

## The Luna Choosing Game by Jane Above Story Chapter 81

Chapter 0081

“That’s enough,” said a firm low voice through the microphone. Nathan had passed it to Nicholas. Please discover all the facts before making accusations. Piper proposed her deal last night. The

announcement about the blood moon did not come in until this morning.”

The second girl relented, lowering her head. “He’s right. She couldn’t have known...”

“But...?” said the first. “Surely the timing was too perfect to be a coincidence.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I don’t tell the future. I don’t have the internet. I just made a guess for the sake of the deal.”

The girls’ looks of outrage slowly morphed into those of annoyance instead. Gradually, they slipped away from me.

Susie returned to the place she’d been pushed away from. “You okay?”

I shrugged

“Piper,” Nicholas said, approaching me. He’d left the microphone on the stage, back with Nathan.

He stopped when he was before me. “What did the physician say about Elva?” After I told him, he sighed,

“Good.”

Susie glanced between the two of us. Then she pretended to see something and left us.

It was a very

obvious show. She was not a good actor.

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I didn't know whether to thank her or be mad at her. She clearly wanted to give Nicholas and me

privacy, but after last night, I wasn't sure I was ready to face him again so soon.

He'd been so kind. I didn't know if I could handle him hating me right now.

"I'll hold up my end of the bargain," Nicholas said. "Sometime during this event, I will let Elva ride on

Night."

"She'll enjoy that. Thank you."

"A deal is a deal."

I thought he would leave now, with what he had wanted to say said. Instead he lingered, quiet.

**The** other girls were being

led away, over to the dining room for breakfast. I watched them go, unsure if should follow.

"Also, I should thank you on behalf of my family," Nicholas said. "If it weren't for your bet, we would have

either had to hunt during the blood moon or cancel the event ourselves. Either would have been a bad

omen. Your deal helped us save face."

I couldn't possibly take

credit for that, especially when Nicholas was the one to try to give it.

I was just worried about Elva. Everything else was just an accident."

Nicholas glanced around. Seeing no one was close to us, he said, "Caring for your daughter is just as

worthy of praise, if not more so. As far as I'm concerned, the life of a child sharply outweighs the reputation of the royal family."

His words were kind, but he should not give them.

"Your reputation is important." Not as important as Elva, true, but with as serious as the royal family was treating this event, I knew there had to be more going on under the surface than I understood.

He didn't reply, to agree or disagree. He just slowly lowered his gaze, then turned and walked away.

I ate breakfast in a hurry, eager to return to Elva in our room. I'd swiped a few muffins for her on the chance she might be hungry, tucked into the pockets of my dress.

Yet at the corner, just before turning to the hallway where my room was located, I saw Lena talking to a maid.

My maid. The strange one.

I couldn't hear what they were talking about, but, after the incident with the gloves, I did not give them the benefit of the doubt. They could have been sharing laundry tips, sure. But they could just have easily

been conspiring against me.

I walked straight toward them. The maid jolted when she saw me. Lena closed her mouth.

"Good morning, ladies," I said, as chipper as I could. I wanted them to know I was onto them.

The strange maid quickly excused herself.

Lena stayed. "Seems you were quite lucky today. We'll see if your luck holds out."

That was an odd thing to say, but seemed fine enough.

I nodded, eager to continue walking **and** forget this exchange.

"I hope you don't have any accidents tomorrow, Piper," Lena **said**.

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"It would be such a shame for that little girl if something happened to you."

I turned again, to confront her, but she was already walking away.

It could have been nothing, but that had sounded like a threat.

Chapter 0082

The next morning, blessedly, Elva woke up feeling infinitely better. She bounced around the room

without a care in the world.

When I told her about her prospective wolf ride, she buzzed with excitement. She wiggled her arms back

and forth and jumped up and down on her feet.

She pouted when I made her sit down.

"You had a serious fever only twenty-four hours ago," I **said**.

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"That's a hundred years ago," she countered. She kicked her legs under the chair. "I want to ride a wolf."

"You will. But we have to wait until you are well." I wasn't going to take any chances this time, not after

what happened. She had gotten sick because of my carelessness. Never again.

“But, Mommy...”

“Elva. The wolf will still be there tomorrow.”

