

The Luna Choosing Game #Chapter 501 - Read The Luna Choosing Game Chapter 501

Chapter 0501 Nicholas held me all through the night, until the storm finally ended and the sun began to once again creep in from between the tree limbs and leaves.

I was feeling better now, though still dingy and gross, especially when Nicholas helped me back into my swimsuit. Though he'd left it by the fire to dry, it was still damp and gross.

But, as it was the only clothing I owned at the moment, I had to make do.

Nicholas gave me his rain jacket to help cover me, but even then, I still felt dirty and exposed.

Off in the distance, I could hear people calling out, "Prince Nicholas!" They were searching for him then. Not

for me. That shouldn't have hurt.

Nicholas, as a prince, was certainly more important than me. Still, it would have been nice to be considered.

"Ready?" Nicholas asked me. He gave me a once over.

I shrugged. This was as good as it was likely going to get.

He nodded, and together we stepped out from the cave.

Immediately, a familiar wolf bounded toward us. Julian shifted as soon as he reached us. Before Nicholas or I could react, he hurried forward and pulled us both into a hug.

Julian huffed a loud, relieved breath.

"Don't worry me like that again. Either of you." As he pulled back a look passed between Nicholas and Julian. The two were usually at each other's throats.

Even a few days back, they'd been willing to shift and have a werewolf fight in the middle of a small private plane.

Yet now, I can see the bond between them. Even brothers fight. But deep down, when it comes to life and death, they truly do care about each other.

I had seen this kind of care from Julian before, when he'd fought to save his brother from Jane and her dampening collar. It was nice to know that bond was not broken, not because of me and not because of Bridget.

After Bridget's arrival, I had worried.

I Julian's gaze shifted from his brother to me, "You scared us, Piper,

Disappearing like that." «I fell in a hole," I said.

"A trap," Nicholas corrected.

Julian's eyes narrowed a little. "A trap on this island." He glanced at Nicholas as if for confirmation. Nicholas nodded.

"Later," Nicholas said.

Julian agreed. "For now, let's get you two out of this place." He looked at us both. "You look and smell like shit." Nicholas rolled his eyes.

I crossed my arms. "I was trapped in a pit. During a storm." Julian grinned as he grabbed my arm and tugged me forward. "I'm not saying it isn't warranted. I'm just

calling it like I see it." Together, the three of us pressed through the jungle. Once we broke the tree line, returning to the beach, I had never in my life been so glad to be free of that place. Wherever the future took me, I was bound and determined to make sure jungle was no longer on my list.

Yet, three feet out onto the beach, all my good feelings sunk away again, because I saw Bridget jump from a boat. She trudged through the shallow water, and then rushed across the sand. She ran straight past me and Julian, and instead, leapt at Nicholas.

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Bridget was openly crying.

It was a strange kind of scene. It looked { like a relieved girlfriend reuniting with her long lost lover who had been away at war or something.

Bridget leaned in to kiss Nicholas's face, and that's when he placed her down on the ground and backed away from her. The confusion had cleared from his face, though seemed passed to Bridget now. In its place, Nicholas looked furious, his eyes fiery and his mouth curved downward.

Bridget sniffled. "Aren't you happy to see me?" Behind her, I noticed now, were cameras. One of the cameramen came in close to capture the scene.

Nicholas must have seen them now

too, even, like me, if he missed them before. But he did not ease his hard expression. He crossed his arms and glowered.

"Why didn't you help Piper?" he asked.

"When you found her alone in that pit?" Bridget stilled for a quarter of a second, not enough to notice if you hadn't already been looking. I had been looking. She slid her gaze to the left, eying the cameras.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said, all doe-eyed innocence. If I hadn't been the person she abandoned down in that pit, I might have even believed her. That was how convincing she was.

Her acting ability was dangerous. It was so difficult to tell when she was

lying and when she was telling the truth. Even now, I felt myself being gaslighted. I hadn't hallucinated her; right? No. She was definitely there. She definitely abandoned me, potentially to die.

"That's not going to work this time," Nicholas said. A growl sat just beneath the surface of his voice, adding roughness. Danger. When he was like this, he was not to be fucked with.

Bridget must have known that. She crossed her own arms and raised her chin a little. "I'm telling you I don't know what you mean." Nicholas stepped closer. He towered about Bridget, and glared down at her.

"you could have helped her. You could have gone back like you told her you would. Instead, Veronica was alone on this beach trying to get help. You didn't even mention Piper in that pit once." "I didn't know she was there. I didn't see anything. Whose word are you going to believe? Me? Or poor Piper, who must have been so hungry and cold that she was delirious? I don't know why she has it out for me by telling you such lies, but —" "Stop," Nicholas said forcefully. The growl did escape him this time.

The camera came closer. But so too, did Nathan, rushing up the beach. He immediately placed himself between I the camera and Nicholas.

_ Nathan gave Nicholas a warning,

withering look, but Nicholas seemed to ignore it, choosing instead to glare his very hardest at Bridget.

“You need to return to the mansion at once,” Nathan said. “The King and Queen wish to speak with you via video call as soon as possible.” Nicholas finally broke eye contact with Bridget to look at Nathan.

“Surely they can wait?” Nathan shook his head. “It’s urgent.” Nicholas looked over at me.

None of us said a word as we started moving forward toward the boat. Julian did, however, keep his hand at the small of my back, guiding me.

Bridget seemed embarrassed, keeping

her head down.

Nicholas looked grim.

What could the King and Queen need to talk about with him that was so urgent? Was he going to be lectured for running off and endangering himself for my sake? €» Or was there something even worse going on? I didn’t want to think about it too much. Tensions within the kingdom had been running high for a while.

Bridget’s presence in the competition may have cooled things for now, but there was no guarantee that would work forever.

Eventually the reality of the dire world would find their way into our lives again,

I just hoped it wasn’t yet.

I’d had enough excitement for a while.

Yet I knew, trouble very rarely waited for you to be ready for it.

Chapter 0502 The moment the boat returned to the royal private island, I rushed off of it in search of Elva. I found her on the beach, building sandcastles with Veronica.

Elva looked up at me and scrunched her nose. “Why are you so dirty, Mommy?” I rushed to her side. I so desperately wanted to hug her, but, looking down, I was still covered in a thick layer of grime.

She didn't seem overly concerned with seeing me again, aside from my unclean appearance.

I glanced at Veronica in confusion.

Veronica dipped her head back,

indicating she wanted to speak privately.

Elva continued to stare at me in question.

«1... uh... fell in a puddle,” I said.

Elva nodded, like that was a perfectly reasonable way to be this dirty. “You should change.” «1 will, sweetheart.” I still leaned in and kissed the top of her head, even though she squirmed away and said, “Ewww!” She giggled as she did it. It was good to see her laughing. I felt like some tangled up mess inside of me was starting to unravel.

I sidestepped away from Elva then, letting her return to her sandcastle as I joined Veronica waiting nearby. We

were close enough to keep an eye on Elva without her easily overhearing us.

“you didn't tell her,” I said to Veronica.

“She doesn't know what was going on, no.” Veronica dipped her head a little, perhaps in apology. “I thought it better not to worry her. Especially after I told Prince Nicholas and he rushed to rescue you. I knew he would find you and bring you back.” I could see it then, with the subtle lilt in Veronica's voice and the bags hanging heavy under her eyes, that she had agonized over this choice. Likely, she had worried for me as well.

