

The Luna Choosing Game #Chapter 511 - Read The Luna Choosing Game Chapter 511

Chapter 0511 I Holding Elva's hand, I lead us both down the stairs.

I As I dropped beneath the surface of the water, I instinctively held my breath.

Beside me, Elva hadn't. She looked around, surprised, and then laughed.

Oddly, I could hear her voice clearly, even under the water.

In front of us, Jessica and Veronica were having a full on conversation about the nature of underwater breathing magic.

"Why can't werewolves live in the merfolk kingdom, with this kind of magic?" Jessica asked.

"The magic won't last for more than a day, I imagine," Veronica said. As our local magic expert, she would know, though Jessica likely didn't understand that.

I "Not to mention that werewolf bodies aren't meant to live underwater," Julian added.

"That would add complications," Veronica agreed.

I Jessica pouted slightly, somewhat disappointed.

Bridget started walking, ahead of all of us.

I watched them all in awe, still amazed I could hear them as clearly underwater as if they had been standing beside me.

Perhaps that magic hadn't just been to help us breathe underwater, but to help us survive there too.

Behind us, Nathan and the camera crew were descending into the water. The cameras were covered in a protective film to keep the salt water from harming the equipment. The crew checked everything over while they were there in the shadows.

Nathan looked over them and all of us. He seemed nervous, likely due to the importance of this event.

The alliance between werewolf and merfolk was a valuable one. Any faux pas I here might tarnish that closeness.

I / Nathan's eyes landed on me, and I swear I felt him giving me a silent warning. Out of all of us, he must have seen me as the weak link. That seemed unfair, given all that Bridget had done.

Elva tugged at my hand. "Come on, Mommy! I want to see the mermaid palace!" «Merfolk," I corrected gently.

Nicholas waited for all of us at the base of the stairs. I was the last one down them, dragged by Elva, who was swimming now, no longer bothering with stairs. I supposed I could have swam as well, but it seemed polite to keep my feet on the floor, as that was what the others were

doing.

I fully intended to follow Nicholas and 4 julian's lead here. Mark and Nichotas's guidance had helped save me when facing I Merfolk Ambassador Zale at a previous I event. I could trust Nicholas not to lead I me astray now as well.

I tried to think back on what few merfolk customs I knew. I had learned some at the Academy, but that had been so long ago, I struggled to remember. At the time, I hadn't thought I would actually use that information so hadn't made much effort to retain it.

The Merfolk had their own language. I only knew basic phrases. I wondered if they would use their own language here, or still to English for the sake of their visitors.

"Are you alright?" Nicholas asked. He held his arm out for me, and I accepted it.

"It's a bit unnerving," I said, "Being able

"to breathe under the water." "You get used to it," Nicholas said. "Give { I it a few minutes." = Elva, meanwhile, continued to tug on my arm. "Let me go, Mommy. I want to { swim!" "It's alright," Nicholas said. He squeezed my arm in comfort.

"Just don't go far," I said and released Elva's hand.

She immediately started swimming like a fish. I had no idea how she'd learned to be such a good little swimmer! Was Anna teaching her while I was at work? Pride brimmed in my heart. My darling daughter was so talented at everything.

The walls and floor of the hallway we were in seemed to be made of stone with some coral and barnacles collected here and there. Warm lights glowed overhead

I in starfish-shaped chandeliers, illuminating the hallway.

I Nicholas led me forward and together . with the rest of the group, we made our way to another set of double doors. A mostly-familiar figure stood in front of them.

Chapter 0512 ' I gasped. Ambassador Zale! I Yet unlike the last time I had met him, when he had been more human shaped and wearing a tuxedo, now he was even more otherworldly. The biggest change was the lack of human legs. Instead, he had a long and coiling fish tale, covered in scales the same as the blue-green ones on his forehead and nose.

On his torso, covering his chest, shoulders, and arms, was a tight jacket similar in material to my swimsuit. Like my swimsuit, it was covered in various shells, all of which were shiny, colorful, and attractive.

At once, Bridget, Veronica, and Jessica bowed in greeting. But I remembered my last experience with the ambassador. So did Nicholas and Julian. As we approached, we lifted our hands to cover where our gills would have been on either

side of our necks, had we been merfolk, We gave the royal greeting, "My life, my friendship." Zale beamed at us all. He mimicked the I gesture, lightly covering his own gills.

"My life, my friendship." He lowered his "hands away. "What a pleasure to see you again, my friends." Bridget cast me a sharp look back over her shoulder. Had she not been warned about the proper greeting? Good. Maybe Nicholas or Julian would have told her, had she not left me on that island.

I did feel bad, however, for not warning Veronica or Jessica, though neither seemed overly upset. Zale's friendliness extended to them as he cast them a kind smile, so there seemed to be no hard feelings.

Well, for anyone except for Bridget.

"I wanted to be the one to formally greet

you before you enter the banquet hall," Zale said. "Many of the royal family has gathered there, as well as others in the { nobility who are anxious to meet you. We have also welcomed some of the well respected common folk who have well- earned a chance to be here." "We are always pleased to spend time with whomever the royal family deems appropriate," Nicholas said.

Zale turned his kind smile to Nicholas. "I am grateful to you, though do not feel overly pressed to speak with anyone you do not feel comfortable with." His gaze slipped from Nicholas to the rest of us.

"Our customs differ from yours. You do not need to be courteous to those who have not earned it. Remember, honesty is valued about all else." Nicholas leaned closer to me, enough to whisper in my ear without drawing attention or being overheard. "That rule applies to all but the royal family.

Whatever you do, be kind to them.” I gave Nicholas a look, hoping to indicate that I would never be unkind to anyone.

He offered a small smile in exchange. He knew that. But he wanted to warn me. I ! nodded, understanding.

i Zale continued to speak, “You will know who is of royal blood because only the royals are permitted to wear crowns.” “The larger the crown, the more important the royal,” Nicholas whispered to me.

