

THE LUNA CHOOSING GAME

Chapter 461



I blinked, staring at Julian. Go on vacation with them? Was he talking about the reward for the theater event? That would explain Veronica's presence.

I stepped back and welcomed them into the room. Then I reminded them, "I'm not one of the high ranking candidates."

Julian shrugged. "Who cares?" He had a devil-may-care kind of blasé behavior about this. One of those, I'm a prince and can do whatever I want, sort of attitudes.

"Surely, Veronica...?" I looked to her. This was her chance for personal one on one time with Julian. I knew she had said she was okay with losing the competition if it was to me, but there was no way she would just actively hand me her chances.

Veronica shrugged. "I'm more than okay with it. It was my idea."

I stared at her in shock.

"It's true," Julian added. "Actually, she came to me this afternoon and told me all about it. Neither of us want you to be excluded."

I still had trouble fathoming it. I didn't want to seem ungrateful for such a clearly generous gift, but... "Why?"

Veronica looked at me flatly. "Why wouldn't we want you there?"

"If we leave you here, you'll just sit around and be miserable the whole time you are here," Julian said. "Wouldn't it be better to see what those two are up too, rather than imagine it?"

Those two. He was talking about Nicholas and Bridget. And honestly, I wasn't sure that would be the case. Would I truly rather witness their coupledness myself?

Though maybe he did have a point. Maybe it would be worse to imagine it. So far, despite what Bridget has said about her and Nicholas being official, I haven't seen any affection from Nicholas to indicate that was actually true.

If I left them alone on a beach though... in front of romantic sunsets...

No. I shouldn't be fantasizing about getting in the way of their courtship. This was how things were always meant to be. Nicholas was always going to leave me for someone else.

I needed to respect that. I needed to stay away.

"Come on, Piper," Julian said. "Don't be such a worrywart. We won't be with them every minute. We could have some fun too."

"It's supposed to be beautiful there," Veronica added.

"It is," Julian replied. "White sandy beaches. Blue-green waters. Bonfires in the evening. Boat drinks only a hand wave away."

He made it sound like some kind of tropical paradise or resort. As the royal family's retreat, maybe that's exactly what it was.

During our conversation, Elva had been playing near the corner of the room. She perked up

when she heard us talking about beaches.

"Mommy?" she called. "Are we going somewhere?"

"I don't know, honey," I said, wondering just how much she overheard.

"Probably not..." She left her stuffed animal tea party and skipped over to us.

"Mommy, I want to go to the beach."

Okay, so she heard most everything. “I don’t know, honey. We weren’t exactly invited...”

“I just invited you,” Julian said.

“Me, too,” Veronica added.

Elva looked at both of them and then turned her doe eyes onto me. God, I’d never been able to resist that pouting look.

Elva had never really been on vacation. I’d always been so busy working, and her illness was such a consideration, we never ventured far from a doctor. Thusly, Elva had never seen the ocean. She never stepped on the sand. She’d seen it on television, sure, but never experienced it for herself.

I had a very hard time denying Elva anything on my best days. Now, when I was already caving, it wasn’t too difficult to let myself fold entirely.

I lifted my gaze from Elva to Julian and told him. “Elva will need a doctor on site, just in case.”

Julian nodded. “Priority one.” His smile started to grow. “Does that mean you two are going to come with us?”

Elva’s eyes went impossibly bigger.

I sighed. “Yes.”

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“Yay!” Elva began to jump. Julian took her hands and together they danced around in a circle. “You are making the correct choice,” Veronica said. “You need to relax.”

With Julian and Elva amusing themselves, I leaned closer to her and asked honestly, “You really think I’ll be able to relax there? With Nicholas and Bridget?”

Veronica pressed her mouth hard together. “It would be better for you and Julian to have each other.”

“Veronica...”

“You’ll need a swimsuit,” Julian said. His dance with Elva had ended and he now cut into Veronica and my conversation. He wagged his eyebrows at me. “Maybe you’d like to model a few for me? I can help you decide which to wear.”

Veronica rolled her eyes. I resisted the urge to smack him... because the truth was, “I don’t have a swimsuit.”

I couldn’t remember the last time I had worn one. Just as Elva had never been on a vacation, neither had I since taking her in as my own. I had been to the beach, long ago, and taken Elva to the pool a couple of times, but not nearly enough to warrant owning a swimsuit, let alone bringing it to a competition like this.

Charlotte, who had been cleaning up around Elva’s tea party now that she moved, smiled as she too came to join us.

“Wait one minute,” she said, and sneaked past us and into the closet. She returned with a bag from a name brand clothing store. “I suspected this might come up sooner or later, so I took the liberty of preparing a couple of things.

Charlotte reached into the bag and then procured two different swimsuits, one a nice, conservative one-piece, the other, a more risqué two-piece that would show much of my curves, top and bottom.

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with the two-piece,” Julian said. “I’ve seen your...” He glanced at Elva, who was looking at him curiously. “Er... assets.” He immediately censored himself.” There’s no shame in flaunting what

you have.”

“You should wear what you are most comfortable in,” Veronica said.