[reached out and placed my hand on her forearm. I didn't press too heavily, aware of my own dirt. But I wanted to

convey my appreciation in a way beyond words.

She was a good friend to me. I wanted her to know that I knew that.

“I'm okay, Veronica,” I said. “You made the right choice.” She shook her head lightly. “I should have been stronger.” I blinked, confused. “Stronger how?” She glared down at her own hands as if they had personally offended her. “IFT had more power... If I could control the teleportation, you never would have been stuck down there. I could have saved you instantly, all on my own.” That was what she was worried about?

“you still saved me,” I reminded her.

“you told Nicholas where I was.” “But what if he hadn’t been on that boat? No one else wanted to risk it, knowing they’d be stuck on the island in the storm. If Nicholas hadn’t been there, no one else would have listened to me.” She sighed. “Twill get stronger. I will master this power. And I will be able to save us both if there is a next time.” There was no arguing with Veronica when she was like this, I had learned.

She was a very independent person.

She spoke only when she had something important to say. For her to make this vow aloud meant that she had already made it within herself.

She was just telling me. This was how

it was going to be. There was no room for arguments.

All I could do was support her however I could. I patted her arm gently, mindful of my dirt and grim, and then pulled my hand away.

I went to my room to shower and change. My bed looked so very tempting. I was absolutely exhausted.

But I was too worried about Nicholas, and what his parents were saying to him, that I didn’t want to go to sleep until I knew everything was okay.

I changed into soft linen clothes and returned downstairs. There was still no sign of Nicholas.

[walked over to Julian, who was drinking a lemonade — possibly filled with alcohol — over by the edge of the deck. After accepting a glass of ice

water from a servant, I made my way over to him.

Julian looked me over as I approached him.

I held out my arms. “Better?” He laughed. “Significantly less dirty and smelly, yes.” “Thanks,” I grumbled as I rested my elbows on the railing of the deck.

He turned, mimicking me, and together we looked out over the water.

«] never want to see a jungle as long as live,” I said. I sipped my water.

«I don’t blame you.” He paused a moment, as if considering his words.

«We need to figure out who dug that pit.”

[looked at him sideways, surprised. I had thought that pit had been placed there a long time ago and just forgotten about, but Julian was making the face he always made when he was deeply considering something. This left me unsure.

[was afraid to ask too much. I didn't even want to consider that I might have been set up. That seemed too horrible for words.

What if I had broken a leg? What if I had broken my neck? It seemed too terrible to consider. I didn't want to think anyone here capable of such a thing.

So I switched my train of thought and our conversation back to something still terrible, but significantly less so.

«I wonder what is taking Nicholas so long,” I said.

“you probably won't see him for the rest of the day,” Julian said. “Our parents are very pissed. I didn't even talk to them, and I know that.” I eyed him again. “Pissed about what?” Julian laughed. “What aren't they pissed about? That their oldest son rushed into danger to rescue someone they don't like? Or everything that happened after.” That stumped me even worse than what he'd said before.

Julian glanced at my confused face and sighed. “There were cameras set up all over that island, Piper. My parents and the producers didn't want to miss a

moment of the drama.” Cameras... on the island...? { The blood drained from my face.

«There weren't cameras in the cave?” «Not inside the cave, no,” Julian said.

Yet before I could relax, he added, “But one did face the cave entrance.” No. That couldn't be possible. Did that mean that footage existed of Nicholas and I... and what we did in that cave...

«The cameras showed Nicholas taking his clothes off,” Julian said. “I saw the footage myself.” A pit opened up in my stomach. I wanted to fall into the ground and hide forever.

«But then he rolled away, and the rest was too grainy to see,” Julian continued.

[exhaled in relief. Oh. Okay. So the worst of what we'd done remained hidden. And this wasn't the worst news, I supposed. “The producers edited all of that out, right?” I couldn't imagine anyone in production wanted Nicholas's royal backside aired across all televisions.

The royal family would be furious.

But then I realized, the royal family was furious.

Julian's gaze dipped away, and that pit in my stomach became a black hole.

«Unfortunately, the footage was broadcast live.»

Chapter 0503 My entire body goes numb at Julian's words. The whole world had seen Nicholas, live, strip down and roll over.

Everyone must have been speculating what they saw. Was there even any question? What else could we have been doing but what we did? God, I never wanted to be in a pit again, but I still half-wanted the earth to open up and swallow me whole, so that I wouldn't have to live with this absolute mortification.

people already speculated so much about my relationship with Nicholas and with Julian. This only added more fuel to the fire,

Julian watched my reaction with a curious, probing glance. Whatever my face looked like made him start to smile like the devil that he was.

"Why, Piper," he said, his voice sing-song and teasing. "Did something happen in that cave that you might not want the public to know about?" The blood rushed to my face so fast that I felt dizzy. "How much did the cameras show?" I asked. How much did it hear? I couldn't bring myself to ask the second question aloud, but it still rattled around in my heart, echoing through my mind on an endless loop.

Embarrassment swelled up inside of me. I felt like I might be sick.

Julian, still watching me, noticed when his teasing didn't land the right away

He'd likely thought he'd earn a blush, not the kind of near-death reaction I was currently having.

"Hey," he said.

He placed his hand on my shoulder. His smile was still present, but it softened from its dagger's edge sharpness.

Instead, now it seemed endeared and comforting. Maybe he was having mercy on me, thank God.

«The rain was too heavy for the sound to pick up anything else," Julian said.

«And as soon as Nicholas rolled over, the view in the cave was too dark to see anything specific. The most anyone could see was some shifting shadows.

It certainly wasn't enough to confirm anything sexy went on in that cave." «please don't say it like that." I buried

my face in my hands. His words brought me relief, but even though the mortification wore off, the embarrassment stayed.

This was closer to Julian's wheelhouse, and his sharp smirk returned. He waggled his eyebrows playfully.

«What should I call it then, Piper?» he teased.

I groaned loudly, the sound muffled by my hands.

Julian laughed and laughed.

I hated to admit it, but that too brought me comfort.

Julian was such a good friend to me.

For someone I thought might be an enemy of mine, I was grateful he had come to be one of my closest allies.

If only he could let go of his one sided feelings for Bridget and work on finding true happiness for himself.

Baby steps, Piper. To break a lifelong commitment to one-sided feelings, Julian was going to need more than a few weeks.

Instinctively, thinking of Bridget made my gaze slide toward her. She was side-eyeing me. When I caught her looking, she quickly looked away. As I watched, she did it again. And then a third time.

None of those glances seemed particularly pleasant. I certainly didn't get the impression that she was worried about me. Instead, though she was smiling, the ice in her eyes made me shiver. She had to be pissed.

Maybe because I was in that cave alone

with Nicholas. If Julian had seen the footage, then likely so had Bridget. She had therefore seen Nicholas remove his clothes. She had likely speculated what came after as well as everyone else.

Since Bridget personally knew Nicholas and me, and already suspected our closeness, she likely speculated correctly.

I suddenly felt very, very exhausted.

Trying to navigate the competition and everyone's feelings was a minefield on the best of days. When I was already running on little sleep, it was near impossible.

[wanted to stay up and wait for Nicholas to return, but I just couldn't force myself.

I needed to find rest or my body was

going to make me rest, one way or another.

