

The Luna Choosing Game by Jane Above Story Chapter 91

Chapter 0091

“That does create a dilemma, doesn’t it?”

Julian picked up where I left off. The disappointed look **had** vanished now, replaced with an almost... pride? Impossible. He most likely just wanted more mischief.

If we let Piper go now, wouldn’t the public have questions?”

“What do we care for their questions?” The Queen tapped her spoon on the edge of her teacup. “When the final selections are chosen, Piper’s shortcomings will become obvious in comparison. No one will be

able to deny it.”

“Well said, dear.” The King turned in his chair to watch the television, dismissing the conversation totally.

Fury burned in my blood. Yet I was powerless. Ultimately, despite what everyone was told about this first elimination ceremony, the King and Queen made the final choices about who would go and who would

stay.

Rankings were arbitrary numbers that they would raise and lower to fit their vision.

The deck was stacked against Piper, no matter how well she had done in the actual events. And she had

done exceedingly well.

Beside me, Julian’s usual smile seemed tighter somehow. I still didn’t understand the relationship between Piper and him, or what he hoped to gain from it. Yet, in **this** instance,

I could see him plotting. and I was grateful that it was likely in an effort to get Piper to stay.

Regardless of his reasoning, if he could discover a way to allow her to remain, I would be grateful.

We ate the rest of our breakfast in silence, before we set out to go our separate ways for the day. No sooner had I stepped out of my father's room, than my phone buzzed in my pocket.

It alerted of an incoming call from Mark. Quickly, I accepted and brought the phone to my ear.

"What's wrong?" I asked, as I struggled to maintain my rested heartrate. He would only **call** if there was a problem.

Since he was assigned solely to guard Elva, any problem could be dire.

"Elva ran away

My grip tightened on the phone. It creaked in my hand.

have eyes on her," Mark added quickly. "But I thought you would want to know of her attempt to slip

"Return her to her mother at once."

"Prince Nicholas," Mark said in a calm way that requested patience. "She is looking for you."

My heart twisted in my chest. "Give me the location."

Elva had only escaped so far as the garage. I found her peeking around the many cars.

When she saw me, she shouted, "Nick-lass!" and ran toward me at top speed.

I dropped to one knee and opened my arms. I braced myself as she tackled into me, catching her in at

strong embrace.

She had tears in her eyes and sniffled when she talked. "... finally... found you..."

"I heard you were looking for me." I gently combed my fingers through her hair, hoping to bring her some comfort. "What's the matter, princess?"

"Mommy said..." She sniffed. "Mommy said we were leaving and that..." Another sniff. "We might not say goodbye. Is... Is it true?"

Chest tight, I

squeezed her in a solid hug. I hated to hurt her like this. "Your mom's not wrong. You might be going home. But I would have said goodbye, I promise."

Her arms wrapped around my neck. "I don't want to say goodbye."

"I'm sorry," I told her, meaning it with all my heart.

It never ceased to amaze me how quickly I had come to care for this little girl, and how easily she had learned to trust me. Even that first day, when she'd been running from the woman who had pushed her, she came to me without hesitation.

"But we'll always be friends, okay?" I told her. "No matter how far apart we are."

"Mommy, **too.**"

I couldn't promise that as readily. Things between Piper and I were messy at best. Hurtful at worse.

But then Elva leaned back. She looked at me. And she said, "Mommy has your picture.

opened my mouth. Closed it "What?"

In her purse, With her money. Mommy keeps your picture with her. All the time."

Chapter 0092

“We’d like to thank everyone for joining us tonight for the First Elimination Ceremony. Tonight, as you have all been previously informed, we will be sending home 9 Luna candidates, leaving our remaining

count at 15.”

Nathan, microphone in hand, spoke mainly for the cameras, and not the three lines of us girls arranged on a set of rising stands behind him.

“The elimination tonight will be based on the candidates’ skillsets. Over the past few weeks, have they displayed the necessary ability and poise to reign as a Luna? They’ve been judged, and tonight, we will

deliver the results.”

I shifted on my feet, too nervous to stand still. I lowered my hand, pressing away imaginary folds on my golden gown. I’d never felt more beautiful, but then, everyone around me looked even better.

Nathan continued, “The girls who are asked to stay will be announced one by one. They will approach the prince of their choice and earn a token of favor from them. Your Royal Highnesses, are you ready?”

The three princes moved onto the stage beside Nathan, taking positions with a few feet of space between them. They each had their own staircase that led to them, so there could be no confusion which

of the princes each girl favored.

