

# **The Luna Choosing Game #Chapter 561 - Read The Luna Choosing Game Chapter 561**

## Chapter 0561

When she awoke from her brief nap, Elva stuck to me like glue. She kept looking up at me with her big, tearful eyes. For a day that began with such high hopes, we were both feeling the lows now. I took her hand and did not release, very aware that I had nearly lost the chance to be her mom.

If I had died, I wouldn't get to see her grow up into the strong, independent woman I knew she would become. I'd miss graduations and weddings and maybe grandchildren.

Even as we walked together toward the deck, I tugged her closer to me, afraid to let her go too far. If I was in danger, then so was she. Ronan was incensed. If he wanted revenge on me, he'd find it easier by attacking Elva.

Then, when I couldn't take the worry and the guilt at nearly dying anymore, I stopped, dropped to one knee, and pulled Elva into a tight hug again.

"I'm sorry I scared you, Elva," I whispered to her. Her tight fingers clawed hard at my shoulders. Was she afraid I would let go and leave her again? I wouldn't. I would never. Even in death, my spirit would stay with her, to watch and protect her.

"Mommy," Elva said, voice watery. Her tears sounded like they were coming back, though I suspected, except during her short nap, that they never really left.

"Your mom is tough, okay? I fought and fought, making certain that I would return back to you. And I promise you that I will do my best to stay with you for as long as I am able, okay?" Content belong to NôvelDrâma. Org.

"Never leave, Mommy."

I pulled back enough to look into her eyes. How I wanted to make that promise. In a way, I could, I supposed. Though I wasn't certain she would understand it.

I gently rested my hand over her heart. "I'll always be here, Elva. Even if we're apart, I'm with you. Right here. Next to your heart."

Elva looked down. As I removed my hand, she placed her own where mine had been. "How do you fit in there?"

She was being silly now and I smiled at her. "Your heart is so big, Elva. It can fit as many people inside of it as you want."

"The whole world?" Elva asked. She giggled a little.

\*The whole world," I told her, and pulled her in for another hug. She giggled and squirmed. When she pulled away, she wasn't nearly as clinging anymore. Not that I had minded.

Elva rubbed her nose with her entire forearm. As we walked onto the deck, I made sure to grab her a napkin and wipe up the mess.

"Elva!" Julian called from nearby, the other side of the deck. "Want to learn a new magic trick?" He held up a deck of cards. Elva looked up at me.

I very nearly rolled my eyes. I hoped he wasn't going to try to teach her to count cards again.

"Go on," I said and patted her back. "I'm going to ask a servant for a couple of waters, and I'll be over."

Elva nodded and hurried forward. I stayed at the bar area, waiting for a servant. Instead, Nicholas came out the door. His gaze panned across the deck before landing on me. He walked over to me with large strides.

His face was stern but not angry. I had no idea what that meant for the conversation he'd just had with the merfolk ambassador.

"I spoke with Ambassador Zale. He was incredibly apologetic for all that transpired. He wished me to convey to you his deepest regrets as well as good wishes to your health," Nicholas said.

That was all well and good, I liked Ambassador Zale, but this wasn't what I wanted to hear right now. I waved away the concerns. "What did he say about Prince Ronan?"

Nicholas sighed. "Prince Ronan was kept locked in his quarters after the... incident at the event. The merfolk queen insisted he be held accountable for this action, and all those previous that he had not been held to count for."

I wasn't thrilled to hear that he had gotten away with such acts in the past, but at least he was facing some kind of ramifications. "What happened?"

"He escaped his confinement. He's a wanted criminal for the merfolk, but apparently is rather well liked. Handsome and popular, Ambassador Zale said. That is typically enough, I guess for him to ruse people to his cause."

I frowned. "His cause this time is to hurt me."

Nicholas's hands formed fists, as if on reflex. "I know. Fortunately, Ambassador Zale and the Queen have offered to send some of their own security to our island to help protect the inhabitants from Ronan."

I wasn't super thrilled that these same security officers couldn't keep Ronan confined in the first place, but perhaps that was all the more reason to accept them. They could be embarrassed and want to prove themselves. If Nicholas trusted them, I could too.

"I've agreed to the offer," Nicholas said. "Having more forces to watch our island from the water will only suit to help keep you safe. I, of course, will also be adding to our protection here on land as well."

Elva laughed loudly, as bright and light as a bell chime. Nicholas and I both looked over in time to see all the cards Julian had been holding flying through the air. Chaos. Delightful for a child.

I couldn't hold my smile. As I looked at Nicholas, it faded when I realized he was frowning so hard.