I nodded, grateful for the tip.

“Now,” Zale continued. “If you are ready...” We were, so we nodded.

Zale turned and pushed open the large doors behind him.

Immediately, my mouth dropped. The banquet hall was spacious and wide, but it was also deep, seeming to go down, down forever. The merfolk didn’t care about floor space, not when they could move easily in every direction.

We moved forward as a group toward the end of the walkway, before the very I ground disappeared. A plethora of merfolk turned to look at us. Some started a throaty call.

“A cheer,” Nicholas whispered to me.

“Similar to clapping.” Bridget immediately began to bow and wave. The others moved slower.

One of the merfolk moved closer. His scales were bright green and matched his eyes. His tail had many fluttering fins, all very attractive and well-taken care of. A crown of conch shells circled his head.

A royal then, of middling importance.

My nerves heightened, especially when he smiled right at me.

Wy TV Vie He covered his fins, gave a small dip of his head, and then winked.

Chapter 0513 "The merfolk royal swam over toward me I stood very still, continuing to grip on Nicholas’s arm.

{The merfolk cleared his throat. I braced i myself, unsure if he would speak in a language I would recognize. Despite any potential awkwardness here, I certainly didn’t want to be rude. I “My lady,” the merfolk royal said, eliminating my worry. The merfolk, it seemed, were trained in English better than we were trained in their language.

"My name is Prince Ronan. I am the eighth son of our Queen Sonal." I placed my hands on either side of my neck, covering my imaginary gills in a shortened form of the traditional greeting, the same form he had just given me.

"An honor to meet you Prince Ronan. My

name is Piper." "A beautiful name that fits a beautiful woman," Ronan said. His eyes flashed in the dancing lights of the room. Unlike the hallway that had light fixtures, this room I seemed to be lit exclusively by magical means. Orbs of light in various shades floated throughout the room.

Nicholas was still holding my arm, and therefore witness to the entire exchange.

"Prince Ronan," Nicholas said, apparently in greeting, though he made no further effort beyond those curt words.

"Prince Nicholas," Ronan replied, though his gaze remained fixed on me. "Your partner this evening is truly enchanting.

Such a delightful traditional merfolk dress, Piper. You are a generous soul to gift us with the sight of it this day." Blood rushed to my cheeks. What was I supposed to say to that?

"Uh, thanks?" I managed.

Nicholas hardened his gaze. "If you will excuse us, Prince Ronan. We've only just arrived. There are many introductions to make." J Ronan nodded critically, though he continued speaking to me, "Piper, in honor of your arrival, the royalty and nobility have been hard at work turning some of our movements into what your people call dancing. It would honor me if you would grant me your first dance." "I must insist on the first dance," Nicholas said. "As is my right as the man accompanying her this evening." I blinked. Was this why he had wanted to hold my arm for the entrance, despite knowing it would be captured on camera? By accompanying me into the banquet hall, was he allotted certain privileges he would have otherwise been denied? Was this more merfolk custom I was

unfamiliar with? God, I really needed a refresher course. { "Understood," Ronan said. "Though I shall anticipate a later dance, then." } Not knowing what else to do, I bowed my head slightly, acquiescing. What was one dance with a handsome merman? I danced many times with other men I wasn't particularly attracted to during the other balls and events. I could handle this.

"Mommy!" Elva called, waving from farther down in the hall. "Look!" She pointed at a passing merfolk, one who was carrying a tray of exotic-looking foods. Fish, I presumed, and seafood.

"If you will excuse me, Prince Ronan," I said. "I must attend to my daughter now." "Until later, then, Piper." Ronan smiled at me,

p I tugged slightly at Nicholas's arm, encouraging him to follow me. Together I we swam to where Elva was asking the { merfolk servant questions about the food.

"And what's this one?" J "Sea bass," the woman said.

"And this?" Elva pointed.

"Lobster." Elva tried each of them, and soon, I joined her. Seafood like this wasn't on our usual dining list, so I wanted to take advantage. Nicholas watched us both with an endearing look and a soft smile.

Before long, a group of merfolk children, some wearing narrow crowns of strung together pearls, approached Elva. They swam in small circles around her, until she laughed.

"Play with us!" one of the children said.

"We're going to race!" said another.

Elva looked at me with doe eyes.

"It's alright," Nicholas said. "She is safe "while she is here. The merfolk treat-all children as if they were their own. Even those of foreign birth." f

Chapter 0514 With that reassurance, I nodded at-Elva.

"Enjoy yourself," I said.

She laughed and immediately began to I chase after the other children as she swam away.

The loud excitement of her laughter warmed me from the inside out. It was so rare to hear my little girl having so much fun. I half wanted to stay here forever.

Nicholas moved closer to me. When he was close like this, even in such an otherworldly place, it was easy to forget the rest of the world existed.

So easy was it to forget the many, many merfolk in the room, and the other candidates, and the cameras that were showcasing every moment of this event to the people back home.

I knew we should be doing other things,

Chapter 0514 With that reassurance, I nodded at-Elva.

“Enjoy yourself,” I said.

She laughed and immediately began to chase after the other children as she swam away.

The loud excitement of her laughter warmed me from the inside out. It was so rare to hear my little girl having so much fun. I half wanted to stay here forever.

Nicholas moved closer to me. When he was close like this, even in such an otherworldly place, it was easy to forget the rest of the world existed.

So easy was it to forget the many, many merfolk in the room, and the other candidates, and the cameras that were showcasing every moment of this event to the people back home.

[knew we should be doing other things,

like introducing ourselves to more of the royal family or making motions of gratitude.

Yet when Nicholas moved his arm slowly around my waist, teasing me with the gentlest touch, all other thoughts were washed away, and I could focus only on him. Only on this moment.

“Dance with me,” he said.