“Yeah, sure,” Julian said, “But when you took your clothes off and jumped into that lake “Julian!” I hissed. “This is exactly why people think something happened between us.

“It doesn’t mean anything to recognize the... figure of a person you are acquainted with,” he said.

“You and I know that, but the rest of the palace doesn’t,” I said. “Those rumors are still floating around. Or should I credit you with starting them.”

His sharp smirk slipped a little. “I wouldn’t do that,” he said.

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I went too far, I realized. I knew he wouldn’t. I was just so angry and scared about it. That rumor had driven Nicholas away from me. It had made the other girls look at me differently. It had given the royal family an opportunity to further chastise me, even though, with our fake relationship, they had already suspected we’d been sleeping together for months.

Then I remembered. They weren’t mad about my supposed sleeping with Julian. They were mad that I was caught.

“Actually,” Veronica said. “I’ve been looking into that. I’ve asked everyone and traced back the rumor to its source.”

“And what’s the source?” Julian asked.

Veronica held his gaze as she said, “Bridget.”

“No,” Julian said: “There’s no way Bridget would start that rumor.”

I pressed my lips hard together and lowered my head so I wouldn’t have to look him in the eye. I hadn’t talked to him since the morning out in the gardens. He didn’t know all the new things I had heard from Bridget herself.

She had been so entirely indifferent to him and me sleeping together. After she ‘came to my rescue’ against Nathan, she had literally told me she didn’t care if we had slept together or not. I knew then that those words would hurt Julian, just as I did now. I still didn’t want to tell him.

“It was her,” Veronica said. “I’m sure of it.”

Having suspected Bridget from the start, though hoping I was wrong, I believed Veronica. Bridget and Nicholas were the only two who knew I had been out late that night, other than Brian. But I couldn’t imagine Brian would say a word. And Nicholas wouldn’t lie to himself about this.

It could have only been Bridget from the start.

Julian, however, was having a hard time accepting that. His smile faded, as it so often did when it came to Bridget. Without a word, he turned toward the door. He stopped only to gently pat Elva on the head, then he rushed out into the hallway.

We all watched after him for a moment. Then I looked to Veronica.

“Do you think he’ll be okay?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “It seems as if he’s been dealing with these feelings a long time.”

“He’s usually so observant,” I said. “It’s like he has a blind spot when it comes to her.” “Love can do that,” she said. She glanced at the door again, which was now closed. There was no lingering presence of him in the room. He’d even seemed to forget about the swimsuits.

I turn to Charlotte, who was holding the swimsuits not quite as high as before. "Please pack both of those suits, Charlotte," I said. "Is there one for Elva as well?"

Charlotte smiled at Elva. "Come on, Elva. Yours are in the closet still. Why don't I show you? One looks like it has a little tutu, like a ballerina!"

A bright smile burst from Elva, and she skipped toward Charlotte. They entered the closet together, leaving the door opened wide. I would join them in a moment, but first I returned my attention to Veronica.

"Thank you," I said. "You didn't have to go to Julian about this. You certainly didn't have to include me at all."

"There were a lot of reasons I felt you should join us," Veronica said. "One of them is that I want you there."

"Thank you," I said again, just in case the first didn't have enough emphasis. Then I pulled

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Chapter 0463

I hadn't considered this, how my joining this trip would make the other girls feel. I looked to Susie for comfort and answers. She, at least, didn't seem jealous. Why would she? The man she wanted was staying here.

"How does everyone know so fast?" I asked her quietly, while Veronica distracted Tiffany with talk of their meal. The chicken parmesan was delicious. I couldn't imagine Veronica would tell anyone. Nor could I really see Julian walking into the room to share the news.

"Bridget told everyone before you arrived," Susie replied.

But how did she know? Only Veronica, Julian, and I knew and- oh.

Julian must have told her. Perhaps Veronica's accusation shook through him and he decided to confront Bridget for himself. God help him, I hope she didn't crassly break his heart again.

I sighed. I couldn't be mad at him for going to her for the truth. It's exactly what I would have done if Nicholas had been accused of starting the rumors.

"It really is too bad," Bridget said, speaking loud enough for the whole table to hear. "Piper thinks herself so vital to the competition that she would break the set rules to join us on our trip. I understand how hard it is to be left behind, but rules are rules for a reason. Don't you think so, Piper?"

All eyes in the room turned toward me. I wasn't as scared of the spotlight as Susie was, but it was still unnerving to have the sudden overwhelming attention of everyone in the room. I swallowed thickly, suddenly very nervous.

The only pair of eyes in the room not directed at me were Susie's. In her lap, she twisted her napkin so tightly it was beginning to fray.

"I..." I didn't know what to say. "If I..."

"You must agree with me?" Bridget said. "Surely you see how unfair that would be, for you to be included on a trip not intended for you?"

"That's enough," said Susie, in her soft frightened voice.

I looked at her in surprise. So did Bridget.

"What was that, Susie?" she asked.

"I said, that's enough!" Susie said louder. "You say it would be unfair for her, but that entire event was unfair to anyone but you."

Everyone's eyes went wide, my own included. I'd never heard Susie speak like that with anyone.