When the princes signaled their readiness, Nathan turned the cameras over to the King and Queen on

the far side of the room, who would be handed the names one by one to read.

The choices then, I realized, had already been made. Maybe they had been made since day one. I had no

doubt that my name would not be called here today.

My heart still hurt from how hard Elva had taken the news. We’d had to pack before the ceremony, so that when the time came, we could make a clean exit. Charlotte and Mark were with her now, distracting

her from the television.

“We will now begin,” the King announced.

The first name called. “Olivia.”

Her smile was wide and perfect. She was already placed on the first level of girls, so she had no trouble stepping forward, heading straight for Nicholas. She ascended the staircase and awaited her favor.

Nicholas took her hand in his and placed a soft, barely-there kiss to her knuckles,

The girl next to me cursed. I better get a kiss.”

The next name was not a shock either. “Lilliana.”

She too went to Nicholas, and received a kiss to her hand.

“Linda,” came next. She also went to Nicholas.

Julian teased, “Come on, ladies, give one of us other guys a chance.” This earned a laugh in the room.

One by one, more names were called. Julian finally won his first girl, who he kissed on the cheek. Joyce gained a couple as well, but he simply shook their hands.

“Susie,” the Luna said.

For a moment, my excitement jumped, and it was all I could do to keep from clapping. Susie had done well in the hunting **event**, having a clear talent for communicating with the wolves. She deserved to see it

through until the next **round**.

She hesitated at the base of the three staircases, but ultimately went to Nicholas. I wasn’t sure she had

spoken more than a hello to the other two at any point. **She’d** likely have to rectify that, if she was going

to stay until the finals.

I knew Nicholas well. I could tell that he liked her, but no more than a friend. From Susie’s reaction to

him, I gathered that feeling was mutual.

The selection continued until there was only one left to name. I continued to stand on the three-tiered

platform, though most of the spaces around me were now empty,

I’d known it would come to this, but I still trembled with trepidation.

Lied to calm down by reminding myself that I would get to see Anna again. Though that relief was short lived. To survive, she would have likely needed to lease out my room.

Elva and I could **be** on the street tonight.

Nathan took over the microphone again. "With only one left to select, who will it be? Stick around, because after this commercial break, all will be revealed!"

He held his pose for a few seconds, until one of the television producers said, "We're clear!"

At once, near everyone in the room slumped.

"This is bullshit," said a girl near my right. "How could I not be picked yet? I'm better than half of those Josera

Tell me about it, scoffed another girl

I kept my head up, tall and proud, afraid that if I let the façade slip for even a minute, I would break down

in tears.

A man with the group behind the camera suddenly rushed over to where the King and Queen were speaking with the princes at the edge of the stage.

"The public, Your Majesty. They don't understand!" the publicist, panicked, spoke loud enough for the whole room to hear. "The social channels are all exploding. They demand to know why Piper has not yet

been selected."

"Because she has not earned the privilege," the Luna said coldly.

Julian laughed once very loudly. Then he crossed his arms. "Wow. If only someone could have predicted

this outcome."

"Don't be crass, Julian," the King said. "We now find ourselves in uncertainty."

"What uncertainty? What you have to do is obvious."

"Julian," the Queen snapped this time.

He turned his smug smile onto her, but said no more.

“We are faced with a choice,” the King said. “Either way we lose.”

“Piper ranked highly,” Nicholas said. “It would be no great hardship for her to stay.”

it goes against all of our traditions,” the Queen said. “It is only for the public alone that her presence has been tolerated thus far. She has no place in further competition.”

“We’re back in two!” called the producer.

“This is getting out of control,” the Queen said. “We cannot allow the public to dictate our decisions.”

But we cannot ignore them either,” the **King** added. He rubbed a hand along his chin.

Til handle it, Nicholas said suddenly. The entirety of the royal family – even Joyce, who had mostly seemed bored by the exchange – looked at him.

The King lowered his brow, “How?”

“One minute and counting!” the producer called “Everyone back to your positions, please!”

TH make it look like a personal decision on my part,” Nicholas said. “Then no one but me will take the blame.

The King seemed unsatisfied, but the Luna was tugging him away, back to their spot. The princes moved

to their own positions.

Some words were passed between Julian and Nicholas, though I couldn’t hear what.

“Sorry, Piper,” said the girl beside me. “Sounds like they are sending you out with the trash.”

“I’m sorry too,” I said, hoping to reflect her comradery.

But the girl laughed at me instead. “I’m not the one going home tonight.”

