

The Luna Choosing Game #Chapter 521 - Read The Luna Choosing Game Chapter 521

Chapter 0521 Her eyes are closed and her body swaying with the rhythm. The merfolk man, her partner, curled his long tail around her and brought her close, I looked at them for a while, then remembered Julian beside me, and how much such a sight must hurt him. I turned to him, though I wasn't sure what to say.

Julian was watching them, though I didn't see anger in his features. Rather, his expression hadn't really changed. He watched the pair with a type of cool indifference, something like that usually flew out the window with him where Bridget was concerned, "I'm fine," he said, smirking a little. His gaze shifted sideways to me, "I can hear your brain worrying, but I swear I'm fine,"

I couldn't really defend myself when he was absolutely right about my worrying.

"Things like this usually upset you," I said.

"Not anymore," he said.

I didn't want to tell him that he had said that to me before, and then gone back on it. Though he did seem more determined this time.

As if sensing my hesitation to believe him, he added, "The way she treated you on that island... I can't see her the same way. And her excuses... God, they all sounded so much like bullshit. That non-apology she gave you, where she demanded your forgiveness... I just can't see her the same way I used to." He seemed genuine, which continued to surprise me, "This woman that she is now... the Person maybe she has always been... She IS not the person I thought I knew,"

Julian said. "What can I think except that the person I was in love with for so long I was simply an illusion? This..." He gestured to Bridget doing her sensual dance. "This is the person she is." I nudged him with my shoulder. "I'm proud of you." He seemed embarrassed by that, brushing me off and looking away. "Yeah, well... Took me long enough, right?" God yes, but I didn't tell him that.

"You're on the other side of it now.

That's what matters." He shrugged some. "I still feel some...

sadness. Grief, maybe? For a person who never existed and a relationship that never could have been possible." "I think it's okay to mourn for that," I said. I thought a moment, "I'm probably be more concerned if you didn't, after I having held out hope for as long as you did."

"Honestly, I'm tired, too," Julian said. "It was exhausting, never really being sure where I stood. The false hopes only to be torn down in the next second really took a lot out of me." I hummed in understanding. It had been hard enough to watch him constantly put his heart out for Bridget only to have her smack it back to him. I couldn't imagine having actually lived that life.

"Well, it's over now," I said. "Now you can recover, and then find someone else.

Someone more deserving of the person you are." Julian grunted, dismissive. "Love probably isn't for me. I doubt I'll ever find someone," "Love is all around you, Julian." If only he could see how often he talked with Veronica, and how open she was to him, Tiffany, too, was ready to love him for the person he was, not some made up

- version of him that they displayed on television.

' "All you have to do is be open to it; added.

He turned and looked at me. His expression was guarded.

Whatever he was thinking in that moment, it was a mystery to me.

I didn't know what else to say to Julian, and he likely felt the same. So we both continued to watch the dancers. On the other side of the banquet room, Nicholas and the Queen were swimming upwards as they talked.

I wasn't the only one who noticed. Bridget's attentions seemed fixed on Nicholas now, as she began to dance more provocatively with her merfolk partner. Suddenly her arms were around the merfolk's shoulders. She gave her hips a wider sway.

All the while, she watched Nicholas. All the while, he was entirely oblivious, speaking with the Queen.

The longer it went on, the more Bridget's bottom lip pouted.

*Her dance partner is going to get the wrong idea," Julian said. "Too much physical contact could be interpreted in a sexual way, especially if she touches... his gills..."

Just as he suggested it, Bridget's hands brushed against her partner's gills. The merfolk man's eyes sparkled as he seemed to look at her with renewed interest. She was ignoring him though, her gaze still on Nicholas.

"This is going to end badly," Julian said.

"Should we do something?" I asked, though I wasn't sure what. Swimming over there to break them up didn't seem like the smartest move. Bridget would likely take offense to our interference.

As it was, it seemed like watching a train wreck in slow motion, one I could only hope that Bridget wasn't purposefully encouraging. I had a sinking feeling however that she was.

Someone as worldly as she was would know merfolk customs. She would know that touching the gills is a sign of intimacy. I was fairly certain that there was a scene in one of her recent movies of that exact scenario!

Then it happened. The merfolk leaned closer and whispered something in Bridget's ear.

Bridget suddenly yanked herself backwards, away from the merfolk man, and then slapped him across the face. The slap didn't hit very hard, as we were underwater, but the intent was clear enough.

The merfolk man, looking stricken, immediately put some space between the two of them.

"How dare you proposition me like some kind of whore?" Bridget loudly snapped, drawing the attention of most people in the room. Even the musicians were surprised, and the music stopped.

"I knew it," Julian grumbled and started swimming toward the scene. I quickly kicked to keep pace beside him.

By now, Bridget had swam halfway to Nicholas. He met her there in the middle.

We arrived at Nicholas and Bridget at the same time the offending merfolk man did. He continuously bowed.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "I misunderstood. I meant no offense."

"This man offended me in the worst way!" Bridget continued to shout. She gripped onto Nicholas's arms. He looked down at where she was holding him, frowning, but she did not release her hold at his clear annoyance.

"I'm so sorry," the merfolk man continued, again and again.

"Bridget," Nicholas said to her, his voice lowered. "You are making this out to be worse than it is."

Bridget drew herself back, offended once again. "You would allow him to speak to me this way?"

What way? The man was apologizing!

"He suggested we go to a private room, as if I was obligated to give him sexual favors!" Bridget shouted.

Anyone who hadn't been clued in to what was happening would fully know now. I only hoped someone was keeping the children distracted so they didn't have to deal with any of this.