“What if it isn’t?”

“It will be.”

Keeping Elva safe from sickness was only half of my worry. Since Lena’s threat the night before, I didn’t dare bring her into any location where she would be at risk.

Today was the day of the hunt. Our prey was a wild boar. They were dangerous when **cornered**, with their

sharp tusks and instinct to charge. Whatever Lena had planned for me undoubtedly would make that risk

even worse.

I didn’t want Elva anywhere around this event.

Leaving her in the care of the nanny, under the **protection** of Mark, I set out to face my fate.

Out in the courtyard, each of the girls were given a weapon of their choice, then **sent** with their wolves

**out** into the forest hunting grounds.

The princes would also participate, though would spread their attention among all the girls, and not

necessarily focus entirely on the hunt itself.

After greeting my wolf companion Silver, I chose a bow as my weapon.

The princes were already swarmed with the other girls, so I didn’t have any opportunity to say hello, That

The hunt was the event, so the hunt was what I would focus on.

“This might work for us,” I said to Silver.

She tilted her head, one ear flopping. For a full-sized wolf, she was very adorable.

If the rest of them are distracted, this gives us advantage of finding the boar first.”

Silver chuffed, then turned toward the forest. I quickly followed her lead. As a wolf, she could more

easily lead the charge. With her heightened sense of smell, she likely already knew the general location of

the boar, if not its exact spot.

Occasionally Silver would stop to sniff at the ground, pressing her nose into the underbrush. Then she

would grumble and continue forward.

Eventually, however, after sniffing the ground, she lowered herself a bit, tensing up. I quickly did too,

crouching low with my bow at the ready, arrow notched.

We were close.

I leaned against the side of a tree and peered around it. A massive boar was in a clearing just beyond, digging into the dirt.

It was huge and meaty, with large curling tusks. This wasn't just a dangerous encounter, it was deadly.

How would one of the more inexperienced girls have dealt with such a monster? Perhaps the organizers

never considered a girl would find it on her own, without the help of the princes.

Silver looked at me. She was letting me take the first shot.

Because we had the drop on the boar, we held the advantage, both in terms of attack and protection. I

could wound the animal before it ever noticed me, if I couldn't simply finish it off in one shot.

It had been a long time since I'd done this, but, as proven at the archery training those weeks before,

some skills never fully left me, even if they grew a bit rusty.

Lifting my bow, I lined up my shot. I steadied my breathing to **keep** my aim true. I drew back the arrow,

pulling tight at the bowstring.

Today's Bonus Offer

Chapter 0083

Crack.

The bottom of the bow snapped from the pressure. What kind of weakly made –?

The boar jerked its head toward me, alerted now of my presence.

I was behind the tree but Silver was mostly **exposed**.

The boar kicked out the ground. It was going to charge!

“Silver, run!” I rushed from my cover to push the wolf into action. I wouldn't see her get hurt, not if there

was something I could do about it.

The boar rushed forward, tusks first. With a horrible squealing noise, it tore through the underbrush,

twigs and leaves snapping underfoot.

Silver darted to the side, but I was too slow. The boar was coming right for me.

The boar was fast, but Silver was faster. She lunged at the boar, colliding with its side. It veered off

course, missing me by a few mere inches as I rolled out of the way.

Silver rushed back to me. She nosed at my side **and** helped me up onto my feet. As I put weight on my

ankle, I winced. I must have twisted it. I wouldn't be able to run like this.

“You have to go, Silver. I'll climb a tree or something. I'll be okay,”

The stubborn wolf absolutely refused to move from my side. Instead, it leaned its head back and howled.

Calling for help? I wasn't sure.

The boar faced us again. It huffed **and** dug both feet into the dirt. It was going to charge again.

With her howling done, Silver lowered her ears. A growl erupted from her throat.

The boar, monstrous and angry, didn't seem to care.

It shot forward like a bat out of hell.

I tried to move, but my ankle shot blinding hot pain through my leg. I stumbled. The boar redirected its

**course**, continuing right for me.

Silver darted forward.

Suddenly, an arrow flew through the tree line and plunged into the side of the boar. It staggered.

A second **arrow** immediately followed the first. Almost true, it felled the creature. The boar collapsed, dead.