'd rather not pass out on the deck in front of everyone.

«I think I need to go lay down,” I told Julian.

His smile softened once more. “Yeah. I imagine you're tired.” Then he reached out and tugged me into another hug.

His arms were strong around my waist, and his shoulder was sturdy. I could have fallen asleep just like this, but I forced myself not to.

I needed to make it up to my bed, then I could sleep.

“Keep an eye on Elva?” I asked him, though I knew she was safe. Veronica was watching her, and the nanny. I wished I could watch her myself, but if

I rested on the beach, I'd be asleep in a heartbeat.

Julian pulled away, then drew a cross over his heart with his finger, marking it as a promise.

“Thank you,” I said, relieved I had so many friends to protect me and mine.

With legs that felt like lead, I turned back toward the manor and dragged myself inside. The stairs were the worst. I had to place both feet on one stair at a time, clinging to the handrail the entire way for fear of falling over.

It took three times as long to ascend the stairs.

When I reached the top, I hobbled my way toward my bedroom door. The

guard at the door saw me coming. He opened it and held it for me.

“Have a good rest, Miss Piper,” he said as I passed him.

“Thank you,” I managed to say, though the words felt garbled in my mouth. Even speaking was so exhausting now.

As soon as he closed the door behind me, I kicked off my shoes and crawled into bed. I didn't bother changing into my pajamas. My linen day clothes were comfortable enough, and I was far too tired to care much beyond that.

I slide myself under my covers and pulled them up to my chin. The bed had been comfortable the night before, but nothing could surpass the level of comfort I felt now, after spending the night on a dirty cave floor.

My eyelids were heavy. [was sunken into the plush bed.

Between one blink and the next, I fell asleep.

I awoke to the feel of a pair of strong arms sliding around my waist, and a hard body pressing up against my back.

I felt no fear. This body and his aura was so familiar to me. My wolf near- purred in happiness.

Nicholas.

[leaned back into him, pressing myself as closely as he was pressing forward into me.

He placed a soft kiss into my hair, just behind my ear.

It was perfect, just like this. I couldn't

remember the last time I had ever felt this safe, this wonderful. I felt like I was home at last. = Sleep was coming for me again, but I fought it off this time. I didn't want to sleep again so soon, no matter how much my body demanded it.

With Nicholas here, out of his meeting, I had questions. So many questions.

And now I could finally get some answers. Gk

} Chapter 0504 I With Nicholas's arms wrapped safely I around me, I debated with myself \ whether to ask the questions I wanted or to go back to what I was sure would be the I world's most comfortable sleep.

In the end, my desire for answers outweighed my sleepiness.

Nicholas could tell without me even saying anything. "I can hear you thinking." I nearly rolled my eyes, but the effect would be lost as it was, with my back to Nicholas's front. He wouldn't be able to see my face.

Instead, I stuck to my questions.

«What happened with the King and Queen?» I asked. "Why did it take so long?" Nicholas sighed, his breath warm on my

ear. 'My parents just wanted to lecture me for a while.' That was a non-answer if I ever heard one.

"Nicholas," I said, pressing.

He sighed again, louder. "Okay, okay. I didn't want to get into the details, but yes, they are absolutely furious about my rescue." «Because it endangered you?» «Not exactly, though I'm sure that was part of it. NO. Instead, they were most upset about the optics." Optics? In the eyes of the public? «Because of the speculation about what happened in the cave?" "No," Nicholas said. «That was so grainy, thank God, that no one could tell what went on for sure. Even my parents, who had people analyzing the footage to see if they needed to make a statement about it,

confirmed the results were inconclusive.

We're in the clear there. I think. Though people will still speculate. Can't help that." "Then what optics are you talking about?" "My rescue was highly regarded among the public. It's lifted my standing in their eyes," Nicholas said.

[was confused. "Isn't that a good thing?" Wasn't that what this entire competition was about? To make the royal family look good? (yes. And no. Because I'm not the only one who's status just got lifted." He kissed me again, this time pressing his lips to the shell of my ear. "I went for you, Piper, and the public knows it. They saw you fighting for survival. They were cheering for you." [couldn't believe what Twas hearing.

Once Bridget showed up, my status in the

\ eyes of the public dropped substantially.

) Suddenly noone cared about the underdog wolfness normie when a \ superstar was around, especially one with I a sorted history with Nicholas and Julian.

It seemed like a kind of movie story, \ reunited childhood sweethearts, who were both famous in their own ways.

Nicholas and Bridget should have been the couple to end all couples.

yet here the kingdom was, once again rooting for me.

"My parents are furious," Nicholas said.

«They've spend the last several weeks trying to bring Bridget into the spotlight.

Apparently I ruined that for them." [hated how much it still stung, knowing how much the King and Queen didn't like me. I knew it wasn't exactly personal.

was supposed to be just a publicity stunt to draw ratings and open the hearts of the wary public to the good of the royal family. That I actually seemed to stand a

chance again and again annoyed them to no end.

yet it did still hurt. Maybe because I cared about Nicholas so much. If the King and Queen weren't so against us being together, maybe we might have stood a chance...

Or maybe not.

Nicholas would always do the best for his kingdom. The throne took precedence above all else, even his own heart.

And I, unfortunately, would never make the best Luna and Queen. After leaving the Academy in shame, I'd spent most of my time working low paying jobs just to survive. What did I know about politics? About court intrigue? About war? No. For the sake of the kingdom, Nicholas was always going to have to choose someone else. Someone from nobility, who was born and raised to hold a high place in the royal court.

Not me. Not an out-of-work waitress «please know that I lectured them nearly as much as they lectured me," Nicholas said, startling away from the downward spiral of my thoughts. "I asked them what kind of alternative they wanted. Did they want me to just leave you in that hole? Didn't they understand you could have died there?" I shivered, even in the comfort of his embrace, remembering how cold and damp I was in that pit. Thank God I had been reunited with my wolf before that happened. Without the additional healing factor my wolf provided, I likely would have died there even before Nicholas had found me.

Not wanting to think on it any longer, I turned in Nicholas's arms and buried my nose against his chest. I inhaled his familiar, comforting scent, letting the feel of him seep down into the deepest parts of me, until I was fully

encompassed by all of him.

Only like this, could I find peace. Only like this, could I truly leave the pit in the past.

Nicholas raised a hand, and traced a finger down the length of my cheek. At my chin, he lifted my face slightly, then leaned down and kissed me on the mouth. I hummed into the soft kiss. I felt like he was kissing life back into me.

When he pulled away, I felt more like myself than I had a few minutes before. I smiled at him in gratitude. He didn't return the smile with his lips, though his eyes were wary, showing his appreciation for me there.

[I didn't need confirmation of Nicholas's affection, not anymore. The man had trudged into a stormy jungle to find me.

He had saved my life.

And now he was here, holding me, instead of being literally anywhere else.

"The conversation wasn't all doom and) gloom, though," Nicholas said. "We did talk about some other, more pleasant I things. Like the upcoming meeting with f the merfolk." Oh, yes. With all the excitement, I'd I nearly forgotten about that. I'd met an ambassador of the merfolk before, at oi.

of the first events of the competition. I remembered the otherworldly nature of the encounter. God help me, I hoped I could remember the customs properly.

"We've all been invited to an underwater ball," Nicholas said.