She glared at Bridget. "You forget that Piper is Julian's favorite, and that they are a couple. Of course she would be included wherever he would choose to go."

"She's right," Veronica added, when Susie began to falter. "Unless you think you have a right to dictate what the prince's want, Bridget?"

Bridget closed her mouth. She continued to smile, even as the corner of her eye seemed tighter than before.

I smiled at Susie in thanks. Her face was beet red.

After dinner, I was so distracted, I was not paying attention where I was going, and in my usual walk down the hallway, ran straight into a hard male chest.

"I'm so sorry," I said. I tried to back away, but a pair of strong arms came around me and held me closer.

I inhaled. I knew that scent. The feel of this chest and those arms.

Nicholas.

He held me tightly, so I lifted my arms and held him in return.

We stayed like that for a long few moments, neither of us speaking a word.

His heartbeat was so steady, so calming. I wished I could stay like this forever, safe in the cradle of his arms.

But it was not meant to be.

Eventually we separated. We didn't say a word as we walked away from each other in different directions down the hall.

Chapter 464



Chapter 0464 The day we were set to leave for the vacation, the chosen candidates and the two princes were to take a limousine to the airport and then a private jet to the southern beaches. Yet before any of that, we were to say farewell to the King and Queen, who would not be joining us on this trip.

I rolled my extra large suitcase, filled with both Elva and my things, behind me through the entryway. With my other hand, I held onto Elva's as we stepped outside into the light. We were the last to arrive that morning, the other candidates were already in a line, waiting for their turn to be greeted.

Bridget must have gone first, she was

already at the limousine. A valet was helping load her luggage into a trailer.

Her bag was nearly as big as mine.

Julian, who was near the car, rushed to help with the luggage as well. Bridget left it in their hands, wandering off to speak with Nicholas near the car door.

Veronica was next. The King and Queen were courteous to her.

"We appreciate you trying to spend time with Prince Julian," the Luna told her.

"We hope you manage to have some one on one time with him during your

trip.” The words struck me, though I tried not to let them. Perhaps the Luna didn’t mean that as a dig against me...

but I doubted it. If I wasn’t going on the trip, all of Veronica’s time would be A one on one with Julian.

I forced myself to remember Veronica’s words. She wanted me on this trip. This was her idea. I wasn’t taking anything from her.

I still felt guilty.

Veronica replied, “Thank you, but your concern is not necessary. I am content with how things are.” The Luna’s smile tightened, but she didn’t reply. The matter seemed settled, and Veronica stepped away, dragging her luggage toward the truck.

Julian and the valet were still there and helped her. Veronica insisted on staying until they’d finished, then she and Julian walked toward the car together.

The King sighed as Jessica approached them.

The Luna spoke up, “It’s so unfortunate that Joyce is still feeling under the weather and won’t be able to join you on this trip.” Jessica nodded in agreement. “My wish is only to spend time with him.” “Perhaps when you return, he will be feeling better,” the Luna offered. That seemed to lift Jessica’s spirits, even though it was a blatant lie.

Last I heard from Veronica, Joyce’s deprogramming was moving at a snail’s pace. And with her gone on the trip, Joyce likely wouldn’t have any forward progress in her absence. To say he would magically get better all on his own was wishful thinking at best, delusion at worst.

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Though I supposed I couldn't blame the Luna for always holding on hope for her son. If it were Elva...

No. I could never let it be Elva. I needed to protect my girl from the underground organization at all costs.

Jessica then said farewell, and moved toward the luggage truck.

Elva and I stepped into her place.

The King and Queen looked at us, then, without word, turned away.

Elva squeezed my hand. She didn't understand. I couldn't explain it while they were within earshot so we had to stand there for a while, watching in silence while they shunned us. When they entered their palace, and the door closed behind them, I looked down at

Elva. She had tears in her eyes.

"Mommy... do they hate us?" "No, honey," I said. I dropped to one knee to pull Elva into a hug. They didn't hate us. If they hated anyone, it was me alone. Elva was just an innocent bystander. Or collateral damage they were willing to risk in their dislike of me. "They don't hate anyone. I'm sure they're just busy." "They said g'bye to everybody else..." Elva said.

"Something urgent must have come up," I told her. "Kings and Queens always have urgent, important matters to attend to." I gave her my best fake smile. "But forget them, okay? It's time to go on our vacation!"

I tried to fake enthusiasm, to cover the hurt, but Elva could see straight through me. She smiled a little in reply, but it was wobbly. She was making an effort to humor me. It hurt to look at, maybe more than the royal shunning.

I stood up again, then lugged our suitcase down toward the truck. The valet that had been here was missing. I looked around. Julian and Veronica were in

conversation as they entered the limo. Bridget was saying something to Nicholas. A driver was holding open the limo door for them.

A group of valets were on the other side of the truck, talking amongst themselves. I could have sworn I felt some of them looking at me, but not one came to help.

Well, fine. I didn't need their help.

With my wolf now, I had enough strength to move this on my own.

"Step aside, Elva, please," I said. She complied, taking a step to the left.