“Welcome back, ladies and gentleman!” Nathan said, signaling the return of the program. “Our final

selection of the evening will **be** personally chosen by the oldest son, Prince Nicholas!”

Nathan crossed the stage to bring Nicholas the microphone.

“Go on, Your Royal Highness. Tell the kingdom who the last selection is.”

Nicholas glanced over the remaining 10 faces before landing on mine.

With my gaze, I tried to tell him it was okay. That I understood. For me to be sent home wasn't personal. It was just how the world worked.

But then he said, "Piper."

Chapter 0093

The Luna audibly gasped. Some of the girls around me started screaming. Guards quickly moved in to usher them **from** the room. I was urged forward.

"End the program," the King shouted. "Now."

The cameras immediately shut off.

Before I could reach the staircase and earn my favor from the prince of my choice, my path was blocked

with a very angry King and Queen,

"Nicholas!" the King shouted.

"What have you done?" the Luna cried.

Nicholas quickly came down the staircase to join me at my side. I stared at **him**, bewildered.

"You heard the public," he said. "This is what they wanted, even if you were too bullheaded to see it."

"Careful," the King said.

"Piper won the people's favor. More, she won the game by the rules we'd assigned."

"I can do one better than that, even," Julian said, jumping down from the stage. He carried

my broken

bow in his hands. Where had he gotten it? Had his Beta kept it hidden for him?

He threw it down into the space between the King and Queen, and me and Nicholas.

"She excelled even when our own staff tried to have her killed," Julian said.

"Our staff?" the Luna gasped.

“Who?” the King demanded.

Julian and Nicholas both shifted their gazes to where Lena was tucked in the Queen’s shadow.

Her face went pale.

Julian smirked, “Anything to say, Lena?”

She seemed set, like she had no intention of moving. The Queen herself motioned her forward.

“Is this true?” The Queen motioned to the broken bow. “Is this your doing?”

Lena lowered her head. She did not answer. It seemed even she couldn’t lie to her queen.

This servant humbly asks for your forgiveness,” she said. “I only ever wished to preserve the sanctity of

the royal throne.”

“But trying to kill someone?” Nicholas said. “Piper could have died had her wolf not stepped in.”

“I did not intend her physical harm. I only wished to keep her from finishing the contest. I had no reason to believe that this girl would wander alone into the forest without the protection of a prince.”

“Yet that is exactly what happened,” Nicholas said.

Lena bowed.

The King and Queen looked at each other. Neither seemed pleased by this revelation, or truly by anything

that had happened tonight.

“This is an evening of supposed celebration,” the King said. “We will handle this matter privately later.”

“But she will be reprimanded?” Nicholas pressed.

“Yes,” the King said. All eyes looked to the Queen.

Begrudgingly, she uttered, “Yes. Lena, see yourself out and send in your successor. I will not see your

face the rest of this evening.”

“Yes, my Queen.” Lena scurried to obey the Luna’s command, scrambling from the room.

The King rubbed his forehead. “What an absolute mess.”

“Your Majesty,” called the publicist as he hurried closer. “Great news! The public has now approved of

your selection. They applaud you for making the choosing of Piper so dramatic.”

Yes, yes, that’s fine.” The King pushed him away.

The producer quickly filled the new open space. “We need to move into the second area now, Your Majesty, if you’d allow.”

“Second area?” I whispered to Nicholas.

“We are holding a small party for those that remain,” Nicholas replied, voice just as soft. “You’ll get more camera time **and** a personal audience with the King.”

None of that sounded very appealing at the moment, knowing the King and Queen specifically had

decided to send me home

and I didn’t know what I was doing here, Nicholas should have sent me home, Hedert van

Yet here I was, one of the 15 remaining girls, with Nicholas himself having stuck his neck out to save me. I didn’t begin to know how to thank him, or why he’d done it.

“I think maybe I should duck out for the night,” I said. If I was there, I would certainly bring down the

party.

Nicholas shook his head. “Stay.”

He... wanted me to stay?

I was so confused. But I found that now, just like three years ago, I had trouble denying him, especially

such a simple request.

“Very well,” I said.

Nicholas and I were separated as we were led into the ballroom. The servants directed me to join the line of remaining girls. The cameramen were setting up to record a long shot, moving on by one through the fifteen, until every girl's name and face was shown.

When that was completed, we waited as a group while hors d'oeuvres were served, as the King's servants pulled each girl one by one for her personal meeting.

In the corner of the room, an orchestra was setting up. In the other corner, a water station was prepared beside a table of champagne bottles and glasses.