My mind scrambled. It made sense that the merfolk, being sea-dwellers, would hold underwater events, including dances and balls. But it seemed strange to me to invite us air-breathers to them. Were we expected to wear scuba gear? Nicholas must have seen the confusion on my face. He leaned in and kissed the spot between my brows where a line must

have been forming.

\ "IT am so curious to what you are I imagining," he said.

He was teasing me. That didn't happen often, so I leaned into it, indulging him.

I : : "I have no idea how to dance with flippers on my feet and an air tank on my back," I said. I didn't know how I'd talk either. How would they be able to hear me with that thing in my mouth? Nicholas laughed lightly, then kissed me again. His eyes were sparkling with mirth. God, it was such a good look on him. I wished I could make him this happy all the time.

But that was a dangerous thought.

As good as we were, we were not meant for forever.

I focused on the now instead, however, and tried to remember every curve and crevice of his smile.

I "piper," he said. "Have you ever been) magicked to breathe underwater before?"

Chapter 0505 I fell asleep in Nicholas arms. It was the warmest, most comfortable I had felt in I couldn't remember how long. With the sun creeping in through the blinds and I the sound of the ocean beating on the sand just outside the window, I was lulled to sleep like a happy baby in a cradle.

When I blinked awake, later, the sun was much lower in the sky and Nicholas was gone. I wasn't surprised by his absence, but I did immediately miss him. The bed was so much colder with him, and without the sun.

I didn't want to sleep anymore, alone. It helped that I was fully rested too.

I rolled out of bed and dressed in clean clothes. My previous linen ones had gotten wrinkled in my sleep. I tossed the dirty clothes into the hamper and then headed downstairs

The rest of the group was standing just) outside of the dining room.

I "Mommy!" Elva called for me. She was holding Veronica's hand. Her free hand, I : : she waved at me enthusiastically.

{ I rushed over to them. They were standing, talking to Julian.

Julian flashed me a smirk as sharp as a dagger's edge. "Have a good sleep, Piper?" I narrowed my eyes at him. I had no idea how he would know that Nicholas slept in my bed, but if anyone would have known, it would have been Julian. He seemed to have an innate ability to sense these things.

Even now, he read the truth in my reaction and just grinned wider, the absolute cad.

I ignored him as best I could, focusing on Elva and Veronica until we were let into

the dining room The seating arrangements were the same I as they had been before: Bridget and Nicholas were set at one table. Everyone I else was at another. They didn't even bother setting a single place at a third I table for Jessica this time, rightly intuiting that we would have just invited her straight to our table instead.

Unfortunately, as we take our seats, noticed that the cameras were out in full force. Two different sets of camera crews watched us from all angles. They zoomed into our faces as we smiled, until those smiles turned awkward and fake.

The whole thing was such a chore. I knew that cameras and broadcasting to the public were part of the competition, but it felt like we had to be on all the time. We weren't allowed to make mistakes, or show too much of our true selves if we were having a bad day.

Though I supposed that was as muc ha

part of this as any event. The royal family)) couldn't have bad days. Saying the wrong thing or projecting the wrong opinion I publically at any event or endeavor was not just dangerous for a royal, it could be deadly.

I With that thought in mind, I forced down all my bad feelings and tried to project my true, happiest self. I was having an okay day now that I was rested and recovered and having a good meal with friends, so it wasn't a difficult mask to wear. Hell, it wasn't a mask at all! The table beside ours, however, was wrought with tension. As I watched, Bridget tried no less than three times to start a cheery conversation. Nicholas shut her down each time by simply not responding. He stared at his food and refused to look at Bridget, even when she talked.

It was so tense and awful, that Nathan eventually stepped in to direct the camera

h Crews away Then, I noticed, Bridget said something, 4 I and Nicholas's gaze snapped up to her: 1 had no idea what she said, but I heard ! Nicholas's reply clearly enough, mainly because he shouted it.

"You left her to die!" Everyone at my table immediately stopped talking, though we all pretended like we didn't notice the scene. We continued eating quietly, casting each other curious side-eyed glances. Even Elva seemed unsure what to do, glancing around.

I cleared my throat, very aware of the cameras zooming in on our faces.

"Uh, Julian," I said.

He cleared his throat and replied, "Yes, piper?" "You've, uh, visited the mer folk before, correct?" It was the only topic I could

think of at the moment.

"I have." "Why don't you... uh... tell Elva what it will be like when we go see them? I heard something about breathing underwater?" "Underwater?" Elva's eyes go wide as she looks from me to Julian.

Julian, ever happy to be the center of attention, easily took the bait. His grin went wide, stunning really.

"They live in an underwater palace, the size of which puts even ours to shame..." Julian said. He placed down his fork so that he could use his hands to regale us with his tale. "It's the real estate on the ocean floor. They have so much more space than us here up above." He continued with hand gestures, eventually even mimicking some of the underwater dance moves as best he could.

It was enough to make both me and Elva

laugh.

"It's easier to do underwater," Julian i explained, though he was laughing too.

I “Gravity gets in the way so much up I here.” I Both Elva and I hang on his every word.

Maybe for everyone else, visiting the merfolk palace is a common event, but for us, it sounds like something out of a fantasy.

Julian laughed as he took us in. “Mother and daughter seem to share in their childlike wonder,” he said.

I smiled and kissed Elva on the top of her head. I couldn’t deny it, so I didn’t bother. Instead, I was proud to share something so innocent and honest with my darling daughter.

After dinner, Nicholas and Bridget were supposed to go on their romantic boat date. They were clearly still mad at each other, both standing a good few feet away

from each other, even as they walked down to the boat dock.

I To distract myself, I returned to the beach to inspect the sand castles Elva had I built earlier in the day. Most were dilapidated now, but Elva still excitedly I told me what they used to look like. And from her descriptions, I was very impressed.

Nearby, Julian and Jessica had begun making new sandcastles. They’d even thrown in a competition.

“pweny bucks goes to the best castle,” Julian said.

“Fine,” Jessica agreed. She sounded like she was begrudging, but I saw the smile on her lips as well as anyone. “Who’s the judge?” “Mel” Elva called, raising her hand high.

“Elva,” Julian said.

“yay!” Elva cheered. She rushed over to

I" inspect as they began to make their) castles.

I Tlooked around and spotted Veronica I sitting in the shade of a coconut tree.

I Trusting Elva to Julian’s care, I walked I the few feet up to join her.

I She was holding a coconut in my hands.

As I walked closer, I suddenly felt something press lightly against my stomach. I lifted my hands to catch whatever it was. Looking down, I saw it was a coconut.

I glanced at Veronica. She wasn’t holding hers anymore.

She had just teleported it straight into my hands!

) Chapter 0506 I “Veronica!” I shouted with excitement I and, holding the coconut, rushed closer to her side. “You did that so easily!” I Veronica did not seem to mirror my level of joy. In fact, she seemed utterly dissatisfied, frowning at herself. Her breaths were shallow. She seemed winded.

“It’s not good enough,” she grumbled.

I sat down at her side and watched her curiously. “How can you say that? You are getting so much better, and in such a short amount of time.” She shook her head and reiterated, “Still not good enough. Just doing this, right now, has taken so much out of me. I can only imagine how taxing it must be to teleport an actual person, let alone a person and myself.”

I When Hawk had escaped the palace with \ Jane, he had been able to sneak himself onto the palace grounds, likely { I teleporting, and then immediately teleported again, this time with Jane in I tow.

