

The Luna Choosing Game #Chapter 0571 - Read The Luna Choosing Game Chapter 0571

Chapter 0571

They're not lies.

Julian didn't say anything after that. Though, neither did I. I just gawked at him while he stared down at his bloody mary.

I wanted to ask him to go into more detail. If he could specifically tell me which of the things Bridget said weren't lies, I wouldn't be on such a downward spiral of thoughts. I wouldn't be trying so hard to bend over backwards to convince myself that Julian didn't actually have a crush on me somehow.

But, I supposed deep down, I already knew the truth. Not all that long ago, we had a similar talk on the beach as Julian threw rocks and shells into the ocean waves.

Yet here, in the quiet of the deck in this mid-morning, with Julian already halfway through a blood mary, everything felt a bit more dire, a bit more real.

This wasn't about getting over Bridget or trying to move on. Bridget had very little to do with this at all. This time, Julian's feelings were his own. And those feelings were all tangled up over me.

And now, because of that, I had to face my own true feelings as well. It would be unfair to Julian not to consider how I felt about him while he was being honest with how he felt about me.

Truthfully, even upon reflection, I didn't know how I felt about Julian. I cared about him, certainly. He was funny and loyal. He protected me and looked out for me in his own way. He was good with Elva, always trying to treat her sleight of hand and card tricks.

He was handsome too. Leaner than Nicholas, but with a similar features. Although Julian always leaned more toward the 'I got out of bed looking like this' vibe, where Nicholas was always crisply dressed and put together.

If I hadn't known Nicholas first, I could have easily been swept up in the whirlwind that was Prince Julian. He was certain to give his partner a life of adventure and joy and excitement. Content belong to NôvelDráma. Org.

But I had known Nicholas first. And I fell in love with Nicholas. My feelings for Nicholas were so strong, that I genuinely doubted if I would ever be able to give my heart to anyone else, even if Nicholas and I were to separate.

My heart would always be his. I wasn't sure I would even try to find another. How unfair would it be to be the love of someone else's life when they could never be anything but second best?

Julian was a great guy. Funny, charming, smart, great with kids. He deserved better than to live in the shadow of his older brother.

He was also a dear friend. One of my dearest.

I didn't want to ruin that.

"I have no defense for my feelings," Julian said. He spoke so softly, I didn't realize he was speaking at first. I had to strain to listen, though as he continued, his voice grew stranger. "I know they are unwelcome."

"It's not that," I said. "It's just..." I didn't want to hurt his feelings, especially with him being so brave to voice them. But to lead him on when my heart belongs to Nicholas would be so much crueler.

"Nicholas," he said. He already knew, then. Of course he did. Even if Julian wasn't the most observant of our group, and he was, I wasn't exactly subtle with my feelings, especially in front of my friends.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Don't be sorry for how you feel," Julian replied. "You can't control your feelings any better than I can control mine."

I was grateful to him, but didn't say so. I let the silence answer for me.

Julian drank more of his bloody mary. After a time, he said, "I would appreciate it if we could ignore everything that happened this morning and act as we always have before. I would hate for these pesky feelings to get in the

way of what we are to each other."

"Of course," I said, relieved. "You are a dear friend to me. That will never change."

He nodded. He smiled, and though it was a touch shakier than usual, he seemed relieved as well. "I'm glad. Thank you."

Another silence followed, but this one didn't feel as heavy as the one before. It felt a bit as if, with the air cleared, things were falling back into their proper place.

I believed we both wanted to move forward and leave this behind us, so I brought up the other question on my mind.

"You accused Bridget of knowing Prince Ronan," I said. "Was that true?"

"You heard all that, huh?" he groaned. "Well, I'm glad I guess. I was hoping to uncover everything before I came to you, but maybe it's for the best you know what I suspect, just in case it is a viable theory."

I leaned forward with my elbows on the railing, mimicking his posture, and looked over at him.