Twice Nicholas tried to come over to speak with me, twice he got no farther than, "Piper, if we could..."

before he was escorted away by Nathan,

"The girls will be available to talk after the King has had his time to speak with each," Nathan said both

times, more forcefully on the second.

Before long, it was my turn to face the King. The servants guided me to a familiar sitting room where I

had once been reprimanded by the Queen for my unfashionable glove length. This time, my gloves had

been perfect, Charlotte had assured me.

The King was seated alone, and I was made to stand before him.

"Leave us," the King said.

The servant bowed and made his escape. He shut the door behind him, leaving me alone with the King **and one** sole guard, likely there if I tried anything.

I had no intention of harming the King I didn't even want to be near him

The King rested his fingers together, forming a pyramid in front of his mouth.

I had learned my lesson in the past, and waited to be addressed. Royalty, it seemed, really loved to

make people wait. Probably because it was so unnerving.

I knew he didn't like me. He most likely enjoyed watch me sweat with nervousness.

“You **have** come to us as a stranger, Piper, but I know you are not one.”

I blinked.

I am very aware that you and Nicholas used to date.”

My body ran cold. Of all the **things** I had imagined him to say, this had not made my list. If he'd known... why hadn't he said anything before? Why hadn't Nicholas?

“Nicholas does not know that I recognize you. He believes that he had kept you secret from me, all those years ago. He is a foolish boy. I am King. I know everything.”

He tapped his fingers together one by one. “He thinks I gave him room to grow when he was in school. That I allowed a measure of freedom. He is mistaken. His every moment, his every choice, I watched

under a microscope.”

The King had Nicholas followed then. He'd likely had me followed **too**.

Did that mean he knew about my downfall? About the taking of my wolf? About my adoption of Elva as

my own?

I shivered, a hint of fear staking within me.

Why was he telling me this now?

I swallowed down my fear, forcing my voice forward. “What do you want from me?”

“What I want from you is simple, Piper.”

I braced myself, expecting the worst. Did he want me to drop out of the competition? Or something even

Worse?

Then he spoke, “You will leave Nicholas alone.”

Today's Bonus Offer

Chapter 0094

“I hope you can understand and respect Nicholas's need to move on from the train wreck you once shared together,” the King continued.

I swallowed thickly, fear mixing with anger. What Nicholas and I had was special, not anything like a terrible accident. We'd cared deeply for each other. I'd had to leave him for his own sake, but I had never stopped caring about him.

Yet as annoyed as the accusation made me, I did understand the King's point of view. Nicholas had revealed to me that he was still hung up on **our** break up even now, three years later. He deserved to be

free, to find someone to love.

I doubted, however, that the King's concern for his son had little to do with genuine care and everything

to do with full control.

Nicholas had been tied up in this from the start. The King and Queen had likely already chosen partners for each of their children, and this competition was nothing more than a farce for the people's

entertainment.

"I have told no one of your shared past, and those that do know are sworn to secrecy on the threat of death. You understand, don't you, Piper?"

I understood the threat well enough. It sounded a lot like if word got out about Nicholas and me, the King would have me killed.

So much for making me untouchable, I doubted there was anything Julian or Nicholas could do to stop a King's direct order, no matter how heinous.

understand," I said, proud of myself when the words came out unbroken.

"Good." He lowered his hands. A kind smile spread across his lips, so different from the dark threat he'd just given. "Enjoy your time here, Piper. Let things play out as they will. But never, and I mean never, allow yourself to grow too comfortable."

Tunderstand." The word did shake this time.

"We understand each other then." He waved me toward the door. "Have them bring in the next **girl** when

you leave."

rushed as quickly as propriety would allow me toward the door. Once outside, I delivered the King's

request to one of his servants, who rushed to accommodate.

Yet no sooner had I walked away from the King's servants and into the ballroom, then Nicholes sought

"We need to speak privately."

I shook my head, adamantly against it with the King's words rattling in my head. It was a major faux pas to deny the prince a requested audience, but I reasoned the King's request took precedence.

"I'm sorry, Nicholas. I just **can't**."

I hurried toward the drink table, eager to drown my worries **in** champagne. I haven't drunk since before Elva, when I'd had a stolen sip or two underage at the academy. I'd always wanted to k

I was eager to lose it now.

Unfortunately, Nicholas followed. "What's wrong? What happened?"

my head.

my hand before I

I snatched a champagne flute from the table and went to down it. He plucked it from my hand and returned it to the table.

I glared at him. "I'm allowed to drink."