And who was I but to agree? He took my hand in mine and slowly we descended farther into the massive banquet hall. Down below, a series of musicians played strange instruments I had never seen before, many made of shells or coral and fish bones.

The music was eerie but familiar. Though the sounds themselves individually were like nothing I had ever heard before, when put together, it formed music I recognized, albeit with a haunting tone.

Some of the other merfolk had already taken to their form of dancing. They swam in tight circles around each other, \ holding each other closely. It was very...

sensual, and fluid.

Nicholas led me toward the center of the dancing group, and then held me as the other merfolk held their partners, with one arm around my waist, and the other draped upward across my back.

This pressed our chests hard together.

Through our thin swimsuits, I could feel hardness of each of his muscles. He likewise should have been able to feel my curves.

[wasn't a terribly good swimmer, but I followed Nicholas's lead.

We swam in tight circles around each other, as the other merfolk did, moving our bodies to the beat of the music.

Gravity had little meaning here. At one point, I was certain we were upside down But that mattered little when I looked

into Nicholas's eyes and saw the heat mirrored there, so like what was growing inside of me.

Moving like this... Touching like this..

I wanted him.

Now wasn't the time to be fooling around. We were here to build relations between merfolk and werewolf. But I could not help my body from reacting to the feel of the water and Nicholas's hard body against mine.

"Nick..." I whispered.

His face was so close to mine. His lips near mine. If I dared, I could lean in and kiss him right here, right now. It was only the strangeness of the environment that kept me from totally losing myself.

And that strangeness reminded me of the others nearby. And of the cameras.

Nick," I said again, but meant it different this time, like a warning We

couldn't keep dancing like this, moving like this...

The cameras will see. Everyone will know...

(Nicholas pulled back, allowing an inch of {space between us. Then two. "Let's disappear somewhere," he whispered.

My heart took flight and my body reacted at once, heat growing within me.

"piper," said Ronan, approaching us. The heat inside me dimmed at once. "How good of you to start dancing so early.

That means we can share our moment next, surely?" I looked at Nicholas with pleading eyes.

I didn't want to dance the way I had just done with him, with anyone else!

Chapter 0515 "piper isn't feeling well at the moment," Nicholas said. He kept one arm wrapped protectively around my waist. "In fact, I I was about to take her to one of the private rooms to rest." "Oh," Ronan said, and his bright smile fell somewhat. "How disappointing. Well, recover and rest well, Piper. Thope we can share our dance at a later time." "Thank you," I said, side-eyeing Nicholas somewhat. While I was incredibly grateful for the save, I knew Nicholas was taking a great risk here. The merfolk valued honesty above all other virtues. For Nicholas to like to a merfolk prince surely wouldn't be looked upon kindly if discovered.

But, looking at Nicholas, I could see the hint of anger in his eyes. Or... jealousy? He did not want to share me with Ronan.

He did not want me to dance with Ronan

3 as I had done with him I could only be relieved. I too did not want to dance with Ronan as I had done with Nicholas.

(Ronan backed off then, and Nicholas led me down into the depths of the hall. Near the base, I noticed a large collection of crowned merfolk congregating around a floating table of various foods.

We swam past them to where a series of separate chambers circled the main banquet hall. Nicholas led me into one of the chambers, and then closed the door behind us. He released me long enough to lift his hand and turn the lock.

The room was small, with steps that led upwards into a pocket of air. As I lifted my head and peeked out over the surface of the water, I spied a human-esque bathroom, with a toilet and a sink. It was very accommodating, though impossibly clean, as if it had never been used.

i pg" Nicholas tugged my arm, pulling me back under the water. Then he turned me in his arms, pressed my back up against the wall, and kissed me.

It was a strange experience, kissing I underwater. Every time I opened my mouth to reposition my lips or accept Nicholas's tongue, water would enter into my mouth as well. But I didn't drown. I didn't even choke. The water was everywhere here, and the magic made it so I could breathe the stuff like it was air.

[didn't even think about it after all. It was so easy to forget it was there, especially when Nicholas tugged at the ties of my swimsuit. His deft fingers made easy work of them, and before long, he was peeling the entire suit down my shoulders.

wore nothing underneath, so after one long motion, where Nicholas pulled the swimsuit down the length of my body to

I — I my ankles, he toss the suit aside and kissed his way back up my body.

First, he kissed the top of my foot, and then my ankle, then my calf and my knee.

My thighs. He skipped my most sensitive I nub for now, kissing instead along my hip I bone and then up to my belly button.

My breasts however, did not miss his attentions, and he grinned at me, the only warning I received, before he clasped his mouth over my nipple and sucked.

I buried my fingers in his hair and arched my back. With no gravity here, the motion kicked us both off the wall until we were floating around in the center of the room.

Nicholas laughed as he released my breast. He grabbed my arms, pulled me closer and kissed me. [looped my arms around him so I could hold onto him. I didn't want to separate while we were kissing and spinning in the water

I "Nick..." I sighed against his lips.

"Hm?" He kissed me again.

"You are still wearing I SUIT are ø aring your body suit...

"Oh?" He smiled, very aware then of what he was doing, how he was teasing \ me. "Is that a problem?" "I'd prefer it if you were naked," I said.

"Greedy," he said with a pleased sort of growl.

He kissed me, then backed up a little. I had to let him go since what I was holding onto was covered with the suit.

He drifted away from me as he unzipped the front of the suit and then slowly peeled it off, revealing inch after titillating inch of rock hard muscle and tan, flawless skin.

If I wasn't already breathing water, I would be drooling for sure.

When his dick sprung free, [gasped. He

was already so hard.

"piper," he said, his voice low and rough.

"When you look at me like that... It 's difficult to control myself." "Who says you need to control yourself?" I said.

In an instant, he kicked his way toward me. His arms wrapped around me and yanked back up against the hard lines of his body. His tongue slipped back into my mouth, stealing my breath away.

"The only problem," he grumbled. "Is that I can't feel or smell how wet you are for me."
"I can tell you," I assured him.