"Nick," I said and placed my hand over his clenched fist. It did not loosen. "We're okay now. We're safe. And with those added soldiers, we'll be safer still."

Nicholas shook his head slightly. "I will have to keep a more diligent eye on our surroundings. I've failed you, Piper. It's because of me that you were placed in danger..."

"Nick, no." None of this was his fault. He had to know that.

He looked at me and the intensity of his gaze gave me pause.

"I will do whatever I have to, to keep my family safe," he said the words with utter conviction. There was no room for doubt. He meant every single word.

It took me a moment to realize he was not referring to Julian. This dedication... was meant for me and Elva. But he called us his 'family.' Did he know what he said? Did he understand the ramifications of that?

Did he know my heart would take that word and run with it?

Our eyes locked for a long moment. I kept waiting for him to take back the words or to correct himself. He did neither.

"You and Elva are very important to me," he said, and my heart flipped in my chest.

He said it with such confidence, as if it was a known fact. I was entirely speechless, lost to this moment and the look in his eyes as he gaze down at me.

Hope ignited in my chest again, burning brightly like a nearby star.

Nicholas, Elva, and me.

Family,

Chapter 0562

Elva wanted to collect some seashells to add the growing pile she was keeping in our bedroom, so together, Elva, Nicholas, and I went to the shoreline and began walking along with water's edge. While I helped Elva pick out seashells, Nicholas kept a dutiful eye on the ocean.

Maybe he thought Ronan himself might jump out at any minute. The thought made me shiver.

Looking at the ocean, despite having nearly drowned, it wasn't the waves or the water that I feared deep down inside of me. No. Instead I feared the merfolk prince who had wanted to pull me into the deeps.

I was grateful to Nicholas for keeping watch.

More grateful, when unnatural waves rippled the top of the water. Immediately I grabbed Elva, who in her surprise, dropped half of her shells.

"Mommy!" she said, pointing to where they had fallen.

I couldn't worry about that now. My wolfy instincts were screaming at me to get my child away from whatever was happening in the water. I'd apologize to her later, if I was overreacting. I'd spend the rest of the day picking new shells with her if she wanted.

But I wasn't taking any more chances.

Nicholas grabbed me and tugged Elva and me behind himself. His muscles were flexed. His gaze was on the water. To see him as tense as me helped tell me I was doing the right thing. Content belong to NôvelDráma. Org.

I hadn't wanted to frighten Elva, but I would do whatever I needed to, to keep her safe.

Then, as we watched the waves, merfolk heads started cresting above the water. Some here and some there, in different spots all along the water's edge.

Then, the merfolk walked forward, breaching the surface of the ocean. Their tails shifted to legs as they stepped out of the water and onto the sand. Many of them stayed in the knee-high water.

They wore skin-tight uniforms, matching black with shimmering blue stripes. The uniform stretched down to their wrists and ankles, almost fully covering them.

One merfolk stepped forward before all the rest. Ambassador Zale was dressed differently than the others. He wore a similar looking garment to what he had last night. A body suit covered in shells.

I relaxed somewhat when I saw him. I didn't know these other soldiers, though with a quick glance, I confirmed that none of them were Prince Ronan. But Ambassador Zale was someone that I trusted. He always seemed to at least attempt to do the right thing.

I was still uneasy about Prince Ronan being able to escape his confinement so easily, however.

"Prince Nicholas," Zale said as he came closer. He bowed respectfully.

Nicholas returned the gesture with a dip of his head. "Ambassador."

Holding Elva, I inched somewhat to the side so I could greet Zale myself.

"Ambassador Zale," I said. I almost said It's a pleasure to see you, but that would have been a blatant lie. It was not a pleasure to see him under these circumstances. He was only here because my life was being threatened. His features twisted into apologetic when he looked at me. "Piper... I don't often find myself speechless, but knowing what has happened to you. I am so deeply sorry for all the suffering this incident has caused to you. I am so very pleased to see you are well."

"You mentioned this wasn't his first incident," Nicholas said.

Ambassador Zale sighed. "Unfortunately, despite his careful upbringing, Prince Ronan has always been somewhat of a cad. He seemed to have a special penchant toward unattainable women. Perhaps he was bored

at the palace and enjoyed the challenge, I don't know."

"I'm not some challenge," I said.

"Of course not, Miss Piper," Zale said. "Forgive my turn of phrase." He looked back to Nicholas. "He's been reprimanded in the past for turning to insults once he's been rejected, rather than handling it with the grace his station should require of him. But never has anything happened like this."

Chapter 0563

"He has a short temper," Nicholas said. I knew what he was suggesting, that this was bound to have happened sooner or later with someone with that type of disposition.