Silver stopped. Her head turned toward the way the arrows had come from. I followed her gaze, but

didn't see anything yet. I heard them though, two figures rushing through the foliage.

"Piper," Nicholas said when he breached the tree line. Julian **was** close behind him. The other wolf companions bounded forward, stopping to meet Silver. They pressed their muzzles together.

I was so relieved, to see all of them and know I was safe, that I collapsed down into the dirt.

"Piper!" Nicholas said again, alarmed. He pushed toward me even faster than before. He dropped to his knees beside me. Holding his hands over me but never quite touching, he seemed to be searching me for

damage.

"I'm okay," I said, grimacing. "It's just my ankle."

We both looked down. It had already begun to swell, pressing out against my leather boot.

"Piper, you alive?" Julian asked from behind us. He'd walked to where I'd dropped my bow.

"I'm alive," I said.

"Twisted ankle." Nicholas frowned at it like it had done him personal harm.



“Glad you aren’t dead,” Julian said as he picked up my bow.

“Me, too,” I agreed. “You both have excellent timing. Another minute, Silver and I would be in much

worse shape.”

“What happened?” Nicholas shouldered off his backpack and began searching through it. He pulled out

an elastic bandage.

“Silver and I had the element of surprise. I had a clear shot. But then my bow...

At that same moment, Julian brought the bow closer to us. The wood had split clean through along the

bottom.

It was far too clean **of** a break to have been natural.

Nicholas stilled. Fury burned in his eyes.

Julian spoke with his usual lighthearted tone of voice, yet his tight grip on the broken bow revealed his

own anger.

“Seems like someone wants you **dead**, Piper”

Chapter 0084

Chapter 0084

Sabotage.

That was what someone had done to my bow. They had purposefully cut a tiny fracture into the wood so when I attempted to fire, the entire thing would snap.

And it had, right at the crucial moment. Because of this, I had nearly been gored.

Nicholas gently touched my calf, directing my leg how he needed it. With a slow but deliberate touch, he

slid

my boot off and inspected my swollen ankle.

The moment felt too intimate, so I spoke to break the tension.

“The last time I saw you both, you were in a swarm of eligible ladies.”

“We lost them in a hurry,” Julian said with a snort. He continued to inspect my bow, particularly where

the slice had been made. “The cameras, too.”

“No one knows these woods as well as us,” Nicholas agreed.

Julian laughed. “Poor Joyce, though. He’s never really been the outdoor type. He didn’t have a chance at

escape.

“He wouldn’t know what to do with the boar if he found it. It’s better if stays to the side.” Nicholas

wrapped the bandage around my ankle, giving me some relief from the pain.

“That’s true.” Julian lowered the bow and looked at me, then to Nicholas. “We should tell her what we

know.”

“Julian.” Nicholas’s firm tone **sounded** like a warning.

“She deserves to know, especially now. If they **are** willing to go far enough to put her life in danger, she

needs to be able to take precautions.

“You know something about this?” I asked Nicholas. When he couldn’t meet my eye, I turned my gaze to

Julian **instead**.

“Nicholas didn’t want to worry you,” Julian said.

“We weren’t certain yet. We still aren’t, fully.” Nicholas secured the bandage, then sat back on his heels.

I didn’t want to needlessly upset you, but... Julian’s right, in this case. If they are willing to do you harm, you should know what we suspect.”

“Did he **just say** I was right? Say it again, brother. Wait, I need to get my phone out and record.”

Nicholas ignored him. Instead, he finally lifted his gaze to mine and held it.

“We have reason to believe Lena and Joseph **are** conspiring **against** you. It is for this reason that I had

assigned my own guard to protect you. Mark is there specifically to protect Elva at all times.”

Nicholas sighed. “They have both served this family for many years, but I cannot deny their shift since

the competition began.”

“They’re well liked and trusted by the King **and** Queen,” Julian chimed in. “It will take a lot to convince

them Lena and Joseph had a part in anything this horrific. Even to bring them under suspicion would need

some concrete evidence.”

Their words did not surprise me, especially after the threat made the night before.