"I misunderstood the situation," the merfolk man said. "I swear that I meant no belittlement or offense."

Bridget ignored the man's words. She tugged on Nicholas's arm. "Challenge him, Nicholas. Defend my honor!"

"That's really not necessary," the merfolk man said. He lowered himself into a fuller bow. "I admittedly overstepped and will accept punishment."

Nicholas hesitated. Bridget's brow furrowed as she watched Nicholas's inaction.

Bridget didn't seem to care about international relations, or if this had been a cultural misunderstanding, or that the merfolk seemed exceedingly apologetic. What she seemed to care about was that Nicholas wasn't coming to her defense.

At least, not with the speed and virility as he had when he had defended me from Ronan. But Ronan's advances onto me had been unwelcome. Bridget had seemed to embrace those advances from this merfolk man, and when she made clear that she didn't want sex, he immediately backed off.

Now, he was even apologizing profusely and accepting full blame.

I'm not sure how she wanted Nicholas to challenge a man who was already prostrating so committedly. The merfolk man would likely forfeit the challenge as soon as it was made.

Gradually, swimming with the serenity and grace befitting her station, Queen Sonal approached.

"Your Majesty," the merfolk man said at once. "Forgive me for causing such a scene. I should have known better than to suggest such a thing to our guests."

"Yes, you should have," Queen Sonal said. "You may see yourself out of the banquet hall and away from the grounds."

"Yes, ma'am." The merfolk man bowed deeply once more, then turned and fled the group. He swam all the way to the top of the banquet hall and then exited through the doors.

"That's it?" Bridget asked. Her outrage was barely in check. As she looked at the queen, she bowed politely. "Your Majesty, surely a harsher punishment should have been necessary in this case..."

Queen Sonal narrowed her eyes at Bridget, but she didn't call out the obvious faux pas, even as Julian stiffened beside me.

Questioning a Queen's judgement was never a good idea, especially as a foreign guest under the queen's roof. Especially when the offending action did not seem all that serious. Bridget turned on her doe-eyes, likely expecting sympathy and agreement. After all, that was the behavior she was used to back at the werewolf palace.

Here, Queen Sonal only frowned deeper. Maybe she hadn't seen Bridget's movies. Or maybe she just didn't like her.

"He will be dealt with for his assumptions," Queen Sonal said. Her voice was colder than it had been before. It warmed slightly as she turned to Nicholas. "Prince Nicholas, if you could please direct your fellow guests not to touch a merfolk's gills."

"I barely brushed them!" Bridget said. Julian and I shared a disbelieving glance. We both knew that was untrue.

"Touching a person's gills is a romantic gesture," Nicholas said with a sigh. His patience was wearing thin.

"You might as well have kissed him on the mouth," Julian said.

Bridget straightened. Her cheeks turned slightly red. "Forgive me for not knowing that..."

"You did know it," Nicholas said softer. "I heard you telling the others earlier today when we were waiting for Piper to board the boat."

Bridget's face shifted, becoming redder, even as she attempted to laugh it off. "Oh. I'd forgotten in the moment. How silly of me."

We all gave her flat looks. No one believed her.

Nicholas sighed as he turned toward Queen Sonal, giving Bridget the cold shoulder.

"Queen Sonal," Nicholas said. "While we are so appreciative of your hospitality, I feel we should leave soon so as not to outstay our welcome."

Behind his back, Bridget glared openly - straight at me. As if this was all somehow my fault!

Lignored Bridget as best as I could. This wasn't my fault, after all, and I wasn't about to take responsibility for it, just because Bridget seemed set on blaming me.

But I didn't say anything, so she didn't either. The conversation between Nicholas and Queen Sonal continued on without notice of us. Though Julian did look between us with curiosity.

"We thank you and your guests for joining us for this celebration," Queen Sonal said, a clear acceptance of Nicholas's offer to leave. "We hope you will think back on this event fondly." Nicholas placed a hand to his chest. "I assure you that we shall."

Though he said that, and he was likely telling the truth, tension had seemed to sellled over our group and the proceedings themselves. Else we might not have chosen to leave so early.

"I better go get Elva," I whispered to Julian.

Julian nodded, "Go now. These goodbyes and platitudes will likely go on for a while."

"Okay." I slowly backed away as to not draw attention to myself, then turned to go down to where the children had been playing. Most were napping now, all except the little princess who had promised to watch over Elva. She was continuing to honor her duty.

I thanked her as I swam to Elva's shelf.

The little princess waved at me.

I found Elva fast asleep. I hated to wake her, but I feared Nicholas was right. If we stayed much longer, we likely would be overstaying our welcome.

Cently, I shook Elva's shoulder until she blinked awake.

"Mom.. my?" She rubbed her eyes and then yawned. When her eyes were clear, they went wide and looked around at all the sleeping merfolk children around her. "I wasn't drearning?" "No, sweetheart," I said, smiling. I held out my hand.

Elva giggled as she swarm closer to me. We took hands.

"Unfortunately, we have to leave now..." I hated to tell her the truth.

"Can we come back?" Elva asked.

"I don't know," I said. Truthfully, it seemed unlikely, but I didn't want to rob a little girl of her dreams. Who knew what the future held for her? Perhaps someday she would come back. Despite my hope to spare her feelings, Elva still seemed disappointed by my response.

I tugged her closer and held her in my arms. "Take a look around," I told her. "Remember everything you see here, because even us being here this one time is special. Very few of our kind will ever know what it is like to breathe water, let alone to rub elbows with the merfolk royalty in their grand banquet hall."