"You're upset."

I shook my head. "Just leave me alone."

He startled, straightening. "What?"

"We can't talk. Leave me alone." I had thought I'd hardened myself to him, but with the shock of the King's knowledge of our past, and the fear that came with his threat, I found myself struggling to lie to

myself.

Other than Elva, Nicholas was the only person I could truly **talk** to in this palace. I trusted some, Mark,

Susie, and Charlotte. But they didn't know me like Nicholas did. They couldn't see me, and in once glance

know that I was falling apart.

“Come with me. We’ll talk in private. You can tell me what’s going on. Then, I’ll leave you alone.” Jsniffed, tears threatening. I **can’t...**”

Chapter 0095

“You would deny the direct command of your prince?” he asked, voice firm. It was an act, I knew him enough to be able to tell. But he was giving me the reason I needed comply with his wishes if I so chose.

And I desperately wanted to.

“Okay,” I said at last. He utilized his servants to draw attention away from us. When he was certain we were safe, he whisked me away, out onto the balcony where we were alone

Night had set in. The moon was bright above us, illuminating the spacious balcony more than the

candlelight could.

Nicholas maintained distance, not touching, though he stayed close enough to reach for me if I faltered. My twisted ankle felt much better now, though, so I walked steadily. It was only my hands that were

shaking.

We stopped at the railing, and together looked out over the darkness. I thought the gardens might be

below, but I couldn’t be certain.

He stood beside me, **looking** at me rather than the view.

“Piper,” he prompted.

“Your father knows about us,” I said.

He **froze**

“He had you followed, all those years ago. He knows everything.” I clasped my hands together. “He told me to stay away from you: He’s **right**, Nicholas. I should stay away.”

“No,” Nicholas said, coming closer. He pressed his palm into the small of my back. I should have shied from the touch, but I melted into it instead.

Despite everything, his closeness was the comfort I needed.

But I didn’t want to die. A tear escape my eye and tracked down my face.

Piper A hint of desperation marred Nicholas's voice, tightening it a bit from its usual facile calm. **He**

almost recognizable. "Elva told me you keep my picture in your wallet. Tell me, is it true?"

My breath caught in my throat. Elva **had** told him about that? When? Why?

she had seen it so much Had she recognized him from the start? Was that wh

"It's true," he **said**, before I could decide whether or not to deny it. "I can tell just by looking at you."

I lowered my head, as shame crept in. I allowed myself one last picture of him. I'd purged everything else, but I could never get rid of my favorite. He'd been smiling so bright, just for me.

I knew we couldn't be together but I didn't want to let him **go**, not all the way. I wanted to at least remember what it had felt like to **be** loved.

"I don't understand," Nicholas said, and he sounded almost as broken as I felt. "Why would you keep that

picture?"

"I don't know." I didn't have a good enough answer.

"If you care so much about me, how could you leave me for another man?"

"I didn't." The words came out in my grief and my upset. I hadn't meant to say them.

His eyes were so expressive. Wide and confused. The flecks of green sparkled under the moonlight.

I wished I **had** an answer for him that made sense.

But the truth would only hurt him more... wouldn't it?

"But Elva..." he said, and it was an effective counterpoint for someone who didn't know the whole story.

He didn't understand. How could he?

Elva looked like me, because she looked like my sister. If someone didn't know that connection, they would never guess Elva wasn't mine.

Nicholas wouldn't understand. Not until I told him the truth.

My chest ached with longing. For years, I'd wanted him to know what really happened. But I'd held myself back.

He deserved better. He deserved more.

Maybe, thinking on it now, what he really deserved was the truth.

So I said, "Nicholas, do you remember my twin sister?"

Today's Bonus Offer

Chapter 0096

Nicholas **had** never met my twin, but I had definitely talked about her when he and I had been dating. I was constantly worried about her, and she would sneak out into my conversations without even meaning

1. to.

Ever since we were kids, she was getting in trouble. Maybe she was too free-spirited. Maybe she was an adrenaline junkie. I'd never been sure. But she chased danger like she was invincible. It was only a matter

of time before she caught it

Or it caught her.

Under the bright moonlight, I watched the shifts in Nicholas's expression as he thought it through.

That I had left him to be with someone else had been the most obvious answer for my sudden

departure. He had convinced himself it was true because it made the most sense

But I couldn't help but wonder if deep down, he doubted.

We had been very much in love for all of our time together. We clicked fast and fell hard. For a long time,

I thought he might be the one.

He knew that. He felt it too.