Julian sighed. "I found evidence that Bridget and Ronan might have dated in the past. It's shaky evidence at best. A few photos snapped from a paparazzi. But it at the very least proves they knew each other. The fact that she's being so dodgy about it only adds to my suspicion."

That was evidence impossible to dispute.

"I know that alone is not enough to prove her guilty of conspiring to send Ronan after you," Julian continued, "But it is damn suspicious. She's also stonewalling me. If she wasn't guilty, wouldn't she want to help catch the person who tried to kill you? Wouldn't she help with the investigation?"

I could sense his frustration, and I understood it.

If Bridget was innocent, she sure as hell could help more. The only reason I could think of that she might not want

to talk about her full knowledge and relationship with Prince Ronan was if she was actually in love with him and trying to protect him.

But that seemed truly outrageous.

"I'll find the answer," Julian said. "She won't stop me. I'll keep digging."

"Be careful," I told him, voice soft.

He smirked slightly. "You know me."

"That's why I said it."

He looked at me and our eyes locked. My heart warmed. He was a good man, a great friend, and I was blessed to have him in my life. I hoped he knew that. I hoped he understood how much I wished my heart was free to love him like he wanted me to.

"Thank you for looking out for me, Julian," I said. "Not just in this, but in everything."

He straightened and turned to me. I did the same.

"I don't do it for you, Piper. I do it for me. Because I wouldn't be able to live with myself otherwise."

I smiled and shook my head. He was so ridiculous.

He held open his arms. "Hug and make up?"

I rolled my eyes. "Fine." I stepped into him. I wrapped my arms around his waist and he wrapped his around mine.

He held me for a long moment, and I was content, knowing he cared for me so very much.

The door to the main house slid open. I lifted my head just in time to see Nicholas step through.

When he saw Julian and me embracing, he froze.

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Nicholas stood still for a long moment. Long enough for me to cough politely and then step backwards, out of Julian's arms, Julian, noticing my distraction, followed the length of my gaze to Nicholas.

Julian stepped away from me and moved out to the center of the deck. Nicholas walked further away from the door, coming to stand a few feet in front of Julian.

They were squared off like this, both standing at their full heights, their arms hanging at their sides.

The tension in the air was palpable. I could have cut it with a knife, I was certain.

I waited for the growling to start, or for them to start shifting into a fighting posture. I tensed my entire body up like a coiled spring, ready to jump forward at any moment and separate them. I didn't care that they were two Alphas. I knew neither one of them would hurt me.

Yet the growling never began. They postured, but not enough that seemed physically threatening, like one of them might throw a punch.

Instead, Julian just sighed. His shoulders slouched. He'd given up the fight before it ever began.

Nicholas watched him with confusion.

I wasn't confused though. Julian knew I loved Nicholas, and this was his way of respecting that choice. His Alpha instincts and his heart might have made him want to fight for me. But his head and his friendship to me told him that would no way to keep me in his life.

Julian nonchalantly walked toward Nicholas, then angled to move around him. He patted Nicholas on the shoulder as he walked by.

Not a single word was spoken as Julian disappeared into the house.

With Julian gone, Nicholas looked to me. He wanted answers, no doubt, and correctly suspected I had the answers to them. And as much as I wanted to trust Nicholas with all the secrets I knew, this one, I felt, wasn't mine to share.

Julian was my friend, and we had agreed to ignore his feelings for me. Bringing Nicholas into it would only incite a pointless fight or worse. Since Julian's crush on me wasn't going to change any of our relationships to each other, it was not worth it to create needless drama.

But Nicholas was waiting for some kind of explanation. I couldn't really play dumb here. Obviously I had sought Julian out and we had been talking. I also didn't want to lie to Nicholas. Content belong to NôvelDráma. Org.

So I said, "Julian and Bridget had an argument this morning."

The confusion cleared from Nicholas's face. "Ah," he said.

He walked closer to me. He didn't touch me, but I could still feel the heat radiating from his body. I leaned into it, into him. If our arms brushed a few times, we could always pretend it was accidental. No one would know.