Elva did as I asked, looking around slowly as if to remember as much as she could. I did the same. Someday we'd go back to our small apartment and tell Anna all that we had experienced and seen. She'd likely never believe it. I wasn't even sure Susie would, and she was much more likely to.

When we swam toward where the others were, I was somewhat relieved to find that the niceties were winding down. Much of the merfolk royalty had joined the scene, and even Ambassador Zale was giving Nicholas a hardy handshake.

"Mormy, I want to say goodbye to Zale!" Elva tugged on my hand. She twisted in my grasp.

"Honey, it's really not a good time to -!"

She broke free, despite my words, and swam straight up to Ambassador Zale. Without warning, she rushed toward his chest and threw her arms around his chest for a hug.

I held my breath. Several people gasped. Even Nicholas and Julian's eyes went wide.

When my initial surprise passed, I hurried forward, ready to apologize and rectify the situation however I could.

However, before I could reach Elva and pull her away, Ambassador Zale began to laugh. As to, did Queen Sonal. After those started it, the laughter spread out among all the merfolk, and then finally, uneasily, to the werewolf group too.

I froze, unsure what to do.

"Goodbye Mister Zale," Elva said.

Zale gently patted Elva's back. "Goodbye, little Elva." As she began to pull away, he smiled at her.

"Such innocence," Queen Sonal said, her smile soft as well. "The purity and kindness of a child knows no bounds. We could learn much from her sincerity."

"We could," Nicholas agreed. He returned her smile, and just like that, the tension between the two groups began to lift. Nicholas dipped his head, as I know he'd done many times before. This time seemed different than the past - more earnest, somehow. "By your grace."

Queen Sonal dipped her head in a mirror movement. "Please return again."

Elva swam back to me. Then, after one last look at the underwater banquet and the people within it, we turned and made our exit.

Once we were safely on the boat again, with the boat on route to return us to our more familiar island, Nicholas scooped up Elva into his arms and kissed her cheek

"A brilliant little girl you are," he said. Elva giggled. To me, he praised, "She saved that disaster of an event."

Julian, within earshot, laughed. "Usually I'm the one with the flair for dramatic, Nicholas. Not you."

Nicholas shook his head. "I'm serious. If we had ended the event on such a tense note, the alliance may not have initially suffered but relations would have been strained over time. But Elva saved the day."

Nicholas kissed her cheek again and then set her down. Elva continued to giggle. She rushed over to me.

"Did you hear what he said, Mommy?"

"I did," I told her, and praised her too. "You did such a good job. I'm so very proud of you, following your heart."

As with the trip to the merfolk palace, during the return trip, the camera crew remained on the deck below, while the candidates and princes and Elva were on the highest floor of the ship.

Nathan, having likely finished whatever meeting was going on down below, chose this moment to come upstairs and join us. He appeared deeply unhappy, with the line between his brow prominent and his frown deeply-set.

"Lighten up, Nathan," Julian said, "Or your face might stay that way."

Nathan shot him a withering look. Julian shrugged.

"Everything went well," Nicholas said. "Queen Sonal seemed pleased as we left."

"Yes," Nathan agreed. "As we left." He looked at Bridget. "Most everyone did a good job today."

Bridget seemed appropriately cowed for a moment, tilting her shoulders downward, but she bounced back almost instantly and stood. "I know you aren't trying to insinuate anything about me, Nathan."

Nathan sighed. "You were out of character today, Bridget. You did not act with the poise that you usually do."

Bridget stood her ground, chin lifted. Her eyes slid toward Nicholas. He looked back at her but didn't say a single word. Her lip twitched like she might frown but didn't quite manage.

"I defended myself and my honor, even if no one else would," Bridget said. "I have nothing to be ashamed of, and I will not let anyone tell me otherwise." Yet even as she said the words, a bit of red rose in her cheeks. She really did look like she was ashamed.

Her gaze on Nicholas was fierce for one more moment, like she expected him to defend her. When he didn't, she crossed her arms and turned around. She walked toward the edge of the boat and held onto the railing.

Nathan turned to glare at me. I startled, unsure why I was the subject of his ire.

"She's lashing out because of your argument, Piper. You need to resolve this."

Then he walked away.

He was blaming me for Bridget's actions? How was any of this my fault?

With Nathan gone, some of the guilt set upon me. Nathan had been gaslighting me, I knew that. Bridget's actions were not my responsibility, but his words had given me a measure of discomfort inside of my chest.

Even though Bridget's actions hadn't been directly caused by me, she was likely acting a bit more aggressively out of jealousy. Nicholas had come to my defense, but did not do the same for her, even when she tried to push the issue.

It wasn't my fault, and she should have behaved more like an adult. But I could sympathize with her hurt feelings. It would pain me greatly to have Nicholas defend someone else and not me.

But my sympathy stopped short when I remembered all that Bridget had done to me, and also that her incident tonight could have been so easily avoided.

Nicholas touched his hand to the small of my back. "You alright?" he asked me

"I'm fine," I told him. I wanted to thank him for all that he'd done for me, yet when I went to speak once more, Elva tugged on Nicholas's hand instead.

"Look, Nick-lass! Dolphins!"

He gave me a small smile, which I returned. Then he let himself be pulled closer to the railing. Out in the water beyond, dolphins breeched the water. They chased alongside the boat like they were making a game of it.

Exhausted, I looked for a place to sit down. I saw one beside Veronica. Julian had chosen to stand near her, and they were chatting. Veronica held a book on her lap, that was strangely dry for where it must have come from.

Did the merfolk use magic to enchant their books, keeping them safe from the salt water?