Grabbing both handles of my suitcase, I was ready to fling it among the pile, when suddenly there was a pair of much more sturdy hands than mine plucking the suitcase away from me.

Nicholas easily lifted the suitcase up onto the trailer like it weighed nothing at all.

"Thank you," I said when he let go of it.

He nodded.

"Nick-lass!" Elva said brightly. She lifted her arms toward him and made the grabby hands motion.

Nicholas did not look down. He didn't acknowledge her at all. Instead, he sidestepped her and started to move back toward the limo where Bridget was watching and waiting.

"Nick-lass?" Elva called. Her voice was tighter, more desperate. There was a hint of desperation there. I rushed to her.

"It's okay, Elva," I tried to say. I placed my hands on her shoulders, but she shook me off. She ran to Nicholas and grabbed his sleeve.

“Nick-lass!” she cried. “Why? Are you mad at me?” This caused Nicholas to totally still. He looked down at her and the hardness that had frozen his face finally melted.

“I’m not mad at you, Elva,” he said, and it was a relief to hear his voice like that, so normal, not full of anger or rage.

He lifted Elva off the ground, easily pulling her into his arms. She hooked her arms around his shoulders and held him closely.

He carried her the rest of the way to the limo.

I was the last to enter the limo. By the time I entered, most of the seats were gone. Elva was seated between Nicholas and Bridget. She looked wedged there, like Bridget had to move over to make room. She didn’t seem terribly pleased about that.

The only spot was near Julian and

Veronica. They both waved me over. I squeezed in beside Julian.

Because of the U-shape of the limo seats, my seat gave me the perfect view of Nicholas, Elva, and Bridget. They looked like a happy little family.

It tore at my heart.

Elva had no idea that when we left the palace for good, Nicholas would no longer be willing to talk to either of us.

It was going to break her heart.

Gently, Julian lowered his hand to my knee. He meant to offer comfort. I tried to take what I could from it.

But inside, I only felt a swell of grief.

The Luna Choosing Game

#Chapter 465 - Read The Luna Choosing Game Chapter 465

Chapter 0465 At the airport, we were led onto the tarmac to board a smaller private jet.

The royal jet, though small, lacked for no luxury. The seats were the finest leather. There was a sitting room and a large television.

I'd never really been on a plane before at all, much less a fancy one like this.

But I had seen what a cramped regular plane was supposed to be like on television and in movies. So I knew this was something much more elaborate and different.

Despite the large area for mingling, I led Elva to the forward-facing chairs with seatbelts. Like me, Elva had never been on a plane either. I had heard that taking off and landing were the

scariest parts. I didn't want her to be scared.

However, as we sat in our chairs, she swung her legs back and forth like a dance, and sung to herself absentmindedly, like she hadn't a care in the world. She seemed totally relaxed, ready for anything. Though maybe she just didn't know what was to come.

"It's going to be okay, Elva," I told her, not for the first time. "If you get scared at any point —" "I know, Mommy. I'm not scared." That wasn't the first time she'd said that either.

When everyone and the luggage was boarded, the pilots turned the plane toward the runway. I held onto the armrests of my leather seat with both

hands, after securing both mine and Elva's belts for the fourth time.

Elva just looked out the window. She was still singing her mindless song.

"Elva..." "Not scared, Mommy." The engines kicked on. The plane rumbled.

My fingernails dug into the leather.

Elva continued to sing.

The plane shot forward.

Elva shouted, "Woohoo!" The plane then lifted, up off the ground, higher and higher.

I pressed back into my seat.

I was fairly certain I'd left my stomach back on the runway.

I held on for dear life.

Elva laughed and laughed, like this was a carnival ride and she was enjoying herself immensely.

When the plane leveled out, I started to breath again.

"Mommy, look!" Elva said. Her face was pressed to the window, her finger tapping it. Beyond her, I could see down to the city below. The houses looked like toy blocks. The people mere specs.

My hands were shaking. No, my entire body was trembling. The blood was draining from my face.

We were so high. Why would anyone travel like this? What could possibly be

the purpose? I needed to get out of here. I couldn't let Elva see how much I was freaking out, or she might read my energy and freak out too. But where could I go on such a small plane? People were everywhere! But then I remembered the brief tour from when we boarded. There was one small room where I could be alone: the bathroom.

Eventually, I fumbled successfully enough that the seatbelt popped open, and I hurried to stand. "I have to go to the bathroom," I said to Elva, to anyone that could listen, and I stumbled into the walkway.

I rushed back. Halfway through the plane was a set of bathrooms. Just as I reached one, the door opened, and

Julian was there. He smiled when he saw me, smirk quirked like he might make some quip, but then he took a closer look.

"You alright?" he asked.

"I-I've never flown before," I said. By now, my voice was shaking too, just like the rest of me. God, I was having a panic attack.

"Here," he said, and tugged me into the bathroom with him. Behind me, he closed the door.

The room was tiny, much too small for two people. Our knees bumped even as we stood in front of each other. But the enclosed space was comforting. In this room, I

couldn't see the clouds or the small buildings far below. Here, I could theoretically be in any small bathroom.

Julian's arm slipped around my waist and he tugged me into him. I dropped my head onto his shoulder and closed my eyes.