Nicholas didn't ask for more details. Instead he said, "I was just speaking with Nathan. Because of what's going on, we've decided to cut the trip short."

"How short?" I asked.

"We will all leave tomorrow at midday, and return to the palace."

I wasn't surprised with this decision. With everything that's happened, I was more surprised this decision hadn't been made sooner. I supposed the television producer had hoped for more steamy and thrilling footage. Well, they sure got the thrilling part of it - at my expense.

Yet, I couldn't deny that I was a bit sad to leave the island as well, despite all the hardships here. For all the bad things that happened, many good things occurred as well.

Elva seeing the water for the first time and even making sandcastles, seeing the merfolk palace and breathing underwater, making love to Nicholas for the first time.

They were memories that I would hold near and dear to my heart. Though, ultimately, yes, I was ready to go home. I yearned for the relative safety of the palace. I also missed Susie and Mark, as well as many of the other staff. I hoped Charlotte was okay as well.

Chapter 0573

Hopefully Lilliana and Olivia hadn't caused too much trouble in our absence. Although, most likely, they were just bored without Nicholas there to try to pursue. They likely had been spending their time attempting to win over the King and Queen instead.

They had to know that was a fruitless endeavor though. The King and Queen had picked Bridget as their winner.

Yet, maybe with her recent actions, that might be starting to change.

Unlikely, I supposed. But one could hope.

"We should do something... private... before we leave," Nicholas said. He kept his voice low. Deep and sexy, just how I liked it. The promise of it sent a pleasant shiver up my spine.

"What did you have in mind?" I asked.

The edge of his mouth curled upright just a little. "Before we fully turn in tonight, we should meet in my room first. Just you and me."

Oh, I liked the sound of this. I lowered my head slightly, so that I could look up at him through my eyelashes. "And what would happen there?"

Nicholas's smile grew wider. He lifted his hand and slowly, gently traced his fingertips down my arm from my shoulder all the way to my wrist.

I closed my eyes and sighed. I had no idea how such a slight touch could elicit such desire in me.

"You'll just have to wait and see," he said.

I hummed delightedly. Oh, those words were definitely going to keep my mind occupied for the rest of the day, and I was oh so looking forward to that distraction.

It would be difficult to worry about anything when every time I closed my eyes, I envisioned Nicholas surrounding me with his body, filling me with his love.

Those thoughts stayed with me, even as others began to come out onto the deck, and Nicholas and I were forced to step farther apart, lest our secret activities be discovered.

Later, the candidates, princes, Elva, and I were lounging about on the deck. Elva was using crayons on some coloring book pages that Selma had found lying around. Jessica was still reading. Veronica was reading too, her own book from the merfolk.

I wondered if the merfolk oracle would make an appearance. She'd said she would when my heart was clear of fear. Would she still seek me out even if she had to come ashore? Content belong to NôvelDrâma. Org.

I sighed and forced the thoughts from my mind. The oracle wasn't Elva's only hope. Veronica was working hard to see to that.

Julian and Nicholas seemed to have wordlessly resolved their earlier posturing. Now they played a game of chess against each other at one of the tables. From what I could tell, they seemed to be evenly matched.

Even Nathan was attempting to relax for a change. He sat on the top step, looking out at the waves.

Only Bridget seemed to be annoyed. She was two chardonnays in, and stomping around from person to person, asking, "Aren't you bored?"

Finally she approached Nathan. "We should do something," she said. "Surely we need a few closing shots of the island and of us. How about a boat ride? That would be a perfect opportunity!"

Nathan looked up at her a moment. I thought he might finally disagree. He had seemed rather comfortable where he was. Instead, he obediently stood. "I'll gather the film crew and alert the boat captain." He made his way inside.

Bridget raised her glass to his retreating back. "Thank you, Nathan! Everyone! Get ready! We're going out into the

water!"

As she said it, she turned to look at me.