He growled in response. Suddenly, he was moving my body, up and up, or was he moving down? Without gravity, it was all very confusing.

But the next thing I knew, he was pushing my legs apart to fit his mouth

4 there.

"Wait!" I called.

He paused at once and looked up at me with confusion in his face.

I pouted. "I want to touch you too." His confusion ebbed. "Oh." Then with a hint of mischief in his eyes, he began to turn himself, so that while his mouth stayed level with the apex of my thighs, his throbbing manhood was now well within my own reach.

In fact, with it this close to my face, I could taste him just as he was tasting me.

I gripped him first and stroked him base to tip.

In response, he moaned, grabbed me by my thighs, and buried his mouth between them.

"Ah! Nick!"

His ministrations were relentless. He sucked on my clit like his life depended on it.

This was a challenge, I realized. And through the fog of pleasure, I was bound and determined to give as good as I got.

So I surged forward and clasped my lips around him.

He moaned against me, and I moaned back.

We moved together as one, matching each other's pace with perfection.

Nick broke from sucking on my clit only to lap at my pussy inside. He dipped his tongue inside of me and I broke away from him to gasp and beg.

"Ah! Nick, please!" As he removed his tongue, he laughed.

"Feel good, Piper? I could taste you, when [went in like that. I want more." He dove in again. He push pulled his

I tongue in and out of me, mimicking what he would do with his dick during lovemaking. It felt so good I nearly lost my mind.

But the thirst for competition and my I desire to make him feel as good as he was making me feel, helped me keep my wits long enough to match his pace with my own attentions.

He picked up the pace and I matched it.

Then I moved faster still, and he matched my movements.

It wasn't long before we were going absolutely wild on each other.

Then shortly after that, we clutched each other fiercely as our bodies trembled, toppling over the precipice into pleasure and completion.

All while we were twisting and floating adrift in the center of the small room.

Chapter 0516

As we had swallowed down each other's pleasure, there wasn't much need for clean up, other than returning into our swimsuits and checking ourselves in the mirror. As our hair was already wild in the water, no one would notice if Nicks and mine had been tugged and pulled.

I did have a few new love bites on my thighs, but hopefully no one would think to look there. Besides, it wasn't terribly obvious what they were. I could have just been breaking out from too long under water or something. That was believable right?

It would have to be because, since makeup didn't work down here, and I didn't happen to have any anyway, I had accept that I couldn't do anything about it.

When we were dressed and as presentable as we ever were going to be, Nicholas gripped my shoulders, brought me close, and kissed me sweetly on the mouth.

I smiled against his lips, my heart and body warmed from his physical and emotional affections.

"I'll leave first," he said. "What five minutes, then follow me."

Those words cracked my façade somewhat. I understood the need of them. If we left together, we could be caught on camera and then who knew what would happen.

But it hurt my soul to know that we had to continue to play this game. I wished I could be with Nicholas for real, though I knew all the legitimate reasons I couldn't.

To want more was being selfish.

I wanted Nicholas however I could have him, and this was the only way I could have him.

So I kissed him again, a touch more desperate this time. He wrapped his arms around me, holding me close.

Then he released me. He turned and he left me alone in the room. I closed the door and locked it behind him.

I waited for five minutes, counting each second to keep my mind from wandering and wallowing in my sudden aloneness.

Then, when my three hundred seconds were done, I opened the door and slipped out of the small room myself.

If anyone noticed my absence, I was not immediately aware. The dancers were still dancing. The kids were still playing. Ambassador Zale was speaking with Nathan in front of the cameras, Julian was showing off his swimming prowess for Veronica, Jessica, and several interested female merfolk.

Nicholas had stopped at a congregation of crowned merfolk royals. If his frown was anything to go by, they seemed to be locked in a conversation of extreme importance. I slowly swam toward them, worried he might be in trouble of our mutual disappearance.

I should have known better. As I approached, I began to overhear some of their conversation, and I felt foolish for thinking their discussion could ever be over something as trivial as a hookup in a bathroom.

"We are committed to the alliance, Prince Nicholas," said a merfolk man with a crown much bigger than the others present. If he wasn't a King, he was at least a first son or an advisor of the utmost importance. "But you must understand our limitations if things continue to progress with your conflict in the north."

That made sense, I supposed, as the border with the bear nation to the north was over land, not sea. The merfolk were heralded as fierce naval warriors, but put them on land, and their abilities were severely compromised.

"Any intelligence would be beneficial enough," Nicholas said. "We trust you to keep your ear to the ground."

"We will do all we can," replied the important merfolk. "Though between us, I already advise caution."

"You've heard something?" Nicholas asked.

"Whispers. Rumors. Nothing more. The merfolk man seemed troubled, his brow furrowing, creasing the rose-gold scales there. "Though they are concerning, none the less."

"Any particulars you can warn me of?" Nicholas asked.

"Only this," replied the merfolk. "Keep a protective eye on your relations... and those whom are important to you." His gaze then slipped straight over to me.

I had been attempting to remain inconspicuous. But he looked at me as if he had known was there for some time.

Nicholas looked too. Yet when he saw me, he didn't look angry that I had been eavesdropping, as I'd initially feared he would. Instead, he seemed concerned.

To the merfolk man, he said, "Thank you, sir. I will take these words to heart."

Then he began to swim his way over to me. Before he could reach me however, another pair of warms went around me, sweeping me up and away into a strong-armed embrace.

I panicked, thinking it might be a stranger, or worse, Ronan, but instead a deep, mischievous laughter helped me realize it was only Julian.

I playfully swatted his shoulder. "You gave me a heart attack."

"You looked so serious, I thought you needed a rescue, Julian said. He released me and rubbed at the spot I'd hit him, though it couldn't possibly have hurt.

He wasn't wrong exactly, though I wished he had done so without scaring me. Even now, my heart felt like it was pounding so hard, it could power a train engine. I placed my hand to my chest.