I “He’s likely been teleporting his entire life,” I said. “You just started to train.” “I need to get better,” Veronica said. “I need to catch up to his skill. If we ever face him... that might be our only chance of taking him down.” Her words give me pause. Face... Hawk? Leader of the Underground Organization? Did Veronica really think we would need to do that? Though, given her background as an escapee from the underground organization, I supposed I couldn’t blame her, I too saw shadows around every corner. And I knew that as soon as I left the palace, Elva and I could be in danger.

. I was more comfortable now in my ability I to protect us, what with my wolf restored, but it was still unnerving. If the I underground came for Elva in large 1 numbers, I didn’t know if I would be I enough to keep them all at bay.

\ [would have felt much more comfortable if we could destroy the underground organization, but I didn’t dare dream we would have the power. With Jane’s defeat, and my wolf restored, I felt we at least crippled them.

Jane. God, when was the last time I had given thought to my sister? She had tried so desperately to kill me, to kill Elva. I couldn’t fool myself into thinking that she cared for either of us, as 1 had once been so desperate to do.

But her hatred of me did not change my feelings for her. To me, she would always be that pig-tailed little girl who followed me around. I hated that now, to protect Elva and myself, if I saw her again, I’d

I likely have to fight her. And I wouldn’t be \ able to hold back, knowing she would not grant me the same courtesy. \ I I wished things could be different. I never \ wanted to hurt my twin sister.

I couldn't help but wonder where she was now, or what she was doing. How was she living her life? Was she safe? None of it should matter to me, not after what she'd done.

But I couldn't help but care about her. I feared I always would. Even if I never saw her again. Even if I lived to be one-hundred. I'd be an old lady in a nursing home and I'd wonder where my sister was. I'd mourn her if she was dead. It would pain me to not know where her gravesite was.

"I'll get better, Piper," Veronica said, and made it sound like a promise. She didn't have to make any vows to me, but she likely knew that so I didn't feel the need

to tell her so. Veronica was set in her ways. "I'll be ready when the time comes." I (When. Not if.

Veronica was so certain.

I She was usually right about things.

Maybe I should start preparing myself, for the inevitable reunion with my traitorous sister.

Eventually, the sun crept down the horizon line.

Elva found Jessica's sandcastle more impressive than Julian's, likely because Julian didn't reinforce his with enough water and it crumbled in half near the end. I couldn't help but wonder if he'd done it on purpose to make Elva laugh and lift Jessica's spirits.

Julian did nice things like that, sometimes, when he thought no one would notice.

I After the sandcastle competition, I took Elva upstairs to bed. Then I returned I downstairs to a cocktail and a comfortable cushioned chair on the back deck.

I From here, I could watch the boat I carrying Nicholas and Bridget sail out on the water. The anchor was down. It was just drifting out there, rocking back and forth on the waves.

I couldn't see the deck. I had no sense of where Nicholas and Bridget were, or how they were getting along.

I didn't want to wish for either of their unhappiness, but my heart secretly, treacherously hoped that they were continuing to not get along.

I sipped at my fruit-flavored boat drink and watch the waves carry the boat up and down. I became lost in them, the gentle rise and fall. It was easier than thinking about anything else.

I Julian appeared then and plopped down I in the seat next to me. He carried a beer in his hand and took a long swig. I was i I grateful for his presence, happy for the I distraction, even if I knew the inevitable I topic of our conversation would be what was going on just offshore.

il “What do you think they're doing out there?” Julian asked.

«1 don't know,” I admitted. Truthfully, I didn't want to think too much about the specifics. “This must be unpleasant for you.” “Not half as much as it must be for you, trust me.” That answer surprised me, and I glanced at him with wide eyes.

Catching my expression, he shrugged. He took another swig of his beer, longer this time, and then spoke again. “What Bridget did out there on the island...

When she left you in that pit... None of

I that madeit to the live broadcast. But] I still saw it from the control room. I saw I allofit.” I I I froze in surprise.

\ I “Of course, they never pushed it to air. All {of Bridget's clips aired with a delay. They had to make sure they painted her in the perfect light so the public would always love her. But to cut those clips down, they have to view the entire raw footage first.

And I was right there. I saw it.” Looking at Julian now, I could see a fundamental change in him. He seemed harder now, talking about Bridget, not at all like the defeated man he had been speaking of her so many times before.

«1 saw what she did to you.” “Julian,” I said, almost wishing I could take it back for Bridget, to spare Julian from hurt. But maybe this was what he truly needed. Maybe this was the moment that would break his image of Bridget

, forever.

“she's not the person I thought she was,” he says. “The Bridget I knew: maybe she never existed. Maybe I \ imagined her. She would have saved you without hesitation. This Bridget now...

I She's not the person I want.” I was listening to him, hearing him say the words, and I still couldn't believe my ears.

vet when he looked at me, I saw the hard seriousness in his usually mischievous gaze.

He wasn't lying. He wasn't defeated.

He was confident and sure.

"I'm ready to move on."

Chapter 0507 I stared into Julian's eyes, and he stared back at me. For a moment, nothing existed except the two of us and the ocean behind us, the waves cresting and crashing into the sandy shore.

"I hope you mean that," I said. I so desperately wanted him to be happy, and I knew he never would be, not so long as he was tied up with Bridget. Whatever her feelings for Nicholas, and whatever became of them, even if they separated, Bridget would never be the right girl for Julian.

She was too selfish. She cared about her own needs and not about those around her. Julian could likely be a good supportive boyfriend, but he had sacrificed too much to try to be there for Bridget and her needs. A good, healthy couple needed to build each other up, not lift one at the expense of the other.

Lo Tarball, "I do," Julian said.

Relief flooded through me. I was cautious.

Julian had seemed like he had been moving on before only to backslide straight back into Bridget when she called for him. But this time seemed different. The confidence in his eyes was the Julian I knew, and though he was a good actor, I didn't get the sense he was hiding something from me.

We looked at each other for a few moments more, the span of a few quickening heartbeats — though I didn't know why my heartbeat quickened.

Then, a boat engine sounded, and we looked toward the ocean in time to see the boat carrying Nicholas and Bridget return to the island.

We heard them before we saw them.

Bridget's voice was shrill. "I swear, I didn't know the storm was moving in!"

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vo MEA add i Nicholas exited the boat first, walking) with purpose down the dock. He was I pointedly not looking behind him, { ignoring Bridget who hopped off the boat next and rushed to follow him.

I "I'fully intended to go back and rescue I Piper!" Bridget shouted.

My stomach twisted uncomfortably as her words forced my conscious mind back to that moment, with me deep in the ground, and Bridget standing over me.

She'd had a rope hooked over her arm.

She could have so easily saved me.

But she didn't. She left me there. All so she could win this 'romantic' boat date with Nicholas.

I'had a disturbing kind of thrill, gleeful that she wrought what she sowed and her prize turned out to be terrible.

Maybe that was unkind of me, but I could have died down in that pit. If a bad date was the comeuppance, then I was willing

I I to accept that.

I "I'told her I would come back for her!" Pi Bridget's voice snapped me back to { myself and they were much closer than I they had been before.

I Julian and I both stood. I don't know why exactly. Maybe to see more. Maybe to make an escape.