"Match my breathing," he said, and I tried my best to. He was breathing steady. My breaths were erratic. It took me some time, and a lot of concentration to match him. "There you go." © "Julian..." "you don't have to say anything, Piper." He wasn't going to make fun of me then. Not about this. That was as much a comfort as his warmth and the strength of his arm at my waist, keeping me upright and secure.

«I didn't want Elva to see," I admitted,

after a few moments.

"She doesn't need to know about this," Julian said. "How is she doing? It's got to be her first flight too, right?" I laughed a little. It wasn't entirely honest, still nervous, but it was getting there. "She's having the time of her life." He chuckled. "Of course she is.

Probably thinks of it like a ride. You ever take her to the theme parks?" «We never had the money for travel," I told him. "But I did take her to the carnival when it came to town. She's too young to ride the bigger things, but she likes some of the kiddie rides." "She's going to be a daredevil, I bet," Julian said.

"She already is," I said. "That's part of

my worry with her." "Nah." Julian rubbed his hand up and down my back. If I was a cat, I would have purred. "She's a good kid. She'll grow up to be a good adult. Just like her mom. Nothing to worry about." I smiled at the compliment. Julian knew that technically Jane was Elva's mother, but for him to imply I was actually her Mom instead made me smile.

"Thank you," I said.

"I'm serious, she's great." "I don't just mean thanks for saying those things about Elva," I said. "I mean, thank you for this." "you feeling better?" "I'm getting there."

"you ready to go out there?" "Not yet," I said.

Julian hummed. He continued holding me and didn't say one more word about it... until, I started to shuffle and gently pull away from him several long moments later.

"Ready?" he asked.

This time, I nodded. Though I trusted most everyone on this plane with my daughter, I didn't want to leave her alone for too long. At the very least, she might begin to worry about me.

My little girl shouldn't have to worry about me.

"Let's go then." Julian reached behind me and opened the door. With the sudden expanse opening up behind

me, I stumbled backwards. Julian caught me just before I could fall and yanked me back against his chest.

There, in the walkway of the airplane, we stood, holding onto each other with the single bathroom door opened behind us.

And there, two feet away, watching, was Nicholas.

His surprise disappeared in an instant, and white hot fiery anger replaced it.

He looked much as he did that early morning in the gardens, when he had rage shifted and attacked Julian.

Panic bubbled inside of me.

He wasn't about to shift right here on the plane, was he?

Chapter 0466 Suddenly I found myself caught between two very irritated Alphas.

Nicholas was growling, his shoulders straight, his stature tall and imposing.

Julian matched the intimidating posture. He was slightly smaller in I build compared to his brother, but he was still tall and strong.

I guessed I might have better luck trying to calm down Julian, as he's the one more fully aware of what happened here. Julian and I had not been having sex in the airplane bathroom, or whatever else Nicholas might think.

Our interaction was entirely innocent.

Julian's Alpha surfacing was just a direct reaction to Nicholas's. It was entirely defensive.

So I turned to Julian and placed my hand on his arm. Before I could say one word, Nicholas's growl grew louder.

Julian began growling to match. Under my fingers, I felt his muscles tense.

“Julian,” I said, pleading. “Stop this.” But Julian didn’t listen. His focus was entirely on his brother. Even when I tried to move into his line of vision, breaking his line of sight, Julian would just lean or straighten to see over or around me.

God, these two thought they were so different in so many ways, but the truth was, they were actually very similar. This stubbornness was just one of the many ways.

Deciding that Julian was a lost cause, and since my interactions with him were only making Nicholas more upset and heightening the already skyrocketing tension in the small plane hallway, I turned to Nicholas instead. I was in front of him in three short steps. Had the brothers inched closer? I really needed to stop this before it turned to violence. Another handful of minutes, and they’d be in wolf form, biting at each other’s throats.

“Nicholas,” I said as I moved closer to him. He did not reply. As Julian did, he absolutely refused to look at me, never taking his furious gaze off of his brother. “Nick.” Still nothing.

Irritation bubbled inside of me. These two were going to shift and potentially

damage this little plane. I wasn’t about to die in a plane accident because these two couldn’t get their acts together! Touching an Alpha about to shift was a dangerous prospect, but I knew Nicholas would never hurt me. So I moved closer into Nicholas’s space, right up to his chest. Then I lifted my arms and placed my hands flat on his face, one on either cheek.

If he wanted to avoid looking at me, I would force him too. This foolish growling match was because of me, I knew that, and I sure as hell wasn’t going to let it continue.

I don’t have the strength to move Nicholas, even with my additional werewolf ability, but with my urging, he did finally look down at me.

His golden eyes were molten, the green flecks dark, nearly black. They cooled only marginally when he looked at me: “I was having a panic attack. Julian was helping me,” I said. In Nicholas’s state, he wasn’t likely able to hear much. I had to keep my sentences short and to the point. “Everything was entirely innocent.” Nicholas’s brow pinched together ever so slightly. Then, subtly, he leaned into me and began to sniff.