“I have my own reasons to **suspect** Lena.” Then I told them what she had said, I hope you don’t have any

accidents tomorrow. It could have been a coincidence, but at this point, I highly doubted it.

Nicholas’s face grew even sterner. Julian’s **good** humor slipped away.

“Lena and Joseph are traditionalists,” Nicholas said. “They believe very firmly that things should stay as they always have. They were against the competition from the start, but they at least tolerate the other girls. You, though...”

“You are a wild card, Piper,” Julian came closer. “You aren’t noble. You don’t even have a wolf. They

have no idea what to make of you.

“They can believe whatever they want,” Nicholas said. “None of that is reason enough to place you or Elva in danger.” He straightened his shoulders. “I will speak to the King about this myself.”

Julian’s attention shot to him. “Have you lost it? He’ll never believe you.”

“I’m the oldest.”

“That never made a difference before.”

“I’m not going to let these two run around making attempts on Piper’s life without consequence.”

My heart beat a bit faster, hearing his protectiveness. I knew he’d likely say the same if any other girl had been threatened. But that didn’t change the fact that in this instance, it was me he wanted to defend.

Today’s Bonus Offer

Chapter 0085

“I don’t care what the King thinks of me,” Nicholas said. “I will see justice done.”

“That’s incredibly noble of you, brother Julian rolled his eyes. “But I have a different scheme. It would provide the same result, with less mess.”

Nicholas shook his head like he didn’t even want to hear him out. But I disagreed. We should hear every

option before acting, especially if Nicholas’s plan would hurt him in the long run.

“Please explain, Julian,” I said.

Nicholas shot me a look, which I pointedly did not acknowledge.

“If we call out the bullies directly, we could back them into a corner and make things worse. It would be

so much simpler if we lifted up Piper instead. We could make her untouchable.”

Nicholas thought a moment, then asked, “How?”

I had the same question.

Julian nodded toward the boar carcass that the wolves were protecting.

Understanding crossed Nicholas’s face. I still wasn’t sure.

“Very well,” Nicholas said. “We can try it. But if it fails, we will do it my way instead.”

“Fair enough.” Julian shrugged. “But give me a couple days, anyway. I think I can work with this for a while, really lay it on thick.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

Julian winked at me. "You'll see."

"Trust us," Nicholas said. Then, after a quick scowling glance at his brother, amended, "Trust me."

Julian laughed.

Nicholas wasn't wrong. I wasn't sure I could trust Julian. But Nicholas? Even with the misunderstanding of betrayal looming between us, I knew I could still trust him with my life. Elva's too.

That counted for something. A heck of a **lot**, actually

"I trust you," I told him.

His face didn't change, but he seemed satisfied with the way he tapped my shin.

"We have to get her back to the palace." Julian waggled his eyebrows. "Maybe I could carry you, Piper."

"Absolutely **not**," Nicholas said at once.

I glanced between them. "I could try to walk...?"

Nicholas shook his head. He turned so that his back was to me. "I will carry you."

With his guidance, I draped my arms over his shoulders, and he hoisted me up onto his back. He held my

legs, giving me support.

My cheeks burned a bit, especially after Julian gave me a knowing look. I couldn't deny the position was nice though, pressing into the long expanse of Nicholas's back. His strong hands pressing hard under my

thighs.

I desperately tried not to think too much about it. Nicholas was only doing this for my sake, to get me

safely and swiftly back to the palace. Romance had nothing to do with it.

That didn't fully explain why he hadn't **wanted** Julian to carry me instead, however.

No, none of it mattered. I had to let those thoughts go. Nicholas no longer cared for me like he used to.

I'd only hurt us both believing for a second that we could be amicable again.

When we made it back to the palace grounds, it was clear the news had spread about the end of the

hunt. I realized later that the wolves had announced it, through their howling.

Being the only one in the room who couldn't speak to a wolf was... upsetting. At the very least, I wished I

could have properly passed my gratitude onto Silver, who had saved my life. Even now, she trotted along protectively behind Nicholas and me.

Nicholas led me through the sea of girls, who whispered cruelly as we passed, likely jealous of the way I was being carried

Julian, still holding my broken bow, gave a sharp smirk to whoever whispered too loudly, making his displeasure known. With his help, the mumbling quickly died down.