He had to question whether I would simply up and leave for such a selfish reason. I was not a good enough actor for everything we shared to be a lie.

Nicholas's brow pulled together, confused.

Slowly, he seemed to piece it together. My constant worrying. The timing. Elva's age.

When we broke up, Elva had already been born.

"Your sister," he said. "Your twin."

I nodded.

Elva looks just like you. So she would also look like her."

brow smoothed **out**. He looked at me as if seeing me for the first time. "Elva is your sister's

the Brusts. At femid, in part. The rest I could not see

"My sister went with the wrong crowd. She became tangled up in a series of bad situations that

ultimately left her pregnant and alone. She'd broken contact with me a few times but when she reached

out and asked for my help..."

I remembered the desperation in her voice as she had begged me, "Piper, I need you."

"You never told me," Nicholas said. "I would have helped."

"No. I couldn't involve you in this. You are nobility —"

"To hell with nobility," Nicholas said, straightening. "I loved you, and you were hurting. I should have been there for you. I would have been."

"But you also had a really bright future. You'd never been... tarnished with any of the **things** she was involved in." I lowered my head, afraid he might see the lingering feelings on my face. "I wanted to keep

you safe."

Nicholas placed his index finger under my chin and gently coaxed me to look at him again. I had thought

he'd be angry, but his eyes held only concern. When he spoke, his voice was whisper-soft.

"And who was keeping you safe?"

We both knew the answer. no one.

“Elva was a newborn when the underground organization snatched her away from the hospital. My sister.

owed them many debts. I offered to pay. I knew I could scrounge up the money somehow. But they

laughed at me.”

Nicholas’s hand moved from under my chin to curl around where my neck met my shoulder. His fingers massaged **the** muscle there, offering silent comfort.

He must have been able to tell how difficult this was for me.

Remembering the past like this, nearly sent me straight back there. His touch was grounding, keeping me here in the present with him.

They wanted my wolf. I didn’t even hesitate. They had Elva.”

tried to blink back the tears but they still escaped from under my lashes. Even after three years, everything that happened felt so raw.

You did what you had to do, Nicholas said. His understanding surprised me. I searched his face out for any hint of deception: He meant his words

to me when

“What happened to your sister? How did you end up with Elva?

“Once my wolf was taken from me, she totally disappeared. But they held up their end of the bargain and

gave me Elva. I thought my sister would eventually return but she never has

Chapter 0097

No visits. No phone calls. No birthday or Christmas **cards** for Elva.

It wasn’t the first time she **had** gone dark on me, but this time the circumstances were much different. I was caring for her child, the one she had been so desperate to rescue when she’d called me.

Whether the underground organization had gotten to her, or she had only wanted me to remove her

responsibility, I wasn’t sure.

She wasn’t dead. I knew that much. As twins, we **shared a bond**. If she was dead, I was certain that I

would feel it. What little comfort I had, was from knowing she was still alive somewhere I had lost my wolf and my sister in one day. And my boyfriend soon after. But I had gained Elva, so I

would never regret. But my grief remained palpable.

I could see a similar grief now reflected in Nicholas's eyes. It lasted only a moment before it was

replaced with a blazing, righteous fury. Yet his touch remained gentle. His voice was measured.

"All of this Everything you went through Everything you lost. And our whole relationship ended,

because of your sister

I understood his anger. I felt it for myself many times. But at the end of the day, she was family.

"She's my sister. Even if things ended badly, we'll always share blood. As twins, our bond is even more profound"

he didn't care about any of that when she set you up to lose everything. Or when she then abandoned you and Elva"

"It's not like that." I stepped back from him, pulling away from his touch "She's mixed up with a bad crowd. She didn't set me up. And she didn't abandon us, either, she just hasn't come back yet."

Thio,

1. ho. Nicholas We grew up together Wherever she is, she must have her own reasons. When she comes back, I will sit down with her and hear her out. She deserves a chance —*

doesn't deserve half so much for what she did to you Nicholas followed me inching into my

Bathing

upati Tel even with his looming intimidating furious presence

touring

"You sacrificed everything for her. And she couldn't even be asked to stick around. Did she at least say

thank you?

She hadn't I never saw her again after losing my wolf. I awoke in a dirty alley with a crying baby pressed

beside me

I watched the moment Nicholas's anger twisted inwards. He seemed to deflate a little

"If you would have told me..."

"What I did was illegal," I said. "And I had a baby I couldn't stay in school after that

"I would have supported you"

"How? By dropping out alongside me?" I shook my head 7 never would have let you This was the only

way, to protect us both"

Nicholas reached out and gripped my upper arms. He held me firmly, but not enough to hurt

"You were my girlfriend, Piper. I would have done anything for you.