Curious, I came closer to the pair. Veronica immediately patted the empty seat beside her. I must have looked as tired as I felt. I flopped down in the seat and then thanked her.

"Veronica was just telling me some of what she learned," Julian filled me in.

"I was only able to visit with the keeper of the library briefly before it was time for us to leave," Veronica said, "But when I told her I was interested in learning more about merfolk magic, she seemed very excited. She led me straight to this book. She even let me borrow it, knowing I might have no way of returning it."

That was incredibly generous. The kindness of the merfolk people seemed to know no bounds. Or perhaps the keeper of libraries simply appreciated Veronica's truthfulness about what she wished to know.

Veronica flipped open the book and gently turned the first few pages. Inside, the words were hand-written in a tight, neat scrawl. Some pictures and diagrams were added among the text. Those too appeared hand-drawn.

"I can tell just from skimming so far that this is very old magic. Even older than the magic I know and use." She looked at me. "It makes me believe the mystic might know of a cure, after all. Her knowledge of ancient magic might very well hold the key."

That was a hopeful thought, but there was a very big problem regarding the mystic now." She never reappeared to me," I said. "I don't know if she ever will again."

"I wouldn't put it past her to show up when you least expect it," Julian said. "She told you, what? That she'd come to you again when your heart was clear of fear? Was that it?"

I nodded in assent.

"Well, there you go," Julian said. "You still have fear in your heart, so she's keeping her distance."

That was true. I tried to find comfort in the words. Yes. I was doubtful before, but there was still hope that she might reappear. Though, admittedly, I was still a bit afraid that the mystic would prove to be another person who wanted to do harm to me or Elva.

It was unfair to think that, I knew. The mystic had done nothing to me, as far as I knew, and as merfolk valued truth so highly, she was unlikely lying to me. But I had been so hurt before, so many times. And I couldn't take chances with Elva's life. Even though I desperately wanted her cured.

My heart was a tangled web of doubts and more doubts, with such a tiny glimmer of hope. I didn't know what to do.

Veronica must have been able to tell. "I'll read through this as quickly as I can. When I can understand more of the merfolk magic, we should be able to have at least some idea of what the mystic intends to do about the curse."

"Thank you, Veronica," I said, and meant it from the bottom of my heart.

Veronica gave me a soft smile, a rare expression from her. I treasured it.

"You know," Julian went on. "This magic might give us an edge against the underground organization. The merfolk would likely see through their dishonest tactics. I doubt the merfolk royal family would be so forthcoming with them, even if Hawk or the rest could deceive their way into an invitation."

Good news all around, then. Hawk and the underground were so adept at magic, that any upper hand we could achieve could potentially save all our lives if we faced them again.

"I'll do my best to study," Veronica said.

Julian placed his hand on her shoulder. He didn't say anything, but winked when she looked up at him.

A soft red dusted across Veronica's cheeks.

After the boat docked on our familiar island, the sun had crept down to the horizon, and everyone seemed tired, Elva most of all. She yawned bigly, then curled up against my side on the chair, even as I tried to tell her it was time to get up.

I finally coaxed her, pulling her up into my arms as I stood.

As we left the boat, Nicholas caught me by the elbow. He tugged slightly, coaxing me nearer him. In my ear, he whispered, "After you put Elva to bed, visit me in my room."

Immediately, my heart began to pound. It was incredibly difficult not to rush as I took Elva upstairs, greeted the guard, and then slipped inside. I changed Elva into her pajamas and then helped her crawl under the covers of the bed.

She was asleep before I even lowered the covers down over her, snoring softly into her pillow.

There was still no sign of Charlotte, though it was late now. She might have gone back to bed. I made a mental note to track her down in the morning if she still hadn't shown herself, or if I didn't receive a note or anything. Maybe she came down with a cold or something. I didn't worry too much yet.

After I made certain Elva was settled, I sneaked out of the room. The guard saw me, of course, but they had been sworn to discretion.

"Elva's sleeping," I told him.

"No harm will come to her," he replied,

With that comfort, I backed up into the hall, then turned and lightly walked to Nicholas's room.

I knocked on his door. It opened after only one rap of my knuckles to the wood.

Then, Nicholas pulled me through the door, closed it, and backed me up into it. He quickly closed the distance, and kissed my breath away.

Nicholas licked his tongue into my mouth. I moaned as I held onto his shoulders, fingers curling into the tight, slick fabric of his wetsuit.

He stepped closer to me, boxing me in against the door. I was pleasantly trapped, with the hard wood at my back, and his firm torso lining my front, pressing into my softness.

He tasted like salt water, but then so did I. We probably both smelled like it too. Though the water in my hair had dried, I still felt like I looked like a wet cat.

Nicholas didn't seem to mind, not with the fervent way he was kissing me. And if he didn't mind, I certainly didn't mind, easily losing myself to the passion of the kiss.

His hands moved away from the door and found their way to my hips. With his thumbs, he teased along the edge of my panty line, right where my swimsuit ended and my sensitive bare skin was exposed.

It tickled just as much as it sent fire blazing to my core, so I shivered against the feel of his exploratory fingers.

He smiled against my mouth. "You're trembling," he said, sounding pleased with himself. As he should, I supposed, since he was making me feel so much with just a little, tiny touch.

"You know why," I whispered.

He hummed. I thought he might continue to tease me, but instead, his attitude shifted. The smugness to his smile fell away, but not the smile itself, which added warmth.

"You did well today. You acted like a trained diplomat," Nicholas said, voice low. "I am very... proud."

He pressed his hips up against mine, and I could feel just how very... something he was.