Julian tilted his head. "I really scare you that bad?"

"Yes!" I said, though I was mostly teasing now. It was easy to relax around Julian, in a way that wasn't possible with other people.

"Let me make it up to you with a dance," Julian said. He nodded toward the dancefloor, where the merfolk were jubilantly flitting around each other. It wasn't a sensual dance like it

had been before. "The merfolk don't usually dance. They been attempting to learn."
"They're making good efforts," I said.

Though the music was still eerie and haunting, this one at least had a solid, steady beat that was easily discerned.

Julian held his hand out for me, and I accepted it. Together, we made our way up to move with the other dancers.

Julian swam in large circles around me, and then I did the same. We both watched the others around us for the appropriate steps and then laughed together when we did them so terribly wrong.

We danced and we twisted and we kicked and we laughed.

And then I felt a lap on my shoulder.

I turned, expecting Veronica or Jessica, Nicholas, or even Elva.

But it was Ronan who was standing there, looking at me with a displeased, affronted sort of look on his face.

"Are you not feeling so sick anymore, Piper?" he asked.

I swallowed thickly.

Julian stopped dancing and kicked to swim beside me. "You were sick?" he asked.

At once, I realized my grave error here. No, I hadn't been sick. Nicholas had made that excuse to keep me from sensually dancing with this stranger. He had lied in the moment, and I had worried for him, knowing that the merfolk value honesty above all else. Except now Nicholas wasn't here. I was the one stuck with the lie. I knew that hadn't been Nicholas's intension. I wasn't angry as he had saved me so valiantly before.

But to save face for the werewolf kingdom, I know needed to resolve this potential international incident. And to do that, I was going to have to dance with the prince.

The music shifted again, no longer up-tempo and fun, but back to the slow, sensual rhythms that had played when Nicholas danced.

Prince Ronan held out his hand impatiently. "I trust you have no objections to dancing with me now?"

Chapter 0517

I didn't have a clear way out of this. For the sake of international relations, I had to accept. So I did.

I placed my hand in Prince Ronan's offered one and repressed by shiver as he closed his fingers around my hand.

"I would be honored to dance with you, Prince Ronan," I said.

Ronan's eyes narrowed. I was a terrible liar. I probably shouldn't have tried to sell it quite so much.

Julian, still standing beside me, shifted his gaze from Ronan to me and back again. "Is everything alright here?" he asked.

"If you would please move out of the way, Prince Julian. I would like to dance with Piper now," Ronan said.

Julian looked at me as if for direction, or confirmation.

Careful to keep my face a bright, smiling mask, I nodded at Julian.

Julian saw through me in an instant, and concern covered his face. But, God, the last thing the werewolf kingdom was another prince lying to a merfolk to get me out of trouble, so I tugged Prince Ronan's hand and motioned toward an open part of the dance area.

"Perhaps we could dance there," I suggested.

He agreed and with the flick of his strong tail, he was instantly moving forward and dragging me along behind him.

That same flow seemed to set the standard for our dance.

Ronan was strong and aggressive. He'd move and twist without much consideration for how my werewolf limbs differed from his fins and tail.

He pushed where I pulled. He twisted where I tried to go straight.

It was an absolute failure of a dance.

But he didn't seem to let that deter him. Instead, he slipped in closer to me. His arm tightened around my waist, keeping me plastered up against his side. Like that, he moved for both of us, no longer simply leading, but instead dragging me around like a rag doll.

It was uncomfortable, but honestly not the worst I'd ever been treated.

But then, he started to get handsy. As if he accepted my limpness for consent, his hands drifted away from my waist, down to the curve of my ass.

I immediately reached back to grab his wrist and returned his hand to my waist. Thank God I had my werewolf strength because he fought me every step of the way. If I had been simply human, he would have remained unchecked.

Yet even with my strength, he was persistent. Three times I had to remove his hand from my ass. And then, once, from my breast. He placed his hand flat over me and squeezed. His

fingers were clawlike, digging in. I winced. Merfolk men didn't trim their nails as neatly as werewolf men.

When I tried to move his hand away, he seemed to only hold on tighter until I was hurting myself trying to unhook him from me.

"Prince Ronan!" I said, my disgust clear in my tone.

"I am a prince and you are a liar," Ronan growled. His eyes were glowing with anger. "I can do with you as I will."

"No!" I said. I lifted my hand ready to slap him across the face. International incident or not, I did not sign up to be sexually assaulted!

Yet just as I was about to slap him, another hand curled around mine. A familiar, warm one. The matching arm slid around my waist.

In a perfect twist, Nicholas spun me away from Ronan and into his own arms.

That prince's clawlike hand finally released my breast. I winced as I pressed it now against Nicholas's chest.

Nicholas's arm went protectively around me, sliding up the back of my spine, to deflect any attempt to steal me back as he had stolen me from Ronan

Looking over my shoulder, I saw that Ronan had other problems now too. After Nicholas had spun me away, Julian had stepped into the empty space to block the merfolk prince from retaliating.

"Let me give you a hint," Julian growled. "Women don't like it when you paw at them like playthings."

Ronan puffed up, shoulders back and fins flaring. "I've never had any complaints."

I doubted that. Or perhaps the girls he'd been with had been too afraid to tell him how terrible a seducer he truly was.

I immediately felt bad for these women. Someone needed to report Ronan. Surely this behavior was unfitting of a prince!

"Yeah, well, maybe you are just a shitty listener," Julian replied,

Ronan glared at him. "Get out of my way!" he shouted then and shoved Julian aside.

On land, Julian would have been the stronger of the two. But at sea, the merfolk's tails gave them a strength advantage that human or wolf legs simply couldn't compete with.

Ronan flexed the strength of that tail now, rushing to where Nicholas and I were in a rush.

"I demand retribution!" Ronan shouted once he'd reached us.