Out into the water.

Not, out on a boat. Or, taking a boat ride.

Out into the water.

I had a really bad feeling about this.

Chapter 0574

The waves were choppy today, making for an unpleasant boat ride. Even a boat as big as the yacht we were on was subject to many up and down jumps. My stomach was in knots. Though, admittedly, it probably would have been even without the constant ups and downs.

I had a dire feeling being out on the water again. Even on a boat as big as this one, I didn't feel safe. It was that strong feeling that had me leave Elva ashore with the nanny. I could take a risk for myself, but I'd never endanger her.

I held onto the railing on the side of the boat and tried to keep my eyes on the horizon line. If I concentrated there, I was sure I could overcome my seasickness.

I wasn't the only one who was ill. Jessica was lying down across one of the nearby benches, her arm thrown over her eyes. When the cameras came nearby, she would rouse herself and smile. But even then, she looked pale and queasy. I'm fairly certain she'd been sick, but she was discreet about it.

Losing her breakfast didn't seem to help her disposition though. She still looked ill and miserable.

Every now and then, I dropped my gaze to the water nearer the boat. The yacht itself was creating a wake, and in that ripple of water, I occasionally caught glance of a merfolk soldier or two.

When Nathan had agreed to Bridget's plan, he had alerted our merfolk protectors. Several of them agreed to follow around the boat to protect it and us, in case Prince Ronan was still lingering nearby looking to do one of us harm.

That was how they had formally put it. One of us. Like he was actually after anyone but me.

But it was fine. One of us still included me. As long as Prince Ronan was kept away, I didn't care about semantics.

He was probably long gone by now, anyway. I hoped. If he was smart, he'd see the island as protected as it was and realize whatever plan he had wouldn't work.

That did little to calm my nerves, however. If Prince Ronan wasn't filled with blind rage, he never would have attacked me in the first place. I couldn't exactly trust his judgement to stay away now, even with the obvious protection surrounding me.

Then, suddenly, looking down at the water, I saw the form of a merfolk take shape against the deep blue of the ocean depths. As he came nearer the surface, he turned toward me and I saw clearly his face.

Prince Ronan.

I stumbled backwards away from the railing. I tripped over a step and tumbled down onto my backside.

Both Nicholas and Julian were at my side in a moment.

"Piper?" Nicholas said, just as Julian asked, "What happened?"

I trembled with the sudden onslaught of fear. To see his face so near. Shouldn't there have been merfolk guards around? Wouldn't they have seen him before he got this close? Content belong to NôvelDráma. Org.

Had I imagined him?

Yes, that must have been it. There was no way it could have truly been him.

My fear was making me paranoid.

I had to fight it, or I risked losing myself. I was strong. I could survive this fear.

Only one more day until we were gone and none of this would matter anymore. Prince Ronan would lose all advantage outside of the water.

I just had to hold onto my courage - and my sanity - for that much longer.

"I'm okay," I said. "The seasickness made me dizzy. I'm fine now."

Both princes looked at me with skeptical expressions.

*Are you certain about that?" Julian asked.

Nicholas helped me stand. Julian stood as well, on my other side.

*I'm sure," I said.

I felt much steadier now, especially when we moved toward a bench and I sat down. The brothers hovered, worrying over me so much that I was beginning to feel like a big fool. If they knew all this fuss was over me being paranoid, I would die of embarrassment.

"I'm okay now, really."

The brothers thankfully began to realize that their presence was stressing me.

"I'll go see if I can find something you can take for seasickness," Nicholas said.

Julian, not to be outdone, said, "I'll find you some water."

They both made certain I was fine once more.

"We'll be right back," Julian said.

"Stay here," Nicholas said.

I typically felt safer with them near, but since I was so very embarrassed, it was a relief to have them elsewhere, at least long enough for me to compose myself.

Yet, unfortunately, I was only alone for the length of three long breaths, before another figure stood before me, darkening me with her shadow.

Bridget.