Zale's look of apology returned. "We have failed in the past. If we had been sterner with him, perhaps the now would be different. But we cannot change the past. We can only correct the present." He waved to the lines of soldiers standing ready behind him. "We are at your disposal."

\*Ronan is after Piper. I don't care about anything but keeping her and Elva safe," Nicholas said.

My heart raced, hearing him say such things so casually, not just to me but to others.

"We will take every precaution to keep Miss Piper safe," Zale said. "We can keep most of the security forces patrolling the water, though we can bring some onshore to guard the doors, if you would allow it."

Nicholas considered it. "I'll have to consult Nathan and my brother to fully decide our best course of action. Though if your forces are patrolling the water, surely Prince Ronan would be unable to reach the shore?" There was a question in his voice, and suddenly the air around us tensed. I held my breath.

Ambassador Zale lowered his head. "Unfortunately, Prince Ronan received some war training before he gave it up to live in the luxury of the palace."

That didn't sound good. Content belong to NôvelDrâma. Org.

"What kind of training?" Nicholas asked.

Zale sighed. "Espionage. He's quite good at stealth and deception, though his short temper kept him from truly being proficient. There are no need for actors in our kingdom like there are yours, else he would have surely exceled."

\*Stealth," Nicholas said, saying the word flat, like he couldn't believe it.

"Yes," Zale replied.

Nicholas cursed under his breath.

"If fact, I might suggest that guards at the doors might not be enough," Zale said. "If we were to be truly diligent, in terms of Piper's safety, I recommend we post a guard inside of her room as well."

"Inside my room?" I gasped. A stranger? Right there beside me? Watching me sleep?

Even for my own safety, I couldn't wrap my mind around that. I would never feel safe with a stranger looming over Elva and I while we were most vulnerable.

"Absolutely not," Nicholas said, stern, and I sighed a little in relief. We were on the same page about this.

Let him assign guards at my doors and windows, if he felt such a thing necessary. But I would not have a stranger with strange weapons standing over my bed.

"It's only for her safety," Zale said.

"I have my own guard on the door," I said.

Zale shook his head lightly. "A merfolk trained in stealth could find his way through the window, or through the guard. It is too risky to leave her unprotected."

I hated when people talked about me in the third person like I wasn't standing right here. I understood to the ambassador, the prince was the one he needed to convince and I was just a bystander. But I held some responsibility in my own safety, thank you very much.

Nicholas looked at me sideways as if sensing my anger. His eyes held mine, but he was guarded now. I couldn't tell what he was trying to convey, if he was trying to convey anything.

After a moment, his demeanor became more determined, and his attention returned to Zale once more.

"I will not allow anyone else to stay in Piper and Elva's room," he said.

Zale lifted a scaly brow. "Anyone else?"

"That's correct," Nicholas said, with conviction. "I will stay in their room and guard them myself."

Chapter 0564

"If you will please excuse us one moment, Ambassador Zale," I said, and tugged at Nicholas's sleeve. At the same time, I lowered Elva down and took her hand instead.

Ambassador Zale dipped his head in acknowledgement, so Nicholas, Elva, and I stepped back a few feet to speak more privately.

I spoke in hushed tones, not wanting the merfolk - or Elva, particularly to hear. "You cannot stay in our room."

"Like hell, I will allow anyone else to," he said. His voice was also low, but the slight volume did not conceal his conviction in this.

"I'm not suggesting anyone else do it either," I said. Though if it had to be someone, maybe a woman would be a good place to start. "You have to realize what the optics of this are going to be."

"I don't care about optics."

I just barely caught myself before I could roll my eyes at him. "If you spend nights in my room, Nicholas, even if you make clear it is only to protect us, even if we say that Elva was there the whole time, people are going to gossip."

"Let them gossip," Nicholas said. Content belong to NôvelDráma. Org.

"Your reputation will be ruined," I said. "It won't be good for the competition, either."

"Piper," Nicholas said, voice softer than before. His eyes were softer now too. He looked at me like he was trying to see deep down into the heart of me. "I don't care about the rumors, the competition, or even my reputation."

That wasn't true. It couldn't be. If Nicholas was going to be king, which everyone knew he was set to be, then he needed a strong reputation. Even my hopes of a future family with him only thrived on our secret being kept until the perfect moment.

"What I care about," Nicholas continued before I could get my thoughts together, "is you and Elva. Your safety is my first priority, and I'm tired of trusting other people with it." A hint of frustration roughed his voice.

"Nick," I said gently. "Nothing that has happened is your fault."

He shook his head, not accepting my words. "If I had kept a closer eye on Selma and the staff, they wouldn't have been able to ruin your clothes or steal them. I never should have left your side at the merfolk event. I'd recognized Prince Ronan would be a problem the moment I saw him."