"You think I didn't know that? That was exactly why I couldn't tell you! You deserved so much better"

"So did you! If you would have only

"Well, isn't this a sight, Linda said from the doorway.

Nicholas and I jumped apart. His arms fell to his sides

At once, his fury and desperation disappeared under his princely persona, cold and detached The

witch was jarring.

"You should have immediately made your presence known," Nicholas said, voice flat. "How much did

you overhear?"

"Many apologies, Your Royal Highness. I assure you my intentions were pure. I merely wondered where you **had** wandered off to, and thought to look out here." Linda tapped a finger to her chin "As for how

much I heard...

Her gaze slid from Nicholas to me and back again.

“So you two were campus sweethearts, hm?”

Today's Bonus Offer

Chapter 0098

The breath punched from my lungs. Linda maybe hadn't eavesdropped on everything, but she had definitely heard that Nicholas and I had once dated.

“I imagine that information would be quite problematic if it was to be publicly known.” With a sway of her hips, Linda sauntered closer.

Problematic was an understatement, especially with the King's threat on my life.

Nicholas narrowed his eyes. “What do you want, Linda?”

“Straight to the point, aren't you?” Linda said.

“I don't like games.

She shrugged. “Fine. Listen, I'm not unreasonable. I'd be happy to keep this information quiet if I'm given

the proper motivation.”

Nicholas crossed his arms. “And what would that entail?”

She tilted her head, a smile on her lips. “I want you to publically favor me. I want private dates, sitting beside each other at banquets, first dances at the balls. All of it. And when the time comes, maybe you'll

consider me for the finale.”

I curled my hands into fists. How could she be so underhanded as to **use** this information, wrongfully

overheard, in such a way? Had she no shame?

But I couldn't say a word against it, with the King's threat hanging over me. As much as I wanted to tell Linda to **buzz** off, if she shared what she'd learned, I would be in the worst kind of trouble.

Nicholas, meanwhile, had no sense of my dilemma. All he could see was this person before him trying to garner ill-begotten gains.

“I won’t be blackmailed,” he said, glaring.

Linda, **unfazed**, tapped her finger to her chin. “I suppose the secret being out wouldn’t affect your princely reputation. Yet I’m sure you can imagine what it might mean for Piper.”

Nicholas glanced at me. The blood drained **from** my face.”

“**She’d** likely be kicked out of the competition for unfair advantage.” Linda continued. “You two have a history. It’s difficult to compete with that.

Nicholas’s fierce gaze sliced back to Linda. “Maybe it’s **you** that I will see **leave this** competition.

Chapter **0099**

Linda was not that person.

Yet.. the King’s threats kept me from saying as much.

“That’s not the way the world works, Piper. At least not within the palace walls.” He faced the balcony railing, and looked out into the darkness. “If playing this game with Linda keeps you and Elva here and

safe, then that is as good a reason as any for me to follow through.”

I absolutely hated that I had no other choice but to let him.

“I’ll respect your wishes in this,” he said, “Whatever you want is what I’ll do.”

He had to do it, or the King might have me killed. All I had to do was tell him so, even though I truly didn’t want to.

If I was alone in this world, I would tell him to turn her down flat. As it was, I had Elva. Elva needed her

mother. I couldn’t afford to be reckless with her care in jeopardy.

Yet the words he waited for did not come easily. I tried several times but could not force myself to say

them.

Instead, after a few agonizing minutes, I said, “We should think about it. Linda gave us some time. Let’s

use it.”

He tilted his face toward me. The moonlight reflected in his eyes, and they sparkled, golden and bright.

The thought of Linda getting to see him like this made me want to scream. With how she was acting,

she didn't deserve to have him, even for one evening. Certainly not all of them.

“We'll need **to** have an answer the night before the challenge,” he said. He was giving me time then.

I exhaled in relief. I hadn't realized that I hadn't held my breath.

“I'll have one before then,” I said, and hoped I wasn't lying.

Shortly later, after I wiped my eyes and practiced my smile, we returned to the party. The orchestra had

set

up by now, **and** the **King** had finished with his private audiences. The King and Queen were now

seated in their thrones.

Several of

the girls had begun dancing on the floor with some of the honored guests who **had** been

allowed to attend tonight. Most were personal friends of the **King** and Queen. Although a few celebrities

were also present

“To bring up the ratings,” Nicholas told me.

