

The Luna Choosing Game by Jane Above Story Chapter 5

Chapter 0005

Nicholas held Elva safe and secure in his arms as he stood to his full height. Elva buried her face into the corner of his neck and shoulder. He gently patted her back.

He glanced down at Elva, his gaze so tender that it made my heart clench.

“There, there,” he whispered. “You are safe now.”

“Oh my God,” said one of the other girls in the room, fanning herself. “Of course he’s good with children.”

“Someone pinch me,” said another. “I think I’m dreaming.”

Nicholas’s soft expression hardened as he glared out at the rest of the room. “Whose child is this? Why is she here?”

I started forward, but the girl in the pink dress spoke before I could reach him.

“An outsider sneaked in, unless she’s a maid.”

Some of the other girls snickered at my expense.

“She can’t be a participant,” another girl fake-whispered, loud enough for half-the room to hear. “I thought we had to be virgins, and she’s got a kid.”

I wanted to disappear into a corner. Whether virgin or not, I was nothing compared to the rest of these girls.

My clothes weren't as nice as theirs, and my figure wasn't like what it had been at the Academy. I'd lost much of my musculature. I was skinny from too many nights of skipped dinners.

Elva's wellbeing had always come before my own.

Her sake was the only reason I continued forward rather than hide in embarrassment. I stopped only when I reached Nicholas.

He looked at me, and I looked at him.

I'd forgotten how gorgeous his eyes were, golden brown with flakes of green. When we'd dated, I had spent hours looking at them, trying to memorize that color, but it had seemed different each time.

Before, when I'd stared long enough, I could earn a bashful smile from him. Now, his face was totally devoid of emotion. He looked at me like I was a stranger.

Did he... not recognize me?

I had changed, sure, but not enough to become unrecognizable. Unless he truly had sealed me away in his past and moved on, never once looking back.

Or maybe he was simply pretending, to save face. I could be a great embarrassment to him, showing up here, years after leaving him, and with a child.

Maybe he hated me.

"This is the outsider." The girl in pink motioned to me.

“I’ll look into this,” Nicholas said, and even his voice was monotone. Another moment of staring at me blankly, then he turned and walked away.

He still held Elva, so I followed him. He led me to an adjoining room, separated by a door.

An official-looking man in a suit hurried toward him. “Your Royal Highness, please remember that per the selection rules, you aren’t to be alone with the contestants yet.”

Nicholas stopped to look at the man, who nervously backed up a step.

“This is an exception,” Nicholas said.

“Yes, sir. Of course, sir.” The man bowed twice as he withdrew.

Nicholas carried Elva into the room. I went inside after them. A servant stepped forward and closed the door behind us, leaving Nicholas, Elva, and I alone in a small sitting room.

My stomach churned. I thought I might be sick. I had never imagined I'd meet Nicholas again, and especially not like this.

I had no idea what even to say. What would he think of me, to see me as I was? To see me here, as part of the selection? And with Elva?

Elva, who seemed at ease against his chest. She must have cried herself to sleep, eyes closed and drooling. She seemed at peace.

I stepped forward toward Nicholas, and at once, his perfect façade cracked. He frowned. His golden eyes filled with rage.

Though his hands stayed gentle on Elva, his arm looped more protectively around her.

“How dare you hide my child from me?” he demanded.

All of my thoughts skidded to a stop. I blinked once, twice, but, no, I couldn't make sense of what he said.

Eloquently, I said, “Huh?”

I glanced at Elva, softly sleeping in his arms. She was three years old. That lined up with our breakup three years ago. But...

I tried to recall the memory. We'd been so young then, too eager and excited and inexperienced.

We'd both finished in clumsy haste. I couldn't remember where he was when he'd climaxed. But, hadn't he been wearing a condom at the time?

His face retained its anger, but the certainty that fueled it seemed to slide into bewilderment. His gaze shifted, like he was trying to remember too.

“You’re mistaken,” I said, hoping to give him some ease.

It was no secret that Nicholas wanted children. He’d even said so on television. For me to hide a child from him would have been a cruelty. He would likely have struggled forever over the guilt for the years he’d lost.

“Elva. That’s her name. But she’s not yours.”

His eyes widened a moment, before the anger returned tenfold. “You...”

Whatever he wanted to say, he seemed to struggle to get it out. He swallowed it down.

He glanced between me and Elva. “She looks like you.”

She would. Her birth mother was my identical twin sister. But I wouldn't tell that to Nicholas. Elva was mine in every way that mattered. I would not have her seen as anything less.

My silence seemed to answer some unspoken question for him, and he started to growl.

I straightened, startled. What could cause that reaction?

Elva stirred his arms, and he immediately cut off the deep rumbling sound.

Slowly, gently, he lowered Elva down onto one of the plush couches in the room.

“Don’t be mad at Mommy,” came Elva’s quiet voice.

My heart cracked.

Nicholas lightly shushed her as he moved a pillow under her resting head. “Rest now. Your mom and I are just going to talk.”

“No loud talking,” Elva said, eyelids drooping low.

“Okay,” Nicholas said, so soft.

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

We both waited until Elva’s breathing steadied out. When she was fast asleep, Nicholas straightened. He motioned me toward another door, this one to a bathroom.

I lifted a brow at him.

He motioned toward Elva, asleep.

He obviously didn’t want to wake her with whatever he was about to say. I didn’t want to wake her either.

Sighing, I walked into the bathroom. Fortunately, it was nearly as large as the room we’d just occupied, with a tall vanity taking up one wall, and a large bathtub stretching the entire width of another.

I went to the vanity before turning to face him as he closed the door three-quarters of the way behind him. Enough we could hear Elva if she called.

With Elva out of sight and earshot, and with Nicholas under the bright bathroom lights, I watched as his entire body tensed, stretching his height taller.

The gold of his eyes darkened to near black, leaving only flecks of green behind, sparkling light a forest under the moonlight.

True to his promise to Elva, he didn't raise his voice. Instead it was strained and low, dangerous.

"Piper."

It was the first time I had heard him say my name in three years. I shuddered unintentionally.

If he'd been anyone other than the man I'd loved all those years ago, I would have run for the hills.

But he was that man.

And he was angry. His body was nearly trembling in rage.

I waited for the accusation I guessed would come. Yet even when I heard it, it still hurt like a physical blow.

“How long after our breakup did you wait, before you let some other man get you pregnant?”