"Nick..."

"I should have been on one of the boats on the water during the race, not standing on shore. I was nearly too late." "You were watching out for me then," I told him. "It's only because of you and Veronica that I'm..." I glanced down at Elva, who was looking curiously at the soldiers. I didn't trust her not to be listening to this conversation however, and held myself back from saying that I would have died.

Nicholas knew. "It never should have been as close as it was. All of this is due to my negligence, Piper. And if I can't keep you safe, one of the people I care about most in this world, then what good am I as a king? How could I ever be trusted to keep a nation of people safe?"



"That's different."

"Maybe," he conceded. "But if I lose you, I am lost as well. No. From now on, your safety is my direct responsibility. I'll entrust no one else, not even my personal guards at your door."

Now, he was being overzealous for sure. "I will be fine."

"When Prince Ronan is caught, and we are away from this place. Then, I'll trust that. But not now. Not while we are here with him on the loose."

I supposed I couldn't argue with that. Arguing hadn't seemed to get me anywhere anyway. So I nodded. "Fine. But when Bridget finds out, she won't be happy."

## Chapter 0565

"What Bridget thinks of anything is the very last of my concerns," Nicholas said.

Then, Nicholas turned from me and together we walked back to Zale, who had been waiting patiently for our private talk to conclude. He lifted his head as we approached.

"Piper and I are in agreement," Nicholas said. That wouldn't exactly be how I would describe what just happened, but I guessed it was good to provide a united front to a foreign dignitary. "While your offer of her security is appreciated, I will personally see to her safety."

"Very well," Ambassador Zale replied. Despite the seriousness of the issue and our conversation, his eye still twinkled a little as he glanced from Nicholas to me. "I am pleased to know she will be placed in the best of hands."

Nicholas hummed in acknowledgement. I blushed a little at his wording.

"We should return to the house and speak with Nathan and my brother," Nicholas said then. "They will wish to be included in any official decisions. All, of course, except for the one we just discussed."

"I understand," Zale said. Content belong to NôvelDráma. Org.

We returned to the manor, where the others were waiting out near the deck. The merfolk soldiers had appeared in the water here as well, though they had said to Nathan that they could not speak for Ambassador Zale and needed to wait for him to arrive.

For Zale to wish to speak with Nicholas first proved that the entire world knew Nicholas was most likely to be next in line for the throne. He was shown the most respect above all others. His word and his consent were the ones most sought out.

As we came closer, Nathan hurried to meet us.

I noticed, despite seeing everyone else, including Selma and a few of the staff out on the beach, there was no sign of Julian. I wondered where he could be.

He still hadn't turned up even as the official meeting progressed. No cameras were allowed to record the meeting. It was simply a few more formal apologies and thanks. I felt the most important bits had already been privately covered.

As the official meeting concluded, Zale went with Nathan into the house. The merfolk soldiers turned outward toward the ocean. Some of them dipped below the water, presumably to start patrols.

Then, Julian appeared from the doorway. He spotted Nicholas and I, and hurried down the stairs from the deck to approach us.

"I spoke with Mom and Dad," Julian said.

Nicholas immediately crossed his arms. Elva inched closer to me.

"What did they have to say for themselves?" Nicholas asked.

"About what you'd expect, Julian said. In a mocking tone, he said, "You can't mean to think your mother and I had anything to do with this."

"No luck finding the truth there, then," Nicholas said with a sigh.

"Actually..." Julian's face scrunched up like he was puzzled. It wasn't a common look on him. Usually he had most everything figured out well before the rest of us. "I'm inclined to believe them this time."

"What?" Nicholas and I gasped at once.

"I'm serious," Julian said. "When I explained to them what happened, they seemed genuinely surprised. I watched them closely, looking for the regular tells. To me, he added, "The King is a terrible liar when you know his tells." To us both, he said, "But I didn't see any of them. At all. I really think he's telling the truth this time."

Nicholas frowned.

Questions flooded my heart and my mind. I had been ready for the royal family to be responsible for everything. They were the ones with the most power, after all, and I knew they didn't like me. I'd even been threatened before.

Julian only looked more confused. "I really don't think they are to blame.\*"

## Chapter 0566

Knowing the King and Queen weren't responsible for the latest attempt on my life should have come as a relief. But Nicholas and Julian were acting like this only made everything worse.

I didn't know what could be worse than having the most powerful couple in the kingdom, and likely the planet, wanting you dead.

"This is... a good thing, right?" I ventured to ask.

Nicholas hummed low, a noise I had come to recognize as disagreement. Julian shook his head.