He was quite frightening as he was. His stretched out fins made him appear large and threatening. And his eyes glowed golden and otherworldly.

Nicholas immediately moved me so that I was safely behind his back. Then he growled. He flexed all of his own muscles, they bulged under his wetsuit. His hands curled, claw-like, as if he might slash out at Ronan at any moment

"Are you challenging me?" Nicholas growled. "After what you were doing to Piper?"

"We were dancing!"

"That is not how you dance."

*She is a poor partner. I was merely attempting to direct her into being somewhat affable."

"By grabbing at her inappropriately?" Nicholas snapped. He was a man of infinite patience, particularly regarding matters of the state. Here, it seemed, he had reached his limit.

"If you want a challenge -" Nicholas began.

"Let's not be hasty!" Julian shouted.

Julian finally made his way to us. It seemed Ronan's strong push forward had knocked those nearest to him far back. It had taken from then until now for Julian to swim back to us.

Julian's smile is razor sharp, but his eyes are calculating as he looks at Nicholas. "Do not forget whose turf we are on, brother. Or whose sea, I should say."

Nicholas's growl remained low and dangerous. "Such offenses cannot go unpunished."

"Nick," I said, and placed my hand on his shoulder. All of his muscles were taut underneath. He was like a coiled spring, ready to jump forward and strike. "We can talk this out."

"Stay out of this, wench," Ronan snapped. "This is no matter for... what did the wolf call people like you.. a plaything."

If I was closer I would have made to slap him again. Of all the pompous, arrogant, terrible things to say to someone! On top of his groping and his inability to handle rejection.

Thalf wanted Nicholas to accept this challenge and through this merfolk to the ground.

But that was not behavior that adult princes who were likely to run their countries in the near future should partake in. For that reason, and only that reason, I held Nicholas back by wrapping my arm around his waist.

He could have shaken me off, but he might have hurt me in the process. He'd never do that. So my arm stayed where it was. And so did Nicholas.

Ronan threw his head back and laughed. "Look at you, cowed by a title-less woman!"

Chapter 0518 "Nicholas's growl returned tenfold. I didn't know how much longer I could hold him back.

I Yetbefore I could become even more I seriously worried, a different merfolk swam up from the space down below us into the quickly narrowing space between Nicholas and Ronan. At once, both men kicked backwards to give her more room.

She was absolutely stunning, her tail the color of coral, all pinks and oranges and yellows. Her scales sparkled in the light of the nearby dancing orbs. Her bodysuit was elaborate, decorated in many dozens of small shells and gemstones. The decoration continued up through her long hair, merging into the tall crown she wore, Her crown was the tallest of any other in the room. Yet even if she hadn't have been wearing it, from her regality and her

NY a poise, I would have known this merfolk woman was the Queen.

"Nicholas immediately bows his head in respect, and I do the same. Julian, likewise.

I Ronan does as well, though he seems to do so begrudgingly. His face is twisted with annoyance the remaining shreds of restrained anger.

"Your Majesty," Nicholas said.

"You need not be so formal with me, Prince Nicholas," the Queen said. "We are all friends here." Her eyes were kind looking at Nicholas. They somehow softened further, as she shifted her attentions to me. "Piper, was it?" "Yes, your Majesty." "My eighth son offended you," she said.

It wasn't a question but I felt compelled to answer it as such.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Enough for your princes to come to your rescue?" the Queen asked.

"I tried to remove his hands on my-own, ma'am," I explained. "But he was persistent." I worried she might not believe me, but from the disappointment clearly turning down her lips, I quickly gathered that wasn't the case.

She swung her attention around then, to Ronan, her son.

"My eighth son," Queen Sonal said. "Do you dispute this charge laid before you? Keep in mind that the loudness of your voice carried your crass messages far beyond this small dance area. I believe, even our visiting cameras picked up some of your words." She waved her hand to where a cameraman was swimming upward, his camera pointed at the scene.

I hdd "Enough for your princes to come to your rescue?" the Queen asked.

"I tried to remove his hands on my-own, ma'am," I explained. "But he was persistent." I worried she might not believe me, but from the disappointment clearly turning down her lips, I quickly gathered that wasn't the case.

She swung her attention around then, to Ronan, her son.

"My eighth son," Queen Sonal said. "Do you dispute this charge laid before you? Keep in mind that the loudness of your voice carried your crass messages far beyond this small dance area. I believe, even our visiting cameras picked up some of your words." She waved her hand to where a cameraman was swimming upward, his camera pointed at the scene.

I wondered how much of the Queen's annoyance with the prince was because of his embarrassing them in front of the [werewolf people, or if she truly was also upset on my behalf. From the soft look she'd given me, I'd imagined both things bothered her.

Perhaps one was more important than the other for the sake of national security and international relations.

Ronan stiffened, his eyes darting between his mother and the approaching camera crew.

Finally he cleared his throat. "I took liberties with Miss Piper that I should not have done." The Queen looked at him expectantly.

"And?" "And... I should not have done it." The Queen Sonal sighed. "Ronan. An apology is what is required now, both to the

the CA Abe woman you have affronted as well as the two men who were quick to step in on their behalf." "Oh, yes. Of course." Queen Sonal swam back slightly, enough for Ronan to move forward and deeply bow at the waist. "Miss Piper. Prince Nicholas." He shifted slightly. "Prince Julian." He moved back towards me. "I deeply apologize for my unfortunate behavior. I am quite shamed." Since the merfolk valued loyalty, I thought that I should believe him, but there was something about this apology — how quickly it came, or how easily — that struck me as false.

"I hope with all of my heart that you will grant me your forgiveness," Ronan continued.

Everyone turned to look at me, Julian too.

Only Nicholas kept looking forward, his body mostly still between me and Ronan, with Inga peeking out from behind his shoulder.

"If this had been some guy on the street or a customer at the restaurant who had assaulted me, I would have called the police and asked them to throw away the key. Forget forgiveness.