When we came before the King, he looked between the three of us with obvious annoyance in his eyes, though a wide, kindly smile on his lips.

"Which one of you downed the boar?" he asked.

I held my breath. I hadn't been sure which of the **two** had fired the finishing blow. I'd only seen the two arrows hit their mark.

Nicholas **and** Julian spoke at once.

Chapter 0086

The gathered crowd quieted at Nicholas and Julian's declaration. The King narrowed his gaze.

"You are saying that Piper did this."

"Yes," Nicholas said without hesitation,

Around us, the speculative gazes of the onlookers were more than enough to tell of their disbelief. Yet before they could make me nervous, Julian's easy laughter claimed every one's attention.

"Have you all forgotten how talented Piper is with a bow? She nearly matched me shot for shot during

our archery event."

No one could deny the truth of that. Soon the speculative glances returned more to ones of annoyance

and jealousy.

“Very good, Piper.” The King studied me closely, draped over Nicholas’s back as I was. “Though it seems

you have gotten injured.”

“A twisted ankle,” I said.

“I will have the physician make certain she is well,” Nicholas added.

The King moved his probing eyes to Nicholas. “Send a servant to do so.”

Nicholas tensed beneath me. “Yes, sir.”

Moving from us, the King approached Nathan, “Send some servants to retrieve the boar for the barbecue tomorrow.”

“At once, Your Majesty.” Nathan quickly directed others to move.

“My wolf companion will guide you to the location.” Nicholas looked down. “Night, if you could.”

Night, who had diligently taken position at Nicholas’s right, stood and followed his command.

“You can lower me now,” I said to Nicholas. I spotted the cameras coming closer. I really didn’t want them to have close-ups of me hanging all over Nicholas.

Slowly, he lowered me down. I could stand on one **foot**, but I was wobbly. Nicholas stayed at my **side**, ready to catch me. When I leaned a bit too far in one direction, he placed his hand under my arm and held me more firmly.

The gate began to separate into shatter groups to talk. Olivia came over to Nicholas and **me**

“Congratulations, Piper. It must have been an impressive shot you made. How fortunate you were that two princes were able to find **you** when you were hurt.”

I wasn’t sure what she was getting at, or why she was being so nice. Likely she was only acting this way because Nicholas was beside me. In private, I highly doubted she would **be** so kind. Regardless, for now, I accepted her words.

“Thank you, Olivia,” I said.

She nodded, then moved on.

Not to be outdone, Linda quickly moved into the place Olivia had vacated.

“Yes, congratulations are in order,” Linda said, sneering slightly. “So... nice that you are now the hero of the event. So.. deserved.” The words came stiffly, like it physically pained her to pay the compliments.

“Thank you,” I said, mostly to make this encounter **stop**.

Linda pressed her lips hard together. “Yes, well. Hopefully you will be more careful next time so as not to hurt yourself and bother our princes.”

“I had no issue assisting Piper,” Nicholas said, voice neutral.

“Most magnanimous of you to say so, Prince Nicholas” Linda gave a little bow, then excused herself.

I was happy to see her go.

Meanwhile, nearer the cameras, the King was smiling brightly.

“We are so proud of the young women of our kingdom for providing such a good showing today. Piper,

as hero of the event, **has** earned a high amount of ranking. But there are many notable persons that we

should highlight...”

I wasn't hurt that he would so quickly turn attention away from me. I knew I was only here for the

publicity stunt, and that the royal family had no actual wish to have me stay in the competition.

Thusly, it made sense for the King to try to guide the public into liking the candidates he preferred, like

Olivia and Linda.

Plus, I felt a measure of guilt for having gained such undeserved attention. I had not actually killed the boar. All I had accomplished was nearly getting myself killed.

Granted, if my bow hadn't been sabotaged, I maybe could have felled the creature on my own. But that possibility still did not seem like enough to warrant all I was now taking claim for

Chapter 0087



I knew this had been part of Julian and Nicholas's plan to make me untouchable. With the credit of the kill, I became the hero of the hunt. This surely made whatever scheme Lena and Joseph planned backfire spectacularly.

Vindicating, truly, but I wasn't sure how it made me invincible.