"Piper? Do you think we could speak for a moment?"

Odd, she was giving me a sad sort of smile, almost like she was... apologetic. I didn't want to believe she could be sorry. I knew she was a very good actor. But... maybe she really was about to open up to me in a way that she wouldn't with Julian.

Maybe she had set Ronan on me by accident, and she wanted to know apologize.

Of course, I knew it was much more likely that she meant to manipulate me. But I didn't see the harm in hearing her out if I kept that in mind.

"What did you want to talk about?" I asked.

Bridget glanced at the bench near mine, where Jessica stretched with her arm over her eyes. Her other hand was holding her stomach. She groaned in misery.

"I was hoping we could speak more privately." Bridget pointed toward a more secluded section of the yacht, near the back railing. I wasn't thrilled to be near the water again, but if I wanted answers, I knew I had to bring out my courage.

"Okay."

I forced myself up onto shaky legs. Fortunately, even wobbly as I was, I was not near as dizzy as I had been and was able to follow Bridget toward the back of the boat where she had pointed. Content belong to NôvelDrâma. Org.

When we were there, I gripped the railing with both hands.

"I have something to confess to you," Bridget said. She leaned onto the railing beside me with one arm. Most of her body was turned toward me. "About Ronan."

I was immediately glad I had decided to make this trek. "Oh?"

"I do know him. We were friends." She sighed. "He wanted more, of course. They always do."

"Right," I said, even though I had no idea what she was talking about. Nicholas had been my only real boyfriend.

"He was sweet when I knew him." She glanced up at the sky and laughed. "He would do anything for me, without me having to ask for it."

I didn't like where this was going.

Bridget sobered as she lowered her gaze back to me. "It is possible that he believes I want you out of the way... by any means necessary. He always had these ideas about what I want, you understand. He'd never actually ask."

I pulled my brow together, struggling to believe. Ronan shouldn't know anything about me, unless Ronan specifically complained about me. But that shouldn't be, should it? Not if they only knew each other long ago, as she was implying.

"Why would he think that's what you want?" I asked. That seemed the most pertinent question, shooting straight through all of her lies.

Bridget smiled sweetly at me for a moment. Then that smile turned sharp and dangerous.

Suddenly, she moved behind me and before I could realize what was happening, she shoved me over the railing.

Chapter 0576

At the last moment, I reached out and grabbed her wrist with my hand. She hadn't been expecting it, so she was unprepared for the sudden weight. Holding tightly, I pulled her as I fell, so that we both toppled over the side of the boat and into the water.

The ocean water was deep and cold. I hadn't been expecting the fall so I had not properly inhaled. I was quickly running out of air as I thrashed and kicked, searching near-endlessly for the surface.

Occasionally my thrashing hand or elbow or knee knocked into Bridget. She was struggling too.

Then, finally, blessedly, I breached the surface and sucked in a large, deep breath. Looking around, I saw the boat still pushing forward. Beside me, Bridget's head rose above the water. I had to do a double take, to make sure it was her.

Her hair was soaked, streaking down over her face. But through those blonde messy streaks was a face blotched with reds and tans and running mascara streaking down her face. She always made it seem so natural, I had no idea she had so much makeup on.

What was most surprising however, was the look of absolute murder on Bridget's face. She glared at me, rage burning in her eyeliner crusted eyes.

"Look at what you did to me!" she shouted so loudly her voice broke. "Look at my fucking face!"

With the harsh waves, it was difficult to keep above water. I kept bobbing up and down. I dipped below a few times but forced myself back up. Each time I resurfaced, Bridget's fury met me, both in her glare and in her voice. Content belong to NôvelDráma. Org.

"How could you do this to me?!"

Enough was enough. This woman was seemingly forgetting that she had pushed me first. I'd had well enough of her bullshit, even with the terror gripping through me. We were adrift, with the endless blue beneath us and our ship driving away. But somehow I was the focal point of Bridget's attention.

"You. Pushed. Me!