But this wasn't just some guy. This was a prince of a foreign land, an ally to the kingdom I held dear. My kingdom which seemed like it was on the edge of a war with the north, as well as a civil war from within.

Even though my breast still ached, I wasn't sure I had any choice but to forgive him. For the sake of the nation.

Yet. On the other hand. The merfolk were a people who valued honesty.

Surely they would know if I only pretended? As I struggled over what to do, Nicholas

brushed his hand back and squeezed my arm. I knew then, that I had his support no matter what I decided to do.

Truth or lie. Forgiveness or dismissal.

And I adored him for it.

I I But I would not betray him, or let down I my kingdom in my hour of need.

I lifted my head and came to swim at Nicholas's side. I wouldn't hide behind him. I was a proud werewolf woman, and I would act as such.

"Prince Ronan, I hope that you can amend your behavior," I said. "Your actions today were not representative of the kindness and hospitality I know your people possess." Ronan straightened slightly. He paled around the gills. He obviously hadn't been expecting further reprimand, least of all from me.

"However, I am willing to put this

y incident behind us, for the sake of prosperity and peace between both our kingdoms," I said.

It wasn't an apology. I was tired of giving those when I didn't truly mean them. But this was as close as I could make it.

Ronan lowered his brow, looking outraged. The Queen, however, seemed pleased.

"We thank you for your honesty, Piper," she said, smiling. "Such a thing is rare among your kind. I see now why Ambassador Zale spoke so highly of you when you visited the palace." I bowed my head in reverence.

Queen Sonal swam closer. Quietly, as if only for Nicholas's ears, she said, "You would do well to keep this one close, young Nicholas." "I'm not so young any longer, Queen Sonal," Nicholas replied, though he was

(J - smiling now as well. When he glanced at me, it was with pride in his eyes.

"Not young, then, but foolish still;-if you have yet to pick this woman for your bride," the Queen said.

I startled, but the Queen just smiled at me. Then she turned and grabbed her errant son by the arm.

"He will be punished for his actions, Piper. You have my word," she told me.

"Such actions are not welcomed among my kind just as they are unwelcomed among yours." "But, mother," Ronan began to whine.

He was silenced with one sharp look from Queen Sonal. They did not speak again as they both swam away, back down to the bottom of the banquet hall where the other royals congregated.

Once they were gone, and the cameras followed them, I worried my hands

I — together. “Did I mess everything up?” I asked Nicholas.

“He gently shook his head. “No. In the end, what transpired here will only help relations between us.” “Oh?” I gave some thought to that. “Is it possible Prince Ronan acted like a brute on purpose then to create this scenario?” “No,” Julian said, cutting in. “Prince Ronan is an asshole, Piper, and you should stay as far away from him as you can.”

Chapter 0519 With the drama mostly settled for the moment, I thanked Nicholas for his help.

He smiled once more at me.

Then we split ways, and I made my way down to where the children were playing. I to check on Elva. As I drew closer, I could see how tired she was.

It made sense, while the other children were swimming around using their strong tails, Elva had only her two weak legs. Of course she would be exhausted trying to keep up.

She was still smiling, still having fun, but she wasn’t moving with quite the vibrancy she’d earlier displayed.

When she saw me, she waved. I kicked my way over to her, opened my arms, and immediately she came closer to rest.

“Are you having fun, sweetheart?” I

asked her.

“So much fun,” she said with a yawn.

“Don’t make me go home, Mommy” “Not yet, dearest. But you better rest for a moment.” “Just a minute,” she said. Her eyes drooped, but she fought off sleep.

Watching her efforts made my heart ache.

Poor thing didn’t want to miss a minute of this adventure.

One of the merfolk children tugged at my arm. She was a bit older than Elva, maybe seven or eight, with her hair done up in elaborate pigtails. A row of pearls dotted across her forehead. A royal, then.

She pointed at the wall behind them, where I noticed some shelves had been set up, each covered in some soft-looking cushions.

"When we get sleepy," the little princess said, "that's where we sleep." She

twisted her tail so that she could twirl her fins around her fingers. "Elva would like it. It's what the mermaids do." She giggled at the word.

I blanched slightly, unsure if the term was politically correct. I should have I made certain Elva knew to call everyone merfolk. The little princess didn't seem to mind though. She looked at Elva with the kind of fondness a sister might have for another.

I remembered what Ambassador Zale said, that everyone treated the children as if they were they're own. I wondered if that rubbed off on the older children as well, who saw the younger as their little siblings to protect.

"Thank you," I told her. "Would you show me the best spot?" The little princess guided me to the shelves and picked one near the top. "This is my favorite," the princess said. "The noises aren't so loud here."

"Thank you," I told her. And then eased Elva onto the shelf. She was already drifting. I roused her slightly so that she would know where she was and where I would be.

She was so tired, but she still gave an excited smile. "I get to sleep like a mermaid..." she said, and then immediately drifted off again.

As I backed away from the shelf where my angel slept, the little princess tugged on my arm again.

"I'll watch her," the princess said. "I'll make sure she sleeps undisturbed." It was so sweet and valiant, I thanked her kindly.

Then she beamed like I had given her the greatest gift.

I backed away then, not wanting to interfere in the princess's self-assigned duties. She seemed to take them

seriously, making sure to keep the other children away from where Elva slept.

"It was absolutely adorable, and warmed me through and through seeing such kindness. Elva has made a friend for life I here, I knew, even if they never saw each I other again.

God, I hoped they would get to see each other again.

I turned then, to find the others, only to find a mysterious older merfolk woman behind me. She watched me closely, then tilted her head.

She had a head of wild gray curls, topped with a towering crown, second only, that I'd seen, to Queen Sonal herself. Someone important then, and well-respected within the merfolk kingdom.