"Let me show you how proud of you I am," Nicholas said.

It was a bad line that probably should have made me laugh, but the sentiment behind it had my heart racing instead. He had praised my diplomacy. He hadn't done that before. Diplomacy was a necessary skill for the Luna.

Could it be that he was beginning to see my value as.. a Queen?

No, that couldn't be. One good day in front of foreign royalty did not fully translate into being able to help lead a nation. I was getting way too far ahead of myself. I needed to slow down.

But my heart would not listen to reason. It simply took the compliment and twisted it into hope.

Maybe this could be a turning point. Maybe I actually could stand a chance in this competition.

Foolish, foolish heart.

Nicholas stepped back, giving me room. I inched forward, and then he leaned down and scooped me up into his arms. I wrapped my arms around his neck. If he was a merfolk, I'd be touching his gills for sure.

I thought Nicholas would take me to the bed, but instead he carried me toward the bathroom.

"Nick?" I asked, raising a lone brow.

"You deserve to be pampered," he said.

He set me down on my feet just outside the shower. Then he reached it and turned on the hot water.

A prince taking such good care of a commoner? What would the kingdom know if they could see us now?

Pity they would never know. It might help them see Nicholas in a brighter light.

Though I was more than happy to keep Nicholas all to myself. I really didn't like to share.

With the water on, Nicholas returned his attention to me. He slid his hands around me, finding the ties that held my swimsuit together. He'd already removed it once, so it took zero effort for him to remove it again. In seconds, the ties came free, and the swimsuit slipped down the length of my body.

The shells of the suit clinked against the tiles of the ground. I hoped they didn't break. I wanted to hold onto that suit as a memento, if nothing else.

Nicholas gripped me by the waist, and physically lifted me up and out of the suit on the ground. He carried me into the shower and placed me down again, a sexy show of strength. My mouth was watering.

"You need to get naked too," I reminded him. He planned on pampering me? I was ready to pamper him right back.

"Oh. Don't worry." His grin sharpened a little, looking boyish and mischievous. He stepped back out of the bathroom, found the zipper of his wetsuit, and then slowly dragged it down, revealing inch after delicious inch of his skin.

With the zipper to his waist, he tugged the wetsuit down off of his wide shoulders until his entire chest was bare. He seemed to flex, puffing his chest more than normal, as if he was putting himself on display for me.

I was eager to look, to appreciate every inch of that raw masculinity he showed off.

He pushed down the wetsuit over his hips. When his rock hard dick sprang free, my mind went blank for a full few seconds.

"Like what you see?" he teased.

I blushed, having been caught staring at his impressive length. It wasn't the first time I'd seen him naked, not by a long shot, but each time felt a little like the first. He was so

mouthwateringly handsome that my brain always needed a restart upon seeing him naked.

The wetsuit totally discarded, he stepped into the shower with me. I reached out for him, but he clucked his tongue and motioned a tiny circle with his finger.

I turned my back to him, obeying.

He slipped into the shower at my back. He reached for the shampoo, and then, after a moment, I felt his sturdy fingers rubbing the shampoo into my scalp. After the shampoo, came the conditioner.

Once both of those were rinsed from my hair, he lathered up his hands with soap and began to carefully clean every square inch of my body.

He was careful but thorough with his ministrations. Quickly, I was putty in his hands. Closing my eyes, I rested back against his chest, as his hands reached up mine. He traced his hands along my abdomen, and then up to my breasts.

I moaned wantonly, but he did not linger his touch there, to my great disappointment. Instead, he merely cleaned me and then rinsed me. Despite my intentions to pamper him too, he'd turned me into goo by then, and I'd lost some of my ability to concentrate.

He quickly cleaned himself instead, while I leaned up against the tile wall of the shower, watching.

His dick was still hard for me. His eyes were all over my body even as he hurriedly cleaned his own. He was rinsed in record speed, then he turned off the water and reached for me.

Kissing, we stumbled out of the shower. He started to lead me, dripping, away from the bathroom.

I broke the kiss to laugh and reaching back, I snatched a towel off the towel rack. Undeterred, he continued to coax me toward the bed. His arms wrapped around me. His lips devoured mine.

I tried my best to dab at us both with the towel, though, admittedly, I was very distracted by

other things.

We both must have been.

Else we might have noticed when the door to the room clicked open.

We would have stopped before we heard a gasp.

At the sound of the gasp, we pulled apart enough to both look toward the door.

There, Bridget stood, staring at us with wide eyes.

I had been naked for a while, but suddenly, with Bridget here now, seeing us, I felt vulnerable and exposed in a way I had never been with just Nicholas alone.

I held up the towel, blocking as much of myself - and Nicholas - as I could.

"What the hell, Bridget?" Nicholas snapped. Where my first instinct had been

embarrassment, Nicholas's had been anger. He twisted me in his arms, hiding me behind the cover of his body as much as he could. "Since when don't you knock."

Instead of leaving, Bridget came more fully into the room and then casually closed the door behind her. She turned back around, facing us, and she glared at us both.

"I'd wanted to talk to you, Nicholas. Privately, I had no idea you'd have... company." The word dripped with venom.

"Leave, Bridget," Nicholas said, his voice lowering dangerously. "Now."

Bridget crossed her arms. "You both must think I'm some kind of idiot. I've suspected you have been screwing around for a while now."

"This isn't your business," I said, voicing my own displeasure. She seemed perfectly content to stand there and judge our nakedness. "At least turn your back!"

Bridget totally ignored me. She kept her glare leveled entirely at Nicholas. "As your friend, it's my job to tell you how absolutely careless you are being."