Julian was in the middle of the **floor**, dancing with one of the girls who had chosen to earn his favor during the elimination ceremony. When he spotted Nicholas and me, he ditched her right in the middle of their dance and came toward us.

move.

She didn't seem all that upset, as Julian's Beta **Brian** immediately guided her into the waiting arms of another single dancer. For him to have acted so quickly, Brian **must** have anticipated Julian's every n

to **find** out he

It certainly brought Julian's behavior into question. Not that it was particularly shocking to

was treating the girls so fleetingly.

Julian

walked to us. I thought he might have something to say about our disappearance. If any one would

have noticed, it would have been him. But he just smirked as he glanced between us.

"The music's started," he said then. "The dances have begun.

"We can see and hear fine," Nicholas grumbled.

"I suppose you can," Julian laughed. "Forgive my clumsy words. I merely wished to lead into a question."

Nicholas narrowed his eyes.

I

"What question would that be?" I asked, though I had a sneaking suspicion. Though surely even Julian wouldn't be so shameless as to ask me for a dance when I was clearly speaking with his brother.

Weren't there rules about such things?

Then again, Julian never seemed to care for the rules.

Julian, fully facing me, bowed low. He held out his hand. "Miss Piper, would you give me the honor of this dance?"

Chapter 0100

"No," Nicholas said.

Julian, still bowing, shot him a **glare**. "I wasn't asking you, brother. In case that wasn't obvious."

1

"She will not dance with you, because she is about to dance with me." Nicholas said.

Julian straightened upright. "Is that what was happening here? Because, to me, it appeared as if you two were awkwardly standing near each other and only barely talking."

That description didn't sound so different from some of the royal dances I knew, but I decided not to

point that out.

"Even if we were only talking, you must admit how exceedingly rude it is to interrupt," Nicholas said.

"Rude, maybe," Julian said. "But necessary, if I'm to save Piper from an evening of boredom."

"Perhaps we should ask the lady to choose for herself," Nicholas said. He looked at me.

Julian did too. "Well, Piper? Which of us will it be?"

My heart leaned for Nicholas and the comfort of his presence. I'd given him quite the shock tonight, I was sure, with revelation after revelation. I wanted to make sure he was okay.

Yet as I glanced out over the room, I felt two pairs of eyes pressing down onto me. One pair belonged to

Linda, who downed an entire champagne flute while glaring at me. The other pair was the King's.

The King

watched me from atop his throne. He wore no expression, but a chill struck through me under the intensity of his eyes. He was judgmental and observant. I had no way of knowing if he knew about

Linda's ultimatum.

I couldn't take the chance either way. So I held out my hand and accepted Julian's dance.

Immediately he clasped my hand in both of his.

Nicholas just stared a moment, a touch of surprise widening his eyes. "Piper?"

"Don't be a sore loser, brother." Julian's grin sharpened. "Wouldn't want the whole room to see how

jealous you are."

In an instant, Nicholas schooled his features. "I'm not jealous."

My heart sunk a bit at the words, even though it had no real reason to. Nicholas and I did **not** belong to

each other anymore. He had no right to be jealous, and I had no right to want him to.

“Could have fooled me.” Julian tugged on my hand, pulling me out onto the dance floor. As he held my hand with one of his, he wrapped his other arm around my back.

The music was a faster song, though the steps were simple. I was able to keep up fairly easily. With Julian twirling me around the dance floor, I noticed Linda and the King had stopped paying me any mind.

Nicholas, however, watched Julian and me with an unreadable expression. His eyes never left us for long, even as other girls approached to speak with him.

“Interesting,” Julian said, and I braced myself for whatever observation he was about to make. “You and Nicholas disappear for a time. Then when you return, he is even more protective than before.”

I swallowed thickly. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“It’s slight, but there’s definitely been a change in him.” Julian tilted his head, looking at me curiously.

There’s a shift in you, too.”

I nearly stumbled over my feet, but Julian, holding me upright, guided me into the next step without

missing a beat.

“Can I guess what you two talked about?” he asked.

I would much rather have preferred that he didn’t, but I knew he would anyway.

“He knows the truth now, doesn’t he? About your wolf. About Elva.”

Julian’s power of observation was alarming and unnerving. I didn’t think I’d ever be used to it.

“You don’t have to say anything. I know I’m right.”

“I had to tell him,” I said..

“You don’t have to explain yourself to me.”

Julian led me into a twirl, then tugged me back into his arms.

“Honestly, I’m surprised it took this long.”

Today's Bonus Offer