"I'm not convinced Prince Ronan was acting alone," Julian said. "He's a right asshole, certainly, and he has the credentials to sneak around. But he's also a buffoon with more brawn than brains. And given enough time to calm down, he typically just moves on to some other woman."

I lifted a brow at Julian, wondering how the hell he knew so much about Prince Ronan, while Nicholas had to get all this same information from Ambassador Zale.

Julian caught me looking and then rolled his eyes. "We used to be in somewhat of the same circles. Or, at least, Ronan thought we were. Two rebellious, philandering princes. While I was in it mostly for the information leakage, Ronan genuinely thought we had a comradery."

"I didn't know any of this," Nicholas said.

"Not like you took much interest in my... extra-curricular activities, brother. Except to scold me for them," Julian said.

He grinned a moment before turning serious again.

"What I'm telling you is, Ronan would not have pieced out how to escape on his own, much less how to find his way here at just the right moment Piper would be in the water." Content belong to NôvelDráma. Org.

I struggled to think of anyone else who would be in a position to be able to know those things, other than the royal family. "But if it's not the King and Queen, then who could be responsible? One of the merfolk?"

Julian shook his head. "The merfolk, even the most powerful among them, wouldn't know what we were planning here. They would know the location of our island, but unless it was sheer luck, Ronan showing up at just the right moment is too suspicious."

"I don't believe in luck like that," Nicholas said.

"Neither do I," Julian agreed.

But if it wasn't a merfolk, and it wasn't royalty... "Who else could it be?"

Julian glanced sideways to where Bridget rested on a lounge chair on the deck. She was in a skimpy swimsuit, sunning, with big sunglasses and a pink boat drink in her hand.

"You can't be serious," I whispered. There was no love lost between Bridget and I, but... "She didn't even interact with Prince Ronan."

"Not in front of us, no," Julian said.

I didn't want to be skeptical of Julian, but in areas where Bridget was concerned, he was always a bit wonky. Now that he didn't crush on her so much that he could see no flaws, maybe he had taken things too far in the other direction. Was he suspecting Bridget simply because now he could only see flaws?

My skepticism must have shown on my face. Julian caught it right away.

\*She's a famous movie actress. Movies aren't big in the merfolk kingdom, but those that know our culture appreciate them highly."

Ambassador Zale did say Ronan would have excelled as an actor. But that wasn't a good enough connection to

accuse someone of murder.

"Mommy," Elva said, tugging on my arm. She'd been incredibly patient so far, with all the adult conversations happening around her. "My shells."

"We'll go back for them in a minute, honey," I said.

"I'm serious, Piper," Julian said. "She's a good lead."

Nicholas frowned harder. All of our glances went to Bridget. Noticing, she waved back in return.

She seemed to be acting perfectly normal.

I didn't know what to think.

"Mommy," Elva said again. I'd held her back long enough.

I excused us from Julian, and tried to from Nicholas.

## Chapter 0567

"I'll go with you," Nicholas said. True to his word, he stuck to us like he'd been glued to our side.

Eventually, the sun crept across the sky and began to disappear at the western horizon. Sitting on one of the sofas on the deck, Elva began to doze at my side, occasionally swaying. When she finally fell into my arm, I roused her and asked, "Bedtime, Elva?"

She nodded.

I looked to the other candidates and two princes sitting around us.

\*Elva and I are turning in for the night," I said as we stood.

"Goodnight," each of them said in turn, except Bridget, who was laughing with one of the cameramen.

Nicholas stood as we did. "I'll go with you."

I couldn't reprimand him in front of the others, who were each side-eying each other. Our new sleeping arrangement hadn't been decided in a public space, so the candidates didn't know a thing about it. Even Julian seemed a little surprised. It was rare to catch him off-guard.

In silence, I led Elva into the house, with Nicholas behind.

Upstairs, at the bedroom door, the guard greeted us with a formal salute. "An air mattress has been arranged for you, Prince Nicholas."

"Thank you," Nicholas replied. Content belong to NôvelDráma. Org.

Inside, I saw exactly what the guard had been talking about. An air mattress had been assembled right next to the bed, and covered in sheets and a blanket. A set of silky pajamas was also set there, for Nicholas.

"You take the bed," I told him at once. I couldn't imagine a prince sleeping on the floor. "I'll take the air mattress." "Absolutely not," Nicholas said in his sternest voice, the one that left little room for argument.

Sighing, I grabbed pajamas for Elva and myself and shuffled her into the bathroom. When we were changed and washed with our teeth brushed, we reemerged. Nicholas had changed in our absence. He was across the room, testing the strength of the lock on the window.