To be fair, we really should have made sure that door was locked. Yet I got the feeling that wasn't what Bridget had been talking about.

"Do you have any idea the damage you are doing to Piper by indulging her like this?" Bridget said. Her face was twisted with anger.

She seemed genuinely upset... on my behalf?

What the hell was she talking about?

"Piper isn't like us, Nicholas. She'll get the wrong idea," Bridget continued. "You shouldn't toy with someone who might start to dream of a better life than the terrible one that waits for her when she goes back home."

Wait. What the hell!

"My life isn't terrible," I said, just as Nicholas said, "I'm not toying around."

"Oh, really?" she scoffed, and she still wasn't looking at me. "Then do you intend to marry her? Are you going to make her Luna? The Queen of our kingdom? You think she can actually handle that? Her? A commoner?"

"That's enough!" I said. Finched forward, careful to keep the towel covering us, as I more directly confronted Bridget.

Yes, outrage fueled me, but right there along with it was fear. I didn't want Nicholas to answer some of Bridget's questions. I had my nice little fantasies. Hearing Nicholas shoot holes in them would hurt me too much. I couldn't even stand the thought of it.

"Don't talk about me like I'm not here," I said fiercely. "I'm not some kind of wilting flower who can't stand up for myself. I don't need anyone's ill-guided protection, Bridget. Least of all yours!"

What a hypocrite. This woman left me in that pit on that jungle island, and now she was here, wanting to defend my heart from being hurt?

It was too much.

"I'm trying to help you, Piper!"

"I don't believe you," I snarled. "If you cared about me at all, you wouldn't have left me in that

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"I already apologized for that," she said.

"You never did."

"You forgave me!"

"I said we could move on."

"Well, you were clearly lying, bringing that up again." Bridget looked down her nose at me, like she was the one up on her high horse, taking the high road, and I was so far beneath her.

"What I'm saying." I doubled down, "is that you do not have my best interest at heart. Whatever this is, it has nothing to do with me."

Maybe she was jealous. Maybe she thought Nicholas was sleeping with the bottom of the barrel. Whatever she thought, she should just say that, instead of trying to paint herself as my hero.

"I'm only trying to protect you!" Bridget snapped,

I didn't believe her.

"Get out, Bridget," Nicholas said with a growl.

Bridget made a loud harrumph in frustration. She pointed straight at me. "I'll leave when she does. For both of your sakes."

"Bridget," Nicholas snapped,

By now, I had the worst kind of headache. If Bridget really did leave alone, who was to say she wouldn't be coming right back with Nathan or a camera crew in tow? It was bad enough that she had seen this much between Nicholas and me.

Even if she had suspected we were together. It was one thing to suspect, and entirely another to see it in action. Whatever else she thought of it, she now knew that Nicholas and I were intimate. That was dangerous knowledge for someone as conniving as her to have.

I placed my hand on Nicholas's chest, redirecting his attention onto me.

"It's okay," I said. "I should go."

Even with the anger on his face, a question raised in his eyes. I knew without doubt that he

would defend me until the very end of the world. He'd muscle Bridget out of this room if he had to.

But I didn't want that. And when his anger eased, he would come to regret such an aggressive action.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow," I said.

Nicholas pressed his lips hard together. He waited a moment more, maybe to see if I would change my mind. I wouldn't. My mind was set. When he realized that, he sighed.

"At least, wear some of my clothes out there," Nicholas said.

That made sense to me. The guard at the door was sworn to secrecy and discretion, but I'd rather not parade naked around him.

Nicholas turned to Bridget. "Face the wall. You've seen enough."

"I'm not leaving," she said, stubborn, though she did comply with the request to turn. She

faced the door.

"I only need a minute to dress, then I'll leave," I said.

"I'll wait," Bridget said.

With her back turned to us, Nicholas and I hurried over to his dresser. He gave me a pair of pajamas which I shimmied into in. Nicholas also grabbed some pajama pants for himself, which he pulled on without boxers underneath.

How I wished we could crawl into bed together. What I would have given to go back in time a half-hour or so, to when he was holding me pressed against that door, or rubbing his hands all over me on the shower.

Sighing, I gave Nicholas one last lingering, longing look, which he fully returned. Then, I headed toward the door.

When Bridget saw I was dressed, she opened the door for me. Out in the hallway, she closed the door behind us. The minute the door was closed, Bridget spoke up.

"Piper."

I didn't really want to talk to her anymore today, but, worried she might threaten to out us, I stopped to hear her out.

"Nicholas will never pick you as his Luna, no matter what you do," Bridget said. "Before you continue to embarrass yourself, maybe you should think about the kind of example you are

setting for your daughter."

Shock stunned me for a moment. Then I looked back at her.

"Do you really want Elva to think your behavior is acceptable? Do you want her to think her mother is a whore?"

Bridget's words stuck with me more than I wanted them to. As I rested in bed that night, I stared at the ceiling replaying everything that happened — not just last night with Bridget, but every time I had been with Nicholas before. Where had Elva been? Had she noticed any of my behavior? I didn't think myself a whore for spending intimate time with the man that I adored, but that wasn't necessarily an aspect I wanted Elva to see and learn and think acceptable.

When it came to be morning again, I think I had slept for maybe an hour or two total. Elva was fully rested and excited, bouncing out of bed at the first sign of light. She talked and talked about the merfolk children and how much fun she had. It was endearing and sweet, but I was very tired.

Still, I tried to be as attentive as I could. I rolled out of bed and made my way over to the dresser to pick out our day clothes. As soon as I opened a drawer, Elva switched her topic of conversation and said, "I knew someone was in here yesterday."