But Bridget caught the action and rushed over to me. Nicholas, who hadn't been coming our way, stopped when she did.

Seeing me, he made his way over to us as well, anger hot in his eyes.

"You believe me, right, Piper?" Bridget asked me. "You know I was going to come back. And you forgive me for not being able to keep my word? That storm moved in so quickly, there was nothing I could do!" Her eyes were full of tears and desperation. If I didn't know she was an

PO a ee I award-winning actress, I might have } believe her to be genuinely sorry. Even if I she had yet to offer a proper apology. i I 'You forgive me,' was nowhere near as I sincere as a simple, 'I'm sorry.' I really didn't want to accept her apology, I but I felt off-kilter. Part of me still felt trapped back in that pit, even though I knew I was safe now. I glanced sideways at Julian and say him watching me. He was always so observant. He likely knew how off-kilter I felt before even I did.

Something dark settled over Julian's expression, and he shifted his gaze from me to Piper.

"Piper shouldn't have to forgive you, Bridget," Julian said. His tone was flat, annoyed. It was unusual to hear him talk like that. Usually the people he didn't like earned sarcasm, not direct cutting remarks. "You should have just done the right thing." Bridget's face shifted suddenly, eyes

i widening like she couldn't believe she) was hearing such a reprimand, let alone I from Julian of all people. \ (I Behind Bridget and Nicholas, Nathan I came closer to the deck, looking tired.

I The camera crew were behind him, but I they carried the cameras down at their sides, obviously not filming.

I wondered if this argument had lasted the entire duration of the boat trip. Was there any footage the producers could salvage? Vindictively, I hoped not.

Seeing us, the camera crew stopped. But Nathan took one look at us and then rubbed his forehead like he had a growing headache.

"Get some rest," Nathan said to the camera crew. "There's no footage to be had tonight. We'll try again tomorrow." Once the camera crew disappeared inside the building, Nathan approached us. He looked around at all of us, leveling each

I one of us a hard stare that did not change) depending on the station of the person , Who earned it. A prince, a movie star, a { I waitress. All of us had earned his (discontent.

{ «) I don't care about your arguments," he I said. "What I care about is how it comes off to the public. We are visiting the merfolk tomorrow. We cannot have you all at each other's throats while we are attempting a meeting of kinship and peace." I had not heard Nathan speak like this before, especially not to Nicholas and Julian, and even Bridget! He sounded like a disapproving father who had just caught all of his kids sneaking out to drink. He must have really been at the end of his rope.

"Whatever this is." Nathan waved his hand between all of us. "Figure it out before tomorrow." He rubbed his hand over his forehead again, his face crinkled

I up in pain. Yeah, that was definitely a) headache he was fighting off, and from I the look of it, a fierce one. "I'm going to (I bed." With that, Nathan stormed away. He I opened the door to the mansion from the I deck and then slammed it closed behind us.

The rest of us looked after him, most of us in shock, though Nicholas hid his very well. Then we all looked back at each other.

A quiet lingered for a moment. If everyone else was like me, we didn't know what to say.

Bridget spoke first, because of course she did. A professional superstar would recover from an awkward situation the quickest. She was probably used to people having uncharacteristic reactions in her presence.

"See? This is why we need to resolve this

A TE Stet td now," Bridget said. "There's no reason to) keep up this fight. We all know it was an I unfortunate accident." { I I "Do we?" Julian said, a bite in his voice.

I Bridget looked at him, a responding coldness in her eyes. "Yes, Julian. We do." I y She thawed away the coldness by the time she looked at me. "Right, Piper?" SURE
Bridget's eyes went soft, looking at me.

She was giving me the same pleading, doe-eyed look that Elva had so perfected.

"The only way we can move past this," she said, "is if you forgive me, Piper."

Chapter 0508 Bridget's doe-eyed look, while so-similar to Elva's, was not nearly as convincing.

I Perhaps Bridget's charms worked on I those who were already fond of her, or on I unsuspecting men who found her attractive, but I was neither of those.

When I looked at Bridget now, all I could see was the memory of her standing over me in the pit. She'd had the means to save me, but she'd left me there instead. I could have died. And now she wanted forgiveness? She hadn't even properly apologized! This question of hers for forgiveness now felt like some type of extortion racket.

Something like, you had better forgive me or else! That type of attitude had a natural rebelliousness grow inside of me. I wanted to deny her forgiveness just because she was so damn demanding of

I it, acting like she deserved it.

In a perfect world, Bridget would reap what she sowed. Karma should come back around and kick her square in the pants.

I Unfortunately, we didn't live in a perfect 1 world.

Since the footage of Bridget abandoning me in that pit was cut and edited for the public, the public had no idea what she actually did to me. This feud, if allowed to continue, would likely reflect poorly on me and no one else.

Plus, Nathan wasn't wrong. Since we were to meet with the merfolk for the sake of continuing to build the alliance between the two nations, showcasing petty squabbles wouldn't look good for the werewolf kingdom.

We had to get past this. Which meant, for the sake of appearances, I had be the one to take the high road.

God damn it.

«I never would have done this to you,” I said to Bridget's annoyingly hopeful face.

“If you had been the one in that hole, I would have dropped everything to rescue I you.” Bridget's pleading expression did not change. It was as if she hadn't heard me.

She was trapped in limbo waiting for those three magical words: I forgive you.

She was going to be waiting for along, long time.

“However,” I said, “For the sake of appearances in front of the merfolk royalty, and for the good of the werewolf kingdom's alliance with them, I think it would be best if we simply moved forward.” Nicholas's frown deepened.

julian startled. Looking at me, he asked, “Are you sure about that?”

No. Not really. But I knew I didn't have anv other choice. Without context, the public and the merfolk could both turn on us.

I “It's not forgiveness,” I added. “Not by a I I longshot. I just don't think we should I fight about it anymore.” “Oh, Piper,” Bridget said. Her smile brightened. She clasped her hands together and tucked them under her chin.

“you truly are a saint among women.

Thank you so much.” I blinked at her happy outburst. She had heard what I said, right? About this not being forgiveness? She probably didn't care, since she was getting what she wanted regardless. I felt like such an idiot. Maybe I shouldn't have made it so easy on her, after all.

“She didn't say she forgives you,” Julian added. “You don't have to seem so happy about it.”

"Moving forward is akin to forgiveness," Bridget said. Her eye twitched slightly, looking at Julian. When she turned her gaze to Nicholas instead, she brightened her entire disposition. "Right, Nicholas?" j Nicholas looked at her flatly, then sighed.

I He walked away without a word, heading for the door to lead him inside.

"I don't know why everyone is so touchy," Bridget said to his back. "Piper is fine. Nothing bad happened." My frown deepened. Nothing happened? I could have died! "you're really missing the mark this time, Bridget," Julian snapped. "If the public knew the full truth, they wouldn't forgive you either." He turned his attention to me. "Do you want to go inside, Piper? It's suddenly a bit suffocating out here." God, that sounded like a good idea. I wanted to be as far away from Bridget as

physically possible, especially when she was so purposefully missing the mark like she was now.

I started to nod, but then Bridget began to speak.

I "Piper. Actually, if we could, I'd like to speak with you privately for just a minute." «1 don't think that's a good idea," Julian said at once, and, while I appreciated his coming to my defense so readily, I was capable of taking care of myself.