He was scenting me, likely to see if the scents backed up my words. They would. While I might smell of Julian, as we did embrace, I would not smell of sex. Nicholas wouldn’t detect even a hint of arousal on me.

Slowly, the fire in Nicholas dimmed

somewhat. He took a great big inhale, and on the exhale, his shoulders lost some of their rigidity. He inched closer to me, and lowered his head down toward my shoulder. There, he turned his nose into the base of my neck and inhaled.

I let my hands drop from his face down to his chest, where I felt the steadiness of his heartbeat under my palm.

Chapter 0467 This type of scenting felt too intimate for our audience, but I supposed there was no real harm in it. Julian knew of my affections for Nicholas, and his for me. If anything, Julian might give me a high five afterwards. He'd say something like, If he's jealous, it means he cares.

But then, I look to the side and realize that Julian is not our only audience. A few feet to the side, watching us from the wall of the plane interior, stood Bridget. Her expression was carefully blank, but even that was alarming, given that she usually sported a smile no matter the occasion.

I didn't know my place here. With Bridget's presence and everything that

had happened since her arrival, I felt on uneven ground. And I heard her voice, remembered her words, when she told me that she and Nicholas were together now, and I needed to back off and leave him alone.

This was not leaving him alone.

Since Nicholas wasn't touching me, his arms down straight at his sides, I faced no resistance when I placed a foot behind myself and took a large step backwards.

Nicholas didn't give chase. He simply raised his head and looked at me. His expression was mostly unreadable, as if he was still half-lost to the instincts of his wolf. But the human side of him seemed like he had a question.

He probably wanted to know why I backed away.

I wasn't about to tell him it was because of Bridget, especially with her close enough to hear.

"I need to get back to Elva," I said. It wasn't a lie. I had left Elva alone too long. But it wasn't the full truth either.

For now it would have to do. "If you'll excuse me." I turned to leave, but that was when Nicholas reached out and snagged my arm. I looked behind me, up into his face. Was that reaction from the human side of him, or from the wolf? Slowly, the human side of him was returning fully to the surface. But he still didn't release my arm.

"I'll go with you," he said. His voice was deep and rough, remnants of his wolf nearly overtaking him.

"T'l be okay," I said.

"There might be turbulence," he said.

"Or you might panic when we land.

You shouldn't be alone." I wasn't entirely helpless. Yes, I did have a panic attack and I didn't want Elva to see, but I felt okay now... I think. At any rate, I couldn't ask Nicholas to abandon his other guests, aka Bridget, to sit next to me just in case something might happen.

He was determined though. And when Nicholas was determined, there wasn't much that could change his mind.

"Okay," I eventually caved. "Thank you." As we began to walk away back to my seat, Nicholas loosened his hold on my arm but didn't release me.

Behind Nicholas's back, Julian flashed me a smile and a quick thumbs up. I knew he'd be supportive. I couldn't help but wonder now too, if he had purposefully matched Nicholas's aggression instead of backing down just to force me into intervening myself. Had he predicted this outcome? I wouldn't put it past him. In all other areas except those relating to Bridget, Julian seemed to be six or seven steps ahead of anyone else.

Then, my gaze slid past him to the other observer. Bridget continued to watch the scene unfold. She still wasn't smiling, though now her face wasn't entirely blank either.

In fact, it almost looked like she was glaring straight at me.

Chapter 0468 When I returned to my seat with - Nicholas in tow, I found Elva still excitedly looking out the window. She had her hands on either side of it, her nose pressed up against the glass.

"Elva," I said, lightly scolding her. If there was any turbulence, she was likely to bump her head against the glass and hurt herself.

"Sorry, Mommy," Elva said as she turned. When she saw Nicholas with me, her eyes went wide. "Nick-lass!" "Hi, Princess," Nicholas said. Elva beamed. Nicholas glanced at me. "May I sit beside Elva for the rest of the flight?"

The rows were six seats wide with an aisle down the middle. This put three seats on either side of the aisle. If Nicholas took the seat beside Elva, that would have me sitting in the third seat, the one nearest the aisle and farthest from the window.

That sounded like the perfect spot for me. Or, at least, as perfect as I was likely to get in this shaky box a mile up in the sky. So I nodded, quickly agreeing.

Elva cheered.

Nicholas slid into the seats and sat down in the middle. I took the seat on the end and immediately fastened my seatbelt. Like this, if I kept my eyes forward, I could convince myself I was riding the bus or the subway. Modes of transportation I was much more comfortable with.

As the flight progressed, things seemed much calmer. Elva would point out things through the window.

Nicholas would look and tell her what they were.

I was glad that Elva could have this experience. I imagined the world looked very different from all the way up here. Elva might not ever be able to see things from this perspective again, once this trip was done.

I wished I could offer her a life of better experiences. Once we would return home, our life would go back to the way it was. Long hours working. Elva watching too much TV. Buses and subways and smog. Underpaid people crammed into overpriced apartments, with only enough extra money to feed ourselves.

I couldn't imagine us ever traveling on an airplane again. And who knew if - Elva would ever get to the beach again? Let alone a private island.

But those things were happening now. She was having those experiences here, and that gave me comfort. More it even made me happy.