My hand stopped halfway to the drawer with Elva's shirts. I looked at her. She was serious.

"How?" I asked.

"They knocked over that pot," Elva said, pointing to a decorative set of vases on top of the dresser. And yes, she was right, one of the vases had been knocked over and then not set correctly. Neither Elva nor I had done that, and Charlotte certainly would have fixed it if she had done it.

No, the person who had knocked over that vase must have been in a hurry.

Perhaps searching through the drawers for my swimsuits.

We knew someone must have come in here to steal my things, so it wasn't providing any new information to point out that mistake of our thief.

However, for Elva to have noticed it before me rattled me. I always knew she was observant and smart, but to have this reminder so soon after Bridget's words...

Maybe Elva did notice the nights I didn't come home, or came home late.

Maybe I was teaching her that it was okay to be out all night with a man that you weren't committed to. A man who had several other women vying for his attention. | | | I didn't want Elva to grow up and find herself in the same situation as me.

She shouldn't know the hurt I feel, being so closed to the man I admired while knowing it was doomed to fail. I wanted Elva to only know love and want and affection. 1 | I shook my head, clearing my worries away. Someday, when Elva was old enough to date, I would sit her down and explain most of what happened here between Nicholas

and myself. I would make sure she understood that this was a special case romance, and not something she should repeat.

For now, at least, I had some time. So rather than focusing on that, I needed to live in the present.

And in the present, we were both awake and there was still no sign of Charlotte. On a normal day, she would have been here by now, to help us dress and prepare for the days events.

She'd been missing yesterday too. I wondered if she was sick, but I worried if this didn't run deeper than that.

Someone wanted me to miss the merfolk banquet, enough to sneak into my room, steal my swimsuits and turn off my alarm. To achieve their success, they would have also needed to make sure Charlotte was out of the way.

Maybe I was overthinking things. But I wasn't willing to take the chance that I wasn't.

When the nanny arrived, I kissed Elva on the forehead, promised we'd reconnect later to make sandcastles, and then slipped out of the bedroom.

I stumbled backwards at once, but a sturdy arm wrapped around my waist, steadying me.

"Careful," Nicholas lightly chided.

A blush touched my cheeks.

Slowly he lowered his arm, and I took a step backwards. He then turned back to the guard, who I noticed was different than the one I recognized.

"You know your orders," Nicholas said.

"Yes, your Highness." Nicholas nodded. He looked at me once more, and then dipped his head forward, suggesting we start walking. I fell in step with him instantly.

Glancing back at the new guard, I asked, "Did you bring on more people?"

"One person cannot realistically guard your door at all times," Nicholas said.

"Now there are three separate guards on rotation, who will protect you and your things." I sighed with relief.

"It is definitely unnerving, knowing someone was in my room, stealing my things." Nicholas straightened slightly.

"I understand." Near the top of the stairs, he stopped walking and faced me.

Worried he might bring up last night, something I was not ready to process yet, I said quickly, "Have you seen Charlotte?" He opened his mouth, closed it.

Confusion tilted his expression. "No," he said at last.

"I haven't seen her since the day before yesterday," I told him. "I'm worried she might be sick or..." I didn't want to admit out loud the other fears that I had, as if saying them aloud might curse Charlotte by making them real.
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E a (%)] +15 BONUS "That's why you were late yesterday," he said. "She never arrived to help you." "That, combined with my alarms all ~ being turned off, yes." Nicholas's confusion gave way to realization, then understanding. "We should speak with the head | housekeeper, Selma. She should know everything that goes on with the staff." "Okay," I said, nodding. I turned to go down the stairs then, on a quest now to find Selma, but Nicholas gently grabbed my arm and held me back.

"Piper..." He wanted to talk about what happened last night with Bridget, I knew that. It was a reasonable request, after the accusations Bridget had made.

But I still wasn't ready to talk about it. I didn't want to hear Nicholas say that Bridget was right, that he would never choose me. I knew he wouldn't mean it personally, that it was simply a matter of what was right for the kingdom.

It still hurt to think about. To have him actually say the words might just kill me.

"Later, Nick, okay?" I asked. If I could have some more time, just a few more blissful hours of lying to myself, letting myself believe that I lived in a world where Nicholas could be my mate and husband, I would cherish every second.

Someday I'd have to wake up and face reality, but not yet. Please, not yet.

Nicholas schooled his expression.

Whatever he was thinking in that moment, even my deep understanding of him couldn't reveal to me.

His eyes bore down into mine with such intensity that it made me shiver from the base of my neck all the way down my spine.

"Later," he said, and sounded stern.

It was a promise, one he wouldn't let me break.

"Later," I agreed, and dreaded it.

y G00 p () +15 BONUS Chapter 0529 Nicholas and I walked down to the first floor and sought out Selma. We found her in the kitchen, preparing the chefs for the day's menu. We waited near the door, not wanting to disturb her work. When she was finished, the chefs returned to their duties and we approached her.

She was an older woman, who had been in service at this residence for many years. She should have seen it all by now. Nothing she face should have shaken her. Yet when Nicholas and I came to stand before her, she seemed nervous.

"Do you need something, Prince Nicholas? Miss Piper?" Selma asked.

"Are you feeling okay?" I asked.

Maybe Charlotte really was sick and Selma had caught it too. That would explain how pale she looked.

"pm fine," she said. "Was that all . you needed?" She started to move like 4

CN (J) +15 BONUS she was going to walk away from us.

Nicholas sidestepped into her path.