Elva went to him for a hug goodnight before she returned to bed for me to tuck her in.

Satisfied with the window, and content after his hug. Nicholas returned to the air mattress. He stood beside me. We'd be right next to each other, me in the bed, him on the floor. If I needed him I could simply reach out and grab him.

It was a very comforting thought. I hadn't thought I'd be able to sleep, but with him so near, maybe there was a chance.

"You don't have to do this," I said to him once more. It still seemed ridiculous, making a prince sleep on my floor. I hadn't been comfortable with a stranger in my room, but it might have been more proper than this.

Nicholas's stem features were unyielding. He had not changed his mind, and therefore would not, knowing him. He was one of the most stubborn men I had ever known in my life.

He glanced at Elva on the bed. She had turned away from us, and was already lightly snoring. Poor thing was absolutely exhausted after today.

I was tired too, but wired enough to hold off sleep for a while.

When I turned back to Nicholas, he lifted his hand, cupped my jawline, and then leaned in for a kiss. It was a soft, gentle butterfly kiss with no real heat. Though he lingered. The longer he stayed, with his lips to mine, the more intimate it all felt.

When he finally pulled away, I was as breathless as if he had kissed the life out of me.

"I will always protect you, Piper," he said.

He couldn't possibly mean always as in forever, but he did not correct himself, even as we broke apart. Even as we laid down in our respected beds. Even as I stared at the ceiling instead of sleeping.

He'd said always.

Maybe forever was what he meant.

Chapter 0568

The next morning, I awoke slowly. The sun was bright outside my window. It must have been early yet. It seemed as if the sun's rays were coming in strong and undeterred. Even the curtains could not dull their luminance.

I felt stubborn though, and groggy from being up much of the night thinking back on the things Nicholas had said. I would undoubtedly pay for it later today.

For now, however, I could rest. Elva was still dozing soundly beside me

I rolled to the side, enough to peer over, down at Nicholas on the ground. He had his arms crossed over his chest and his eyelids closed. He seemed to be sleeping as well.

Good. Then I truly did have a few minutes to wake slowly. I liked mornings like this, where nothing felt urgent. They had always been a rare gift to me.

Still on my side, I watched the way Nicholas's chest rose and fell with his deep breathing. His face was stern, as if he was having a dream about giving some kind of orders or reprimand.

I wondered what he dreamed about.

Could it be anything like my dreams? Although with that stern expression, I doubted he was dreaming of a blissful family life.

"Mommy...?"

I rolled over, away from Nicholas and toward my daughter instead. She was rubbing her eyes with one hand.

"Is it time to wake up?" Elva asked. Content belong to NôvelDráma. Org.

\*Soon," I said. "We can sleep in a bit, though. There's no rush."

"Okay," she said. She blinked a few times, then met my gaze. "Is Nick-lass still here?"

I nodded. "He's sleeping, so we should keep our voices low. We don't want to wake him."

She lowered her voice. "He stayed all night?"

"He did," I said, keeping my voice low as well. "Protecting us. Keeping us safe."

Elva smiled as she wiggled under the covers. She pulled them up higher, closer to her chin. "I like Nick-lass." "Me, too."

Elva seemed content with that. Her smile widened as she said, "So when will he be my new daddy? Soon, right?" Shock struck through me and for a moment, I simply stared at her, startled. But then I recovered myself.

I supposed the correct thing to do would have been to let her down gently, or at the very least, temper her expectations. But my own fantasies had been running so rampant lately, that what I should do and what I wanted to do didn't align.

So I asked her, "Is that something you would want?\*

"Yeah," Elva said. "Then he'd stay with us forever."

My heart cracked down the middle, hearing her words. Elva's dreams were so similar to my own. What I wouldn't give to have Nicholas belong to us as part of our family.

But, even with my fantasies, I should still let Elva know that it might not work out that way. I could be eliminated at the next ceremony. Or the King and Queen could simply deem me unsuitable. Or Nicholas could choose someone else. Despite everything, Bridget was still a possibility.

Yet before I could begin to tell Elva anything. Nicholas let out a loud yawn and I snap my mouth shut.

He was noisy as he began to sit up. He stretched out all of his limbs, almost as if to make a big show of it.

I could only hope he had actually been asleep a moment ago and hadn't overheard Elva and my conversation.

Nicholas blinked a few times, then looked between Elva and me. I held my breath, expecting some kind of comment.

\*Ready for breakfast?" he asked, and I huffed out a deep exhale of relief.

"I am!" Elva said and hopped out of bed.

"Let's get dressed first," I said, and after selected the day's clothes for us both, ushered Elva into the bathroom to change and ready for the day.