Also, I couldn't deny my curiosity over what exactly Bridget wanted to tell me privately. Perhaps, here, I'd finally see a glimpse into Bridget's true feelings, something she undoubtedly didn't want the public or the princes to see.

"It's fine, Julian," I said. "I'll hear her out." julian lifted a single brow in my

J direction, as if to ask me if I was certain about this \ I was.

+ Inodded at him in response.

I I "Alright," he said, though not without i Mr 3 . : hesitation. He leaned in and kissed my cheek. "I'll see you in the morning, then." "Goodnight," I told him.

"Goodnight, Julian," Bridget said shortly after I did.

Julian ignored her, gave me a small smile, and then turned and followed his brother inside.

Alone with Bridget, I crossed my arms, waiting for whatever terrible thing she was about to say.

Her bright smile never wavered. It was starting to make my skin crawl. How could she always keep that up so

convincingly, when I knew, in my heart that it was bullshit? 1 «1 just wanted to thank you personally, Piper,” she said, voice sugar-sweet I “You're forgiveness should help smooth things over between Nicholas and me.

I You know how stubborn he can be. He would never forgive me if you didn't first.” “I didn't forgive you,” I reminded her. “I just want to move forward.” She laughed. “Same difference!” I blinked, startled. Was she living in a fantasy world, or did she purposefully pretend that everything was going her way until the people around her caved and went along with it? “Although...” Bridget's smile turned sly, and she leaned in as if telling me a secret.

“Angry sex can be pretty good too.” She laughed. “If the boat is a rocking, don't come a-knocking. Am I right?”

My stomach dropped down to the ground Was she trying to insinuate that she and Nicholas had sex on that boat? That couldn't be possible. Nicholas had I been so furious with her. He wouldn't } have...

\ Right? “Have a goodnight, Piper!” Bridget said, sing-song, as she walked past me toward the door.

I stayed where I was a few minutes, as her words sunk in. I didn't want to run into her in the hallway have her tell me even more gut-wrenching things.

When I finally did get to my room and crawled into bed, images of Nicholas and Bridget intertwined flooded my brain, one after the next. It was so painful, so terrible... My imagination was my worst enemy.

I tossed and turned, but sleep did not find

me until well into the night When I blinked open my eyes, the sun 4 was high in the sky, beaming at me through my windows.

How long did Elva and I sleep? I And, oh no! The boat for the merfolk territory was set to leave early today! We didn't miss it, did we? I rolled out of bed and hurried to the window. Down below, I saw everyone walking onto the boat.

They were getting ready to leave without us!

Chapter 0509 “Elva!” I cried out, and rushed to wake her. “We overslept, honey. We have to go now!” I I had so many questions. Where was Charlotte? Why didn't my alarm go off? Why didn't anyone come looking for us? But there was no time to consider them, let alone process them long enough to find answers.

I tried to think back to what Nathan said about proper etiquette for meeting the merfolk in their territory. We would have magic cast on us to breathe underwater, so we should wear swimsuits.

I quickly picked out a swimsuit for Elva and helped her change. It was an adorable one-piece, sky blue, with little shorts and purple bows dotted all over it. When Elva was ready, I opened my

— bed.

drawer to grab one of my own swimsuits. Yet, the place I had stored my swimwear was entirely empty! I opened the rest of the drawers, searching, frantically thinking that maybe the swimsuits had fallen down into the other drawers somehow.

\ But no matter where I looked, there was no sign of any of the swimsuits! How could this be? A knock sounded loudly on the door, more like pounding.

“piper!” Nathan called through the door.

“If you are not down in the boat in two minutes, we will leave without you!” “I can’t find my swimsuit!” I called back.

“We can’t afford to be late!” Nathan shouted. “Just make do!” His footsteps were loud as he thundered away, “Mommy?” Elva asked. She had tears in

her eyes. “Are we not going to breathe underwater?” My heart broke at the hint of defeat in her voice. The poor little girl really thought we’d be left behind. And she was likely right, if I didn’t hurry up and ‘make do.’ As quick as I could, I threw on the first dress I could grab, then I took Elva’s hand and rushed out the door.

Nathan stood on the dock, his arms crossed, glaring at me.

“We’re here!” I said, as Elva and I approached.

“Never be this late again,” Nathan snapped and motioned his head toward the boat.

There wasn’t time to explain what had happened, especially when I wasn’t so sure of it myself. Nathan likely wasn’t eager to listen to me anyway. I hurried forward, and Elva and I boarded

the boat.

It was a yacht more than a boat, with two floors and many wide open seating-areas.

Everyone seemed to be on the highest floor, toward the front of the ship. So Elva and I went there to join them.

"As soon as we joined them, everyone stopped talking to look at us. Well, to look at me, specifically, and what I was wearing. I was the only one on board who wasn't wearing a swimsuit or wetsuit.

Slowly, I inched over to Veronica.

"Piper..." she began.

"You don't happen to have a spare swimsuit?" I asked.

"I could go back =" As soon as she started saying it, the engines of the boat stirred to life, and the boat itself drifted away from the dock and into the ocean.

Veronica frowned. "Sorry, Piper. What happened to yours?" "I don't know," I admitted. "When I went searching for them, they just weren't there..." That combined with Charlotte's absence and the mysterious turning off of my alarm had me wondering. These all seemed like one too many occurrences to be a coincidence.

I didn't want to give voice to my worries, but what else could I think at this point? "You don't think someone is trying to sabotage me?" I asked Veronica.

Together, as if on reflex, we both turned our heads at once to look at Bridget. She was sitting on a bench, far too close to Nicholas, though he had his shoulder to her, looking out over the water.

I didn't want to think Bridget capable of something like this, but why wouldn't I? On top of all the other petty things she'd done to me in the past, she also left me in

that pit on the jungle island. She hadn't even told anyone I was there.

Hiding my swimsuits and sabotaging me to make me look bad in front of the public and the merfolk seemed arbitrary in comparison.

\ ' We must have stared at Bridget for too long, because after a moment of looking at Nicholas, she turned her head to consider me again. Maybe she was annoyed at being ignored by Nicholas. I didn't know. But suddenly, she stood up and made her way over to us.

Behind her back, Nicholas turned to watch the scene. Jessica had turned away from all of us to look out over the water.

Julian was asleep on a nearby chair. Elva let go of my hand to go over to him. She poked him on the face until he peeked open one eye at her.

He smiled, so I knew she wasn't bothering her. I hoped he would distract her long enough for whatever Bridget

I wanted to say to me. Likely, whatever it was, it wouldn't be very good.

I Bridget dragged her gaze down my-outfit.

She continued smiling but the nature of her smile shifted into something like pity.

Or mockery.

' "Oh, Piper," she said with sympathy. It didn't entirely match the pleased look on her face. "You really didn't think this outfit through, did you? A white sundress when we're going underwater? When that gets wet, it is going to basically be translucent." Oh, God. In my panic to grab whatever this morning, I hadn't even thought of that. Fortunately, I was wearing a tasteful bra and panties, but I didn't exactly want to showcase that to the public or to the merfolk royalty.

At this rate, I was bound to make a terrible first impression.

"111 figure something out," I said to

I Bridget.

She shrugged. "You should see that you I do. You wouldn't want to embarrass yourself... or the rest of us for that matter." She turned away from us then and walked back to where Nicholas had been, but he wasn't on the bench anymore. Instead, he stood by the far railing, holding his cell phone to his ear.

