a miniscule chance of rain, but for

"No rain..." Mark hesitated. He was holding something back. Unusual. He typically told me everything

without need for further prompting.

**"Mark?"**

"I think you need to see it for yourself. The royal family is gathered in your father's room."  
"

I glanced behind me, where Piper and Elva continued to doze, even as the physician attended Elva.

"I will stay and watch over them in your stead, Prince Nicholas," Mark said.



Only with that assurance was I able to pull myself away. “Very well. Thank you, Mark.”

Mark nodded.

I allowed myself only one last quick glance behind me, then I made my way from the room.

Inside my father’s room, my parents and two brothers were standing in a half-circle around the television. A weather report blared on the screen. Red bars flickered at the top and bottom. Urgent

Weather Update.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

The King glanced at me sideways. “Nice of you to finally join us, Nicholas.”

“I told the servants where I’d be,” I said.

“That you did,” Julian said, smirking. “I hope you had a favorable evening.”

I resisted the urge to sigh – barely. “Elva was sick.”

“**She** better now?” Julian asked, smile fading.

I nodded.

“**Come** here.” The King waved me closer. “Look at this.”

I joined my family in their half-circle and finally saw the news.

The newscasters were calling for a blood moon tonight.

A rare and ominous sign.

To have continued the hunt during this condition would have been disastrous.

That girl saved us. the King said.

Chapter 0080

When I awoke, I was surprised to find myself in my own bed, while the physician tended to Elva beside

1. me.

I looked around the room, but Nicholas was gone. I wondered how long he stayed. Likely not for very

long. He did dislike me, after all.

Still, he had been kind to stay at all, even with all the layers of hurt between us. He had been kind to me

last night, and I would not soon forget it.

I rose and dressed, and by the time I was done, the physician was ready to talk to me.

“She should have a full recovery. She will need to rest for a day or so. Her body is fatigued from fighting

off her illness so hard.”

I thanked her, though my relief did not fully squash my guilt. Elva had only been in danger at all because

of my inability to protect her. If I had stayed away from her until I was absolutely certain I was healed, she

might never have gotten sick.

The thoughts plagued me even after the physician exited the room. No sooner had she gone than Mark

entered.

“All of the girls are being summoned into the parlor room,” he said.

I knew, with the distinct lack of pitter-patter of rain against the window, that it was not storming outside.

My deal would, as expected, end in failure. But at least Elva was safe for now, no matter what would

become of me in the days ahead.

“Will you stay with Elva?” I asked Mark.

“Yes.”

I nodded. “Thank you.”

With that reassurance, I left the room and made my way down to the parlor, where most of the other

girls were already waiting. They whispered as I entered, and I heard echoes of the deal I had made. Word

of it, it seemed, **had** already spread through the palace.

The royal family **stood** on a raised platform at the far side of the room. Nathan was among them,

**nearest** a microphone.

I was alone where I stood. No one would talk to **me**. At least, not until Susie arrived. She **rushed** to me

with a concern filled expression.

When I explained what had happened, but how she is better **now**, Susie looked relieved

“I was worried when I heard,” Susie said. “Thank God her fever broke.”

I agreed.

“Attention,” Nathan said into the microphone. “Attention, please.”

All of the girls turned to look at Nathan.

“As you well know by now, the hunt previously planned for today has been postponed. A bet had been

made, dependent on inclement weather.”

“It’s not raining,” a girl from the front helpfully provided.

My stomach twisted into a knot. Since I had lost the bet, at the very least I would **be** embarrassed. I’d

also have to help arrange the barbecue, however one managed to do that. Hopefully Lena wouldn’t leave

me too far out of the loop.

“It is not,” Nathan said, “Yet Miss Piper has still won the deal between her and Nicholas. While it is not

storming, not even drizzling, the forecasters have predicted that tonight we will experience a blood

moon.”

Several gasps sounded around the room. One of them came from me.

“The royal family would like to personally thank Piper,” Nathan said. “To hunt during a blood moon would

have surely lead to misfortune.”

“Blood moons are so rare,” Susie said. She looked at me with a bit of awe in her eyes. “However you

knew, thank you, Piper.”

“I didn’t know,” I whispered to her. “I was just desperate.”

“Even so. Good fortune favors you, to help you like this.”

I shook my head. I hadn’t had good fortune in a very long time. Even this, lucky as it was, felt like it had

strings attached somehow.

“There’s no way she knew beforehand,” one of the girls said, cutting between Susie and I. “Tell us how

**you** really did this, Piper.”

“Isn’t it obvious?” said another. “She must have insider Information somehow.”

But how could ? The first girl gasped. “Do you have the Internet? Are **you** hiding a phone?

“What? No!” I said, but they didn’t believe me. Other girls overheard and quickly chimed in.

“If she has her phone, I want mine too. Fair is fair.”

“Kick her out. She’s obviously cheated.”

“No one wants her here anyway.”

“Stop...” Susie said, but she was too timid. Her voice was easily swallowed under the noise of the others.

“I didn’t do anything wrong!” I shouted, to be heard above the mob.

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