"We're looking for Piper's maid, Charlotte. You'll remember that she ~ was brought in specifically to serve Piper." Nicholas kept his tone friendly enough, though his face was hard and stern. "She has been missing for the past day." Selma swallowed. She straightened a little, though she was much shorter than Nicholas, slightly shorter than myself.

"Yes, of course. Charlotte has been feeling unwell. We requested that she stay in her room for a few days, so as to not spread the disease around. This is such a small island. When one person catches something, it can so quickly travel around." It was a logical explanation. I still wanted more answers. "I want to see her." "Absolutely not," Selma said Sd

() +15 BONUS Nicholas lifted a brow.

Selma, upon seeing it, amended, " You will likely catch her cold as well.

It's only for your health and safety ~ that I ask you to leave her be. The airplane has already been called for.

She will be headed home later today." "You are sending her away?" I asked, surprised. ie I Selma nodded. "It's protocol for illness. We don't have the means to care for sick people here." Just how sick was Charlotte? If it was merely a cold, she'd just need some

aspirin and rest. She had to have caught something more serious... if any of this was true.

"I'd still like to see her," I said. "I can bring her something to eat. Chicken soup, maybe." Seeing Selma was about to argue, I added, "I'll maintain safe distance, and I'll only stay for a moment. I just want to make sure she's okay. We're friends." y

(_) +15 BONUS "Friends?" Selma asked. "I thought she was your servant." "She is," I said. "She's both." Selma seemed taken aback by the words. She looked at me for a long moment, as if I was a puzzle she was trying to piece together.

"Selma?" Nicholas prompted. "It doesn't seem unreasonable to allow a woman to visit her friend." Selma dropped her gaze down to the ground. "You know the rules, Prince Nicholas. Many apologies, but those with illness are to be quarantined." "And an exception cannot be made, for my sake?" Nicholas asked.

Selma closed her eyes for a long moment. "I'm afraid not. Please forgive me." Nicholas watched her. He knew her better than I. I wondered what he could see in her that I could not. He revealed nothing now, though I hoped he would

nothing now, though I hoped he would when we were alone again.

"Of course," Nicholas said dryly.

Rules are rules." Selma nodded. "May I go now? I have many other duties to attend to." "Forgive our disruption of your day," Nicholas said. He lightly touched my arm, signaling I should move.

Together, Nicholas and I stepped back, giving Selma room. She quickly retreated from the kitchen.

I had so many questions for Nicholas, none of which I wanted to ask around the chefs. Though I didn't totally trust Selma, I could tell she was a hard worker, and I didn't want to undermine her in front of the staff under her command.

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Chapter 0530

Nicholas must have felt the same. He nodded toward the door. I followed him from the kitchen to the sitting room near the front door. We didn't sit, just stood there, but it was privacy enough to finally speak.

"She's hiding something," Nicholas said. "She's never been that cagey before, as long as I've known her."

"Do you think Charlotte's really sick?" I asked.

*Illness is taken seriously here. Everything she said was true in that regard, but to not allow leniency when I asked for it... She is exceedingly loyal to the crown. In the past, she would always allow me and my brothers special treatment. The only time she wouldn't was when..."

Suddenly, he frowned.

*...when?" I asked.

He looked me in my eye, and his were swarming with a tirade of emotion: anger, regret, annoyance. None of them good.

"When my father specifically commanded otherwise, Nicholas said.

By order of the King? To keep everyone away from Charlotte?

That seemed so outlandish, I almost couldn't believe it.

We needed to talk to Charlotte, find out if she was sick and what she knew, then we could make our conclusions. Until then, we were just guessing, and I really didn't want to guess about the royal family. Nicholas would only get a light scolding, but I could lose my head if we were wrong.

"Hey, what's up with Selma?" Julian asked.

I jumped, not having heard him approach. God, I really was strung tight. Nicholas's words had put fear into my heart.

"Whoa, it's okay." Julian came nearer to me. He placed a hand on my shoulder. "I'm not a ghost or anything."

"I'm sorry," I said. "We were just talking and... I was surprised."

Julian looked between the two of us, likely garnering the wrong kind of assumptions.

"We were talking about Selma," I said quickly, to bring his mind back on track, instead of following those incorrect leads he was no doubt surmising. "Nicholas was saying she seemed off when we talked to her."

"She's still off," Julian said. "She walked right by me and didn't even say hello. That has never happened before, not even when we were children." Julian glanced from me to Nicholas. "What did you say to rattle her?"

"Charlotte is missing," Nicholas said. "Selma claims she is sick."

*You don't believe that," Julian said. It wasn't a question.

"Someone was in my room yesterday. They stole my swimsuits and turned off my alarms. Charlotte still should have been in to wake me and see me off," I said. "That she wasn't..."

"It's connected," Julian said. Again, not a question. His quick mind seemed to piece everything together at once." So where is Charlotte?"

*Selma says she is in her room," Nicholas said.

"She's going to be sent home today by plane," I added, hinting at the urgency.

"Well, there's only one thing to do then," Julian said with a shrug. "It's so simple, I don't know why you didn't think of it. Although, you are both so goody-two-shoes, you'd likely not do anything without permission."

"We should go see her for ourselves," I said.

Julian flashed me a mischievous smile, a touch of pride in his eyes. "Visitors typically don't go into the servants' quarters but it's not totally off-limits. It's just through a door under the stairs. We won't want to be seen, of course. Last thing we want is for Selma to know we're suspicious of her. But with discretion..."

"Let's do it," I said. Julian nodded.

We both looked at Nicholas, expecting him to be the one who might be against this plan. But with a sigh, he said, "We need the truth."

And it was decided.