Nicholas waited for us, and then, we all headed down to breakfast together.

As soon as stepped off the stairs, the tension in the air on the first floor was palpable.

Selma was scurrying around, being shorter than usual with the staff as she barked orders. This in turn, caused all of the staff to seem more stressed then too. Drinks were getting messed up or spilled. The person mopping the floors slipped on their own wash.

Nicholas immediately started walking toward the chaos. "Selma? What is this?"

"I'm so sorry that you had to see any of this, Prince Nicholas," she said and seemed genuinely ashamed. "I just don't know what to do."

"What's the matter?" Nicholas asked her.



"These merfolk," she said and covered her face. "I don't know what to do or how to feed them. What do they even eat? I received a list of dietary restrictions from the Ambassador. My prince, I don't even know what some things on the list are! Oh, forgive me. Forgive me!"

Nicholas wrapped an arm around her and patted her shoulder gently, offering support. He looked hopelessly back at me. I nodded at him, knowing and understanding that he was needed here. He didn't have to attend to Elva and

1.

"Let me talk to the Ambassador," Nicholas said. "I'll see if I can sort this all out for you."

"Thank you," she sniffed. "Oh, thank you so much, your royal Highness. You are so kind."

"It will be alright," Nicholas said.

I smiled down at Elva, who was watching the scene with a curious though somewhat frightened expression. Seeing a grown woman lose her composure likely frightened the poor kid.

"Hey," I said. When Elva looked up at me, I smiled down at her. "Nicholas is going to take care of this, alright? You know we can trust him to handle anything, right?"

Elva nodded. The fear ebbed from her expression. Yes, she knew she could trust Nicholas.

"Are you hungry?" I asked.

"Yeah..."

"Let's go to breakfast, then," I said. "I bet Julian will be there!"

Elva's face lit up. She would miss not having Nicholas nearby, but she did like Julian almost just as much.

A moment later, Elva was the one pulling me toward the dining room.

Yet, just as we drew nearer, I could hear arguing coming from inside the room.

"I don't know what you are talking about," Bridget snapped. Her usually friendliness was missing. Instead she sounded sharp and annoyed.

"You know him," Julian said, voice dripping with accusation.

"Who doesn't know him?" Bridget replied. "You know him."

"You know him intimately." Julian wasn't letting up.

"Maybe we should go back upstairs," I say to Elva.

She's worrying her bottom lip with her teeth.

"I'm famous!" Bridget says. "I know a lot of people!" Bridget huffs then. "I know what this is about, Julian. You are so obsessed with me. You have been for years! And now that I've rejected you, you're trying to make me look back."

\*You are out of your mind!"

"Am I? You've been following me around like a lost puppy since we were kids. Well guess what? I'm sick of it. I won't stand for your accusations."

\*Bridget-

\*If you need someone to follow around, why don't you go find Piper instead? Your little crush on her is sickening, but at least it gets you to leave me alone."

My thoughts come to a complete and total stop.

Julian... has a crush on me?

Chapter 0569

Julian must have stormed out of the room, because in the next moment, he burst into the hallway. We were face to face, our eyes meeting, both pairs widened.

Was Bridget telling the truth? Did Julian truly have a crush on me?

Julian wasn't denying it. But then, he wasn't saying much of anything at the moment.

\*Jul-an?" Elva asked.

Julian startled, as if he hadn't realized she was there. He glanced down at her, and then back to me.

"Sorry, Elva," he said, and then stepped around us and disappeared down the hallway.

Bridget came out next. "Don't you dare ignore me, you - oh." Her face, which had been twisted with anger, quickly shifted into a more neutral friendliness when she saw me. She didn't smile, however, until she saw Elva beside me. "Good morning, you two."

"G'morning," Elva mumbled.

I didn't return the good wishes. Instead, as the shock of learning of Julian's crush subsided, I began to comprehend the other words of the argument between Bridget and Julian.

Julian had seemed certain that Bridget had known Ronan. Was that true? I didn't want to believe it, but Bridget was starting to acquire far too many coincidences for me to give her the benefit of the doubt. It seemed like every time something terrible happened to me, she always had motive or opportunity.

If she did in this case as well...

There were too many coincidence. She needed to start telling the truth and not deflecting like she usually did. Less and less people were ready to defend her now. Maybe this was the time she would finally give straight answers.

\*Bridget, are you intimate with Prince Ronan?" I asked.

Her phony smile immediately dropped. "God, you are just like Julian. Are you going to accuse me too? Of having something to do with this?"

I didn't directly accuse her, but I supposed my silence might have given my opinion on the matter away.