Nicholas had said to trust him, and I did. But I really hated lying like this. I was keeping too many secrets

already, I didn't want anymore.

When the spectacle was mostly over, Nicholas led me to a stone bench in the gardens and had me sit.

"I will return with the physician," he said.

A few minutes later, the physician appeared without him. He'd kept his word, and I was honored that he cared enough to seek out the doctor to begin with.

Yet I couldn't deny the **twinge** of disappointment I felt inside when he had not joined her .

The physician checked me over. "You should stay off of your ankle as much as you can. I will have a wheelchair brought in to help you to your room. I'll make sure you are provided with crutches as well, if

you'd prefer."

Fortunately, outside of the barbecue tomorrow, not much was on the schedule for a few days until the night of the first elimination ceremony. This would give me enough time to recuperate without much

issue.

I thanked the physician. Once the wheelchair was brought, she helped me up to my room. I thanked her

for that too.

Elva was worried for me initially, when she saw me in the wheelchair. But when she learned I was more or less fine, she was excited to ride the chair around.

Looking around, I noticed that only the quiet maid was there to attend us now. The stranger maid was

nowhere to be seen.

"Did something happen to the other maid?" I asked.

“She won’t be returning by royal orders,” the maid said “I hope that I will be enough to serve **you** from

now on.”

“Of course you are enough,” J said quickly. My mind reeled. “Royal orders...?”

She leaned forward. “Prince Nicholas gave the order himself.”

My heart pounded against my ribcage. He was personally seeing to my protection yet a gain. I pressed my hand to my chest, trying for calm. It didn’t mean anything. I couldn’t quite get my heart to slow,

however.

“Tell me your name,” I said to the quiet maid. When she hesitated, I **added**, “I know it’s not proper, but... **you** have aided me when few others would. You are more **than** a servant to me, you are a friend. I’d like to know how to address my friends.”

She seemed embarrassed but she said, “Charlotte.”

I offered her the kindest smile I could. “Nice to officially **meet** you, Charlotte.”

After I learned her name, Charlotte became much less quiet. “We watched some of the hunt on television. The two princes Nicholas and Julian lost the cameras and the crowds very early on.”

I heard they did that,” I laughed.

Charlotte gave a soft smile. “So much of the hunt itself didn’t make it into the program. But, from what I saw of the finale, and the public reaction, everyone is behind you, Piper.”

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Her words filled me with a sense of pride. I was so pleased that people had begun to cheer for me, and even wanted to back me in this competition. As foolhardy as it was.

Even with my good showing. I knew the end was nigh for me on this competition.

The royal family didn’t want me to win. They just wanted my presence.

It didn’t matter how well I did, I knew when the time came for eliminations, I would be sent home.

Today’s Bonus Offer

Chapter 0088

The next day, during the barbecue held in the gardens, Elva finally got her wolf ride. Nicholas helped her **up** onto the massive wolf Night, who then trotted slowly around the field under Nicholas's watchful eyes.

Confined to my wheelchair, I stayed on the patio, not wanting to take my chair into the grass on the chance of getting stuck. It had been embarrassing enough yesterday, having Nicholas haul me around. I didn't want a repeat performance.

It was a little lonely so near the door, while everyone else was out in the gardens, but I was happy to

watch from afar.

Eventually, Silver came over to see me. She let me scratch the top of her head, and licked.

"Thank you, Silver, for yesterday," I told her. "I wouldn't be here today if it weren't for you."

my hand.

She chuffed at me. I wished I knew what she was trying to say. She didn't seem to mind, though. She just lowered her big wolf head into my lap and made herself comfortable.

"Interesting how the only person who can't talk to wolves is the one who made the best friend of one."

Julian sauntered toward me, moving slowly like he hadn't a care in the world. I had parked myself near a stone bench in case anyone wanted to chat with me. He plopped himself down there now.

"She's beautiful and deadly." I scratched between her ears. She closed her eyes. "I'm happy to be her

friend."

"Makes sense, I suppose, then. Why she would choose you." Julian glanced out at the other girls standing in the garden. Their companion wolves had all mostly abandoned them. Instead, they played amongst themselves out in the grassy field.

Only Susie had deigned to join them, enjoying the company of the wolves more than her human

colleagues.