Her scales were a deep, rich purple that looked near black at times, depending on the light. Even her fins were different than the other merfolk. They seemed to

/ glow somewhat, as bright and mysterious as the float orbs at times, much dimmer at others.

I could tell just from looking at her that this was a matron of significant power.

Magical, most likely, though I knew so little of magic, I had no idea if merfolk were more or less prevalent than werewolves.

I wished Veronica was here.

"Are the other children treating yours well?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am," I said. I didn't know her name, but felt she was worthy of some type of honorific. "Thank you, ma'am." "Good," the mysterious merfolk said.

"That poor child of yours is haunted by darkness. I had worried that the cause was linked to you, but I can see now that I was mistaken in that regard." I blinked, surprised by the admission.

Then I was surprised a second time but the implication.

"You don't need to share with me if you are unable," the merfolk said. "Though I suspect you too know she is cursed." ' So I was right. Only those with magical abilities would have been able to detect the curse, especially as it was currently inactive. Or, as inactive as it could be, with Jane's distance and the talismans destroyed.

"It worries you," the merfolk said. She studied my face like she could read my every expression, though to be fair, I did little to hide what I was thinking.

"My sister," I whispered, and hoped that would be enough information for the mysterious merfolk to fill in the blanks.

She nodded grimly, likely putting the pieces together. "Broken familiar bonds shatter like glass. The shards remain with us, deterring the healing."

I didn't totally know what she was talking about, but if she meant Jane would I continue to hurt me even after she was gone, I could only agree.

"She won't remove the curse," I said.

Maybe I shouldn't have said anything.

Maybe this was a secret worth keeping.

But, on the other hand, I couldn't help but feel a growing shred of hope.

Even with Veronica's research, we'd struggled to find any possible solutions to breaking the curse on Elva. And I knew, even if moving slowly, the curse would continue to eat away at Elva, eventually ending her life prematurely.

If this woman knew anything, a way to stop it, or slow it down, I would be worse than a fool not to pursue it. I would be a heartless mother.

And I had nothing but heart for my daughter.

"please," I said. "If there's anything you can do... Anyway you know of that can save my little girl..." The merfolk looked at me with pity, but also with a kind of fondness, like a mother would feel for a child. I had not I experienced a look like that in so very long that it made me tremble. I wrapped my arms around myself.

"I can see you love your daughter," the merfolk said. "Your heart is pure, Miss Piper. As is your little Elva's." "You know our names," I said.

"All who enter here do," the merfolk said, "Though I suspect I am somewhat of a mystery to you." I nod.

"I'am a type of Oracle," the merfolk said.

"A mystic of the sea. Your princes will know. Speak with them, clear your heart of fear, and I will speak with you again."

She looked away from me, out across the room. I followed the length of her gaze to where Julian and Veronica were speaking.

When I looked back to the mystic, she was gone.

Chapter 0520 * I glanced all around, but there was no sign of the mystic. Confused and slightly alarmed, I swam over to Veronica and Julian to join their conversation. They I both stopped speaking and looked at me as I approached them. Likely my face was giving away my tumult of emotion.

"What happened?" Veronica asked, just as Julian asked, "Are you okay?" "I don't know," I admitted, and then told them both what had just happened regarding the merfolk mystic.

"She approached you?" Julian asked, when I had finished, even though I had just told him the full story. Surprise widened his features.

"Yes," I said, and pointed toward where I had been standing. I reiterated what I felt was the most important part, "She knew about Elva's curse."

"I'm sorry," Julian said. "Forgive me. It's just that she doesn't usually speak to anyone. For her to have come to you is quite a special occurrence." "So you do know her?" I asked.

"Yes," Julian said. "I've met her only once, but I've seen her often enough. She is highly regarded among the merfolk royalty." "That she could so quickly discern the curse around Elva speaks to her considerable magic," Veronica said.

"Though I'm skeptical she knows a cure.

It's not impossible, but..." "The merfolk have their own kind of magic," Julian said to her. "If there was anyone who might have an alternative cure to the curse, it's them." Veronica frowned but didn't disagree.

"Do you think we can trust her?" I asked Julian

I "The merfolk royal family trusts her," he said, which was an answer and a non-answer both. "I would probably trust her with my own life. But since we are talking about Elva..." I understood his hesitation. I too would likely trust the mystic with my own life, knowing the merfolk royal family kept her in such high regards. But when talking about my child... My qualifications for trust were infinitely higher.

However, if there was even a small chance she could cure the curse that was certain to shorten Elva's life, I couldn't exactly turn that down.

Veronica and Julian's own faces mirrored my concern.

"You should hear her out, at least," Veronica said.

"She said she would approach me again when my heart was free of fear said

"When and if that happens, I'd like you both to be there." Veronica quickly agreed. "I would like to hear what solutions she has for the curse.

I might be able to tell right away if she knows what she's talking about." Julian hummed. "And I might be able to tell if she's lying. Yes, I'd like to be there too." "Thank you both," I

said, infinitely grateful. Trying to face such a mysterious person on my own had been daunting. I feared my hopeful heart might make me more susceptible to deception. Julian and Veronica would both be able to help me with that.

“I want to see what information I can uncover about merfolk magic while we are still here,” Veronica said. “If you'll excuse me... I'm going to see if I can visit the library.” We said our brief goodbyes and she swam

I toward one of the merfolk servants.

Alone, Julian and I turned to look out over ‘the merfolk dancers. The music had slowed into that eerie melody, which was both beautiful and haunting. It was strange, but the unusual music did elicit a type of desire to dance within me.

Though, with everything that happened with Prince Ronan, I was determined not to participate in another dance again.

Julian seemed to understand that. He didn't say a word about us dancing together. Instead, we just watched the dancers in silence.

Then, as we continued to watch, I recognized Bridget out there in the dancing area. She was dancing the same sensual dance that I had done with both Nicholas and, unfortunately, with Prince Ronan. She seems far more into it than I had with Prince Ronan, however