Bridget puffed up her chest like a rooster about to crow. Her face split into an ugly glare. "Why would I need to interfere with the race, Piper? I'm the strongest swimmer and the best athlete here. What need would I have to cheat?"

"This isn't about cheating," I said. "I could have died, Bridget."

"That's not my fault. Maybe if you were a stronger swimmer, you wouldn't have found yourself in that situation," Bridget said.

I blinked, surprised by her cruelty. Was she... blaming me for my own near-drowning? No other species could swim as quickly and powerfully as even the laziest of the merfolk. Even a champion werewolf would not have been able to escape an attack like what happened to me.

"You are just trying to undermine my win," Bridget snapped. Content belong to NôvelDrâma. Org.

She was so out of touch. So self-absorbed. She couldn't see beyond her own bubble, her own life. Maybe she really did have nothing to do with this, because she was too caught up in admiring herself to bother with me.

No, I couldn't forget her hatred of me. Now that she knew Nicholas and I were secretly coupling, I imagined that hatred only grew.

I couldn't write her off just because she was self-absorbed. I needed to remember that she was an actress and an expert at gaslighting.

"If you did have anything to do with Prince Ronan's escape or his attack on me," I said, "the truth will come out." "The truth will show I'm innocent," Bridget said firmly.

As the others began to arrive for breakfast, I dropped the argument with Bridget, who seemed content on never speaking to me again, and we all walked into the dining room.

The arrangements were similar to before. By now the third table had been entirely removed and two tables remained. Two chairs were at the second table, presumably for Bridget and Nicholas, while the other table housed enough chairs for the rest of us.

## Chapter 0570

Elva was a little shaken after the argument with Bridget, so I sat her between me and Veronica, who, when she saw the state Elva was in, began to cheer her up with small magic tricks. When Veronica made some colorful sparkles dance between her fingers, Elva finally brightened once more.

Jessica sat on the other side of me. She'd brought a book this morning, and placed it open beside her plate. It must have been a good book, because she seemed entirely engrossed. I made a mental note to ask her for a recommendation later.

The fifth chair at our table, the one meant for Julian, remained empty.

As the food began to be served and there was no sign of him, Veronica glanced at me with a question in her eyes. I didn't know how to begin to answer her question.

Between Julian's accusation of Bridget knowing Ronan, and Bridget's accusation that Julian had a crush on me, the whole situation was a tangled knot I hadn't untied.

"I'll tell you later," I mouthed.

Veronica nodded. Then her eyes went to the open door behind us. The way my chair was positioned, I couldn't see what was there. When I turned, I saw that Nicholas had just arrived.

Nicholas frowned as he looked at the empty chair at Bridget's table, the one he was expected to sit in. Slowly, his gaze shifted to the empty chair at our table, the one Julian had seemed to abandon for today.

Nicholas glanced between the two for a moment, then appeared to make up his mind. He moved straight for the chair at my table and sat down.

Veronica gave him a kind look. "Good morning, Prince Nicholas."

"Nick-lass!" Elva cheered. Her mood had entirely lifted now. "Good morning!"

"Good morning, Veronica. Elva." He returned each of their kind expressions. Then his eyes fell on me. "Good morning, Piper,"

Nicholas's smile for me was softer than for the others. It warmed me from the inside out, healing all the cuts that fighting with Bridget had sliced into me.

"Good morning," I said, and felt my heat cheeks. It was silly. So often I interacted with Nicholas, yet each time, my heart raced as if it was the first time all over again. Content belong to NôvelDrâma. Org.

I remembered how handsome he had been at the Academy. He was nothing like he was now, merely a boy back then. But his smile was kind and his eyes so focused on me. Many other things had changed from then to now, but not this. Never this.

From the other table, Bridget scowled openly at us.

After breakfast, I was worried about Julian. If the crush rumor was true, or even if it wasn't, he and I needed to have a talk.

I left Elva in the care of Veronica, Nicholas, and the nanny, and then went in search of Julian, following his direction from when I had last seen him before breakfast.

I found him outside on the deck, drinking a bloody mary. He was leaning up against the railing, resting on his elbows, with his drink placed in the space between him. Leaning like he was, he could reach the long straw placed into his drink.

He looked miserable.

I didn't say anything, just came up beside him and leaned on the railing beside him.

He was obviously having a difficult time accepting what had been said with Bridget.

I didn't want him to worry, so I decided to give him an out.

"You don't need to explain to me," I said. "I know you don't have a crush on me. I won't believe Bridget's lies."

Truthfully, I was unsure if the crush was real or not. But I offered this olive branch in the hopes that the denial would make Julian feel better.

Instead, he shook his head.

"Piper," he said. "They aren't lies."