Though that likely wasn't just because of the experience of this trip.

Having Nicholas here, sitting between my daughter and me, was making my wolf very satisfied. Its pack was here.

Its family. My family.

If only it could last.

Suddenly, the plane began to tremble and shake, like it was driving over a bumpy road. But there were no bumpy

roads in the air! Was this the turbulence I had heard about? Elva lifted her arms and cheered. That could, it seemed, wasn't afraid of anything. Maybe she just didn't understand that she should be afraid.

We never really talked about riduug, airplanes before. I'm not sure she even understood that they could crash.

I clawed at the armrests, holding on for dear life. I wished I had Elva's innocence. I wished I didn't know as much as I did about crashing planes and fear.

Nicholas placed his hand over mine.

Carefully, he pried my fingers from the cushion of the armrest, and slid his palm beneath mine, facing up. Our fingers laced together with ease, so that now I was holding onto his hand

for dear life instead of the cushion.

"Just a little turbulence," he said, to me or to Elva, I didn't know. Maybe - both. "It never lasts long." Was he telling the truth? Was he lying to make me feel better? ~~
Isqueezed his hand so tightly, it must have hurt. But he withstood it without as much as a wince.

Then, the plane shook even harder. I slammed my eyes closed. I grit my teeth. I was going to die. This was the end for sure. After everything I had faced, to die here and now, on this royal plane on a way to a luxury vacation island, seemed like some kind of cruel joke by fate.

Chapter 0469 How unfair. How unkind. At least let me enjoy the beach first! "More turbulence," Nicholas whispered.

This time he was right up against my ear. I could feel the warm puffs of his breath against my skin, rustling my hair. With my eyes closed so tightly, my other senses heightened. I could feel the warmth of him, leaning so close to me. I could practically feel his words, rather than just hear them.

"Nothing to worry about," Nicholas continued. His words were so comforting. Was he putting some Alpha command to them, to help me relax? Or was it simply his closeness that was adding to my calm? My wolf

was practically purring, turned to putty in the warmth of his presence.

His closeness like this wasn't sexual, I felt no need to suddenly jump him. But it was... intimate. Like this, I felt his words whisper down deep inside of me, practically into my very soul.

Something weaved between us. It was electric yet soothing at the same time.

Instinctively I leaned into him, searching for more. He didn't move an inch away, allowing my closeness and offering all the comfort he could muster in return.

It was in this state, that I endured the rest of the plane ride. And when it was done, I barely noticed the landing.

Nicholas stayed close to me and I stayed lost to him.

Until Elva called for me, after the plane had finally stopped moving. "Mommy, look!" - "It's okay," Nicholas whispered, when I hesitated. The thought of looking at that window gave me a jolt of fear. Yet with Nicholas's encouragement and Elva's excitement, I peeked open my eye to see.

The view stole my breath away.

Beyond the tarmac and the runway, was the bluest crystal waters I had ever seen in my life. Gentle waves seemed to sparkle under the light of the late afternoon.

"So much water!" Elva said.

"That's our southern ocean," Nicholas explained. "That's where the merfolk live."

The landing strip was private and part of the royal island, so it didn't take long after we left the plane to find our way to the mansion we would be staying in. It was miniscule compared to the palace, though still so much larger than anything I had been used to from my regular life.

It was two stories tall, concrete and painted plaster with a tin roof. Storm shutters were open above every window. Along the entire perimeter were palm trees and plants with large leaves and brightly colored flowers.

I felt as though I had walked into some kind of greenhouse filled with strange, far away flowers and plants. It was unusual to me, but no less beautiful. A wooden deck fully encircled the mansion, with the largest part in the

back of the house, where steps led down to the wind sand of the beach.

We went there now, as a group, without even stepping inside. Several staff waved and greeted us as we walked. We were assured our luggage was being transported inside.

"Before we show you your rooms," said lead housekeeper, a woman named Selma with a tan and sun-kissed brown hair. "Please make yourself comfortable in our open-air lounge area. Our bartenders and wait staff are ready to serve you." With her direction, we moved onto the deck.

I stood there a moment with Elva, our hands intertwined, staring at the beach I and the ocean, and the sun slowly

lowering behind it all.

“Is this what heaven looks like, Mommy?” Elva asked. As Nicholas came to stand on my other side, I knew the answer.

“Yes.”

Chapter 0470 After gazing at the ocean for a time, Nicholas separated from us, saying he had to make the rounds. So Elva and I walked to where a couch was arranged on the deck. Julian and Veronica were already sitting on it. I sat on the open seat and Elva wedged in between me and Julian.

One of the wait staff brought me a fruity drink with an umbrella in it, and gave Elva a virgin lemonade with a curly straw. The straw amused Elva to no end. She was excited to see if she could get the lemonade stuck in one of the hoops.

“So, Piper,” Julian said, wagging his eyebrows as Elva was thoroughly distracted. “Things seem to be going

well with you and Nicholas.” [rolled my eyes at his teasing, “Aren’t you glad you decided to join us?” Julian continued, flashing a toothy grin. Beside him, Veronica remained silent, but I could see the humor in her eyes.