“Most of the girls saw their wolves as mere tools, not as living breathing creatures with their own thoughts and opinions.”

“Sometimes when you have everything, you take certain things for granted.”

I had never been ultra-rich or popular, but I remembered what it had been like in my academy days.

When the world **was** at my fingertips, it had been **so** easy to almost-forget the needs of others.

Nicholas hummed. “You are something special, Piper.”

“No,” I said. “I’m just not what you are used to. The novelty of me will wear off eventually.”

He glanced at me sideways. “I’m not so sure.”

Beyond him, out in the field, Nicholas glanced in our direction. His face immediately hardened and he

glared.

I tried my best to ignore him. I knew Nicholas had warned me about Julian being a playboy, but he wasn’t hitting on me. We were just talking.

“I showed Lena your broken bow,” Julian said, snaring my full attention.

“What?”

“She denied any knowledge of the clear sabotage, but I have no doubt she at least knew who did it, if she hadn’t ordered it herself. I made my intentions clear to her, though, so you shouldn’t have too much

more trouble from her for now.”

His words sat heavy on me. “What are your intentions, Julian?”

He shrugged, carefree. “She may have her plans to sabotage you, Piper, but now she will have to worry

about my plans to sabotage her.”

His tone was so casual, so flippant, it sent a chill up my spine. He was a little bit terrifying. Who knew.

what he would do, all with a smile on his face? I was relieved, in this case, that he was on my side and not

my enemy.

“Oops, I’ve been spotted.” Julian waved to a group of girls who had begun to inch closer. “I better head

them off or they will come over here.” He hopped to his feet. “Always a delight, Piper.”

“Don’t break too many hearts,” I called after him.

“Only the correct amount,” he replied. The scoundrel.

With Julian gone, I was once again left alone with my thoughts. I continued to stroke Silver’s fur as I considered that this might be my **true** last night of fun. The elimination ceremony was only a few nights away, with not much planned in between

Chapter 0089

I desperately tried to memorize all that I could from this moment.

Nicholas being sweet with Elva as he lifted her up off of Night. Night licked at her face and she giggled.

event

Julian had been so kind to me, making me laugh even though I had fully intended on sitting here quietly

and alone.

Silver,

so relaxed and protective, head resting in my lap.

Near the end of the night, Elva fell asleep in Nicholas’s arms. Mark took her from him to carry her back

to my room.

Most of the other girls had retired by now. The stars were bright in the sky, and the hour was late.

Nicholas approached me and asked, “May I walk you back to your room?”

He pushed, my chair for me through the palace toward an elevator in the back. It was tucked out of the way, but helpful for situations like these. Nicholas said the servants used it to bring heavy loads up and

down the stairs.

Outside of my room, we hesitated. Now was the time to say goodbye. Neither of us said it.

“The next time we see each other

likely be at the elimination,” he **said**...

That was true. Though we would be under the same roof, the royal family only interacted with the girls during specific scheduled events, none of which had been arranged for the next couple of days.

“We both know I’m going to be sent home,” I said.

He didn’t reply, basically confirming my assumption. I nodded, expecting it, yet oddly, I still felt a bit sad

inside.

“Elva will miss you,” I said.

I’ll miss her too.”

You could still reach out to her, if you wanted. Even after we’re gone. I’m sure she’d love to hear from

you

Nicholas swallowed hard. His gaze fell to the ground. That wouldn’t be appropriate, I’d be duty bound to both the throne and whichever woman becomes my wife. My own family would require my loyalty.

Another pang of hurt sliced in between my ribs. I understood, **of** course, Princes belonged more to their

“No.” I said. “I’m just not what you are used to. The novelty of me will wear off eventually.”

He glanced at me sideways “I’m not so sure”

Beyond him out in the field, Nicholas glanced in our direction His face immediately hardened and he

glared.

aa

I tried my best to ignore him. I knew Nicholas had warned me about Julian being a playboy, but he wasn't hitting on me. **We** were just talking

7 showed Lena your broken bow." Julian said, snaring my full attention.

"What?"

"She denied any knowledge of the clear sabotage, but I have no doubt she at least knew who did it, if she hadn't ordered it herself. I made my intentions clear to her, though, so you shouldn't have too much

more trouble from her for now.