A touch of fear stirred in my heart. Was he also embarrassed by my lack of appropriate clothing? Maybe he didn't want to be seen with me at all, not even enough to talk to me.

Veronica touched my arm, bringing me away from my depressed thoughts.

"It's going to be okay," she said. "I'll go below and speak with the crew. Maybe they have something that could work." I thanked her, and we parted ways. I

walked over toward Julian, who was laughing at something Elva said. His smiling eyes lifted to me. When he took in my downtrodden expression, he sobered slightly.

I I hy H » (You okay, Piper?" he asked.

I sighed. "You wouldn't happen to have a woman's swimsuit tucked away anywhere that I could use?" "No, sorry." He glanced back over his shoulder, eyeing Nicholas still on the phone. "But I wouldn't worry too much.

These things have a way of working themselves out. Especially with Nicholas on the case." "What does Nicholas have to do with this?" Julian laughed. "Who do you think he's on the phone with?" I didn't know so I shrugged.

“Don’t worry, Piper,” Julian said. “Just
i wait and see.”

Chapter 0510 [tried to take Julian’s advice, trusting in Nicholas, and attempted to relax. By now, \ Julian had sat up, so I took the open seat I t . ; I next to him. Elva squeezed into the I middle space between us.

Veronica soon came to join us. She was apologetic, it seemed none of the staff members on board had extra swimsuits.

Though Veronica had convinced one of the camera crew to give up their t-shirts if we agreed to pay him one hundred dollars cash.

“Don’t worry,” Julian said again.

I looked back behind us where Nicholas stood. He wasn’t on the phone anymore.

Instead, he was looking out over the ocean. His hair was windswept. He was wearing a wetsuit that clung to his every curve and muscle.

“I hope you know what you’re talking

I — about,” Veronica said “I trust my overly-prepared brother to already have a plan, that’s all,” Julian replied.

I Veronica rolled her eyes, even as she sat \ with us, sitting down on the other side of Julian.

The boat lifted and fell with the waves.

Elva hung onto me, while I hung onto the edge of the seat.

Julian glanced at us both.

“T expected Elva to be nervous, but you’ve never been on the ocean before, Piper?”
“No,” I replied. “This is new for me too.” The ocean was beautiful. We could no longer see the island, so the rolling blue waters stretched out in all directions around us. Yet, as gorgeous as it was, it was also unnerving. I wondered, if Elva or I slipped off the boat, and sunk down into

the water, would we ever be found? “There,” Veronica said, and she pointed at what looked like a dark spec off in the distance.

I “What is that?” I asked.

I "That's the tallest tower of the merfolk palace," Julian said. "That's our destination." The boat raced toward the dark speck, until we came close enough for my eyes to discern what the tower truly looked like. It was tall circular stone structure, three pronged, like a trident scratching up against the sky.

An opening ran straight through the center of the main body of the tower, right on the water line. Once we were nearly there, I realized a marina was inside the opening, with several docks that led toward large gated opening.

Merfolk were scattered about, above and below the water,

I "The captain of our boat, steered into an open spot that the merfolk directed. The boat came to a stop and was tied off to the § dock.

I Nathan reappeared on our deck. "Time to depart," he said, waving to us. Below, the camera crews were already exiting the boat, likely wanting to set up shots to show the candidates first impressions of the tower.

I stood, and held Elva's hand tightly.

"piper. Elva," Nicholas called to us. "Stay close to me." We shuffled over to him, and then stuck close by his side. When we reached the dock, he held onto Elva's free hand and helped lead us both.

The merfolk servants didn't do much talking. They simply directed us through the door. Still, I made certain to thank each one that I passed.

"Beyond this door is a welcome chamber," Nicholas said. "Piper, there should be someone there waiting for you." "For me?" I asked, confused.

"yes. I called ahead and arranged for you to be provided with more suitable attire." "Oh." Embarrassment swirled in me, bringing a blush to my cheeks. "I'm sorry, Nicholas. I don't know what happened this morning..." Nicholas shook his head. "We'll worry about that later. For now, we just have to survive this event." I nodded, taking the words to heart. "Yes: Of course." We walked through the massive doors into the welcome chamber. An elaborate stained glass mosaic covered the floor.

Through the colored glass, I could see down into the ocean, Some merfolk swam

. by, along with brightly olored schools of fish.

"pardon me, miss," said a merfolk servant who approached me on my right.

"please come with me to a changing room." I / Nicholas nodded at me.

"Stay with Nicholas, okay, Elva?" I told my daughter. She nodded in response.

Then I went with the servant into a separate changing area, a small room with opaque floors and walls. Inside, hanging on a hook on the wall, was a beautiful swimsuit. It shimmered blues and purples, with several shells affixed to the surface. Several long translucent ribbons dangled from down the back.

The servant stayed to help me with some of the more complicated, unfamiliar tie-ups that ran along the sides of the swimsuit,

When the swimsuit was secure, I looked in the mirror along the wall and marveled at the intricate beauty of the suit. The shells did not interfere with my mobility whatsoever, and the ribbons trailed behind me as I swayed back and forth. I imagined they would look beautiful, lifted in the water.

The servant bowed to me, and I thanked her. Then I left the room and rejoined the others. The others had moved farther into the room, toward where a grand staircase descended under the water.

Nicholas was waiting for me, nearer the door. When he caught sight of me, he stilled entirely, except for his eyes, which trailed down the length of me from top to bottom and back again.

“piper... You look... so beautiful,” he said.

He sounded... breathless in a way that wasn’t typical for him. Nicholas often wore his hard exterior shell, showing the world the steel-faced prince that he

I thought they needed to see. But for me, things were different. He was different My heart raced. I placed a hand over it, half-worried it might leap from my chest.

I “Nicholas,” came Bridget’s too-friendly I voice. Her smile was too-tight as she approached us. “We need to get going now. It’s impolite to be late.” “Right,” Nicholas said.

The three of us rejoined the others. Elva was running in small circles around Julian and Veronica, unable to contain her excitement. When she spotted me, she cried out, “Mommy!” and rushed over to give me a hug.

“Wow, Mommy! That swimsuit is so pretty!” She walked around me, and giggled as she tugged on the ribbons.

“It’s a more traditional merfolk dress,” Nicholas said. “You’ll see a lot of suits like this today.”

i Elva’s eyes went wide They staved wide when, a few minutes later, one of the merfolk accompanying us, lifted her arms and gave an unfamiliar incantation. From her fingers,

sparkles flickered. The sparks flew over all of us. I I didn't feel any different, though my skin glowed for a moment.

"There," Nicholas said. "Now we can breathe underwater." "Really?" Elva asked in disbelief.

Nicholas nodded. "I'll show you." The rest of us, even Veronica and Bridget, waited as Nicholas descended the staircase into the water. His mouth was open, he was talking. Though we couldn't hear him above the water. A moment passed, then two. Soon Julian joined him, and then Veronica. Bridget and Jessica went next.

I held tightly onto Elva's hand. We'd do

I this together.

"Ready?" I asked her. I wasn't sure what was waiting for us down in the merfolk palace, but I needed Elva to know that I would be here for her no matter what. "If you get scared, let me know, and we'll come back to the surface." "I won't get scared," Elva said, with determination shining in her eyes.

Together, mother and daughter, we began to descend the stairs.