I huff a soft laugh. They mean the teasing good-naturedly so I’m not put-off. “I am,” I reply honestly.

Already this trip has felt something like a success. Things were still strained with Nicholas, but it felt good just being beside him. The ocean was beautiful. The drink was good. Elva was enjoying herself. Really, what could be better than this? All those good feelings went out the window the moment Bridget walked

closer to us.

“You all seem cozy over here,” she said. Her bright smile had returned since it had disappeared on the airplane. Her perfect facade was back in place on her face.

Yet as Bridget’s brightness shone, Julian’s dimmed. His toothy grin diminished into a humorless smirk. I missed it instantly, and wished Bridget would just go away, to whatever far corner of the world all her money would take her.

Maybe that was unkind. But I was tired of watching my friend be hurt just because of this woman’s proximity.

Veronica must have felt similar. The humor vanished from her eyes, though her expression didn't otherwise I

change. She watched Bridget carefully, with a too-cool indifference. If Bridget noticed, she pretended not to.

"Piper, I'm so glad to see you enjoying yourself. You must be so unaccustomed to places like this," she said, her voice sugar-sweet.

I could see the insult in there. She was calling me poor. Unfortunately, that was a fair assessment. I didn't want to give her that kind of joy though, or let her know that her words struck me at all, so I smiled vaguely in reply.

"Fortunately for me," I said, matching her sugar-sweet tone, "my inability to regularly visit places like this makes them all that much more special to me.

How terrible it must feel to be so jaded that you can't appreciate the beauty of nature all around you,"

"Talways try to stop and see the small things," Veronica said, adding to my veiled insult. "It's essential to happy living." Bridget's smile went tight. "Yes, well.

I'm glad you are able to experience it like this, then." Her sharp gaze cut into me. "Especially as the next elimination ceremony is coming soon. It's good for you, Piper, to enjoy yourself while you still can." Her words stung more than I want to admit. Yet through the dull haze of pain, one thing struck through the most.

"The next elimination ceremony?" I asked. There had been no mention from Nathan or any of the staff about the planning of the next ceremony.

Was Bridget talking out of her ass, or

did she actually have evidence the next one was approaching? "Oh," Bridget said and covered her mouth like she admitted something she hadn't meant to. The gesture was proven entirely dishonest, however, but the genuinely joyous smile she was now half-hiding with her fingers. "I'm sorry. I forgot that no one else knows about that yet." Veronica and I shared a look. Julian, still lost to his misery, stared into the bottom of his beer bottle.

"Keep this a secret between us, okay?" Bridget winked. "It's all very hush hush for now. But of course, I get the inside scoop all the time, since the royal family and I go so far back. They are quite fond of me. The feeling is mutual, of course,"

"Of course," Veronica added flatly.

For such a beautiful day, it was starting to get very sad around here. For what purpose would Bridget mention the next elimination ceremony other than to bring down the bright mood of me and my friends? "I'm not worried," Veronica said.

"Of course now," Bridget said. "I'm sure Julian will save you." She switched on a sadder face when she looked at me again, though it was entirely dishonest juxtaposed to the smile still gracing her lips. "What about you, Piper? Do you think anyone will save you from being eliminated?" Across the room, Nicholas was speaking with Selma, the head housekeeper. He was fully immersed in

the task. He always gave such dedication focus to every action and conversation, .

Someday he'd be an amazing King. He would give everything to his people.

He would have nothing left for me.

Without Nicholas's support, that would leave me... Julian. I looked at him now, instead. He was peeling the label off of his bottle. I wasn't sure he was even listening to this conversation. God, whenever Bridget was nearby, it was like his cognitive thinking went on vacation, "What do you say, Julian?" Bridget asked, calling him out more directly than I had intended to.

Julian startled and glanced up from his I

bottle, "Huh?" "For the next elimination," Bridget said. She tilted her head. "Will you save Piper from being ejected? Or do you think it's time for her to go?" Julian sighed. "I don't know." Wow. Okay. That hurt like a knife to the heart. I didn't expect Julian to defend me to Bridget. He always got a bit watery when she was around. But to actually fold entirely when the matter of me being eliminated is brought up? That was like a slap to the face.

"Julian," Veronica said quietly.

It was nice of her to want to stand up for me, but Julian was allowed to have his own mind about these things. If he didn't want to rescue me for the elimination, he certainly didn't have

to. I would never force him into anything.

That didn't mean that I wouldn't get hurt by his actions, however, I tried not to be too disappointed. I could talk to Julian about this later, without Bridget around, and he could tell me his reasoning in private. This wasn't a conversation to have with an audience.

I grabbed the empty beer from his hands and began to stay. "Elva, stay here. Julian, I'll get you another drink." "Okay," Elva and Julian said at the same time. Elva was still trying to catch her lemonade in her straw. Julian was now staring at his empty hands.

Bridget watched me closely, even though I tried to avoid returning her I gaze. I Yet as I walked directly beside her, she seemed to lose her balance. Her glass of red wine toppled and somehow managed to splash all over me, from my shirt down to my pants.

My entire outfit was spattered with red. @