His words sat heavy on me. "What are your intentions, Julian?"

He shrugged, carefree. She may have her plans to sabotage you, Piper, but now she will I have to worry.

about my plans to sabotage her."

His tone was so casual, so flippant, it sent a chill up my spine. He was a little bit terrifying. Who knew

what he would do, all with a smile on his face? I was relieved, in this case, that he was on my side and not

my enemy.

"Oops, I've been spotted." Julian waved to a group of girls who **had** begun to inch closer. "I better head them off or they will come over here." He hopped to his feet. "Always a delight, Piper."

"Don't break too many hearts," I called after him.

"Only the correct amount," he replied. The scoundrel.

Silver's fur as!

With Julian gone, I was once again left alone with my thoughts. I continued to stroke Silver's considered that this might be my true last night of fun. The elimination ceremony was only a few nights away, with not much planned in between.

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Chapter 0090

Nicholas

I woke up in the morning with a looming sense of dread. Today **was** the day of the first elimination ceremony. The past few days, I had quietly hated every second of the ticking clock while knowing there was nothing I could do to stop it.

Even now, as I dressed and prepared to meet my family for breakfast, I tried to be regal, but inwardly I

was torn to pieces.

I

Despite my every effort not to, I had come to care for Piper and Elva. I had as little doubt as Piper seemed to, about how quickly they would be sent away. And I worried.

Would they be alright on their own? They had been, up until now. But Piper herself had told me how they struggled more often than not. Would that persist? What if Elva’s sickness worsened and Piper wasn’t

able to afford care? What would become of them?

I hated that I wouldn’t be able to know. My duty to the throne would keep me from checking on them as I

would like. And my loyalty to my future wife would limit how much I could even ask after them.

My future wife deserved to have my full heart. If I continued to care for Elva and Piper, my heart would

always be divided.

Yet I wasn’t sure, now, having seen Piper again, that I could forget her and Elva enough to fully move on. I would try, but I doubted my potential success.

Perhaps there was some way I could continue to make sure they were comfortable, even if I never got to

I see them again. Mark could be my intermediary, perhaps. Or someone else I trusted, though there was no one I trusted as much as Mark.

—

If I could keep tabs on Piper and Elva without anyone knowing about it even them that would be ideal. It would all have to be very secretive.

In my father's personal rooms, I found my family tucked around a smaller dining table.

Stacks of pancakes and bowls of fruits and eggs were set on the table. A servant was pouring coffee for my father. Joyce had his nose in a paper. Julian, biting into a crunchy apple, was watching the television on the other side of the room.

Julian was the only one to glance at me when I walked in. Unfortunately, the only **opened seat** was at his side.

Look what the cat dragged in he teased: "Brother, you look terrible,

I lowered myself into the seat and tried to ignore him.

I bet I know what has you so down."

"Don't start," I grumbled.

I glanced up the table, but fortunately no one else seemed to be paying attention. The Luna was scrolling through something on her phone. The King was berating the servant for adding too much sugar to his

coffee

"My question for you," Julian continued, "is what makes you so certain she is leaving?"

"I'm in no mood for games."

The servant poured my coffee next. His hands were shaky from my father's tirade, so he spilled a few drops onto the table. I didn't mention it.

Julian cleared his throat. Loud enough to draw everyone's attention, he said, "Surely, Piper will be asked to stay. Hasn't she exceeded at all of the events? She won the Ambassador's favor, don't forget. And then, of course, she bagged the boar."

I glared daggers at him, but he just smiled wider.

The King sipped his coffee. "Everyone knows that one of you two killed the boar. No one truly believes it was her doing, no matter what you claim."

His denial annoyed me. Piper could have easily hunted that boar alone had she not been set up to fail. Yet, to appease him, I kept my mouth firmly closed.

He watched me. When I didn't say anything, a hint of disappointment crossed his face.

The Queen spoke next, "I would argue that Piper's many disciplinary failings counteract those achievements"

"None of those disciplinary measures were allowed to be broadcast on television, don't forget," I said,

no longer able to keep quiet. The reasons my mother had created to discipline her at all had been outrageous. Even now, my anger made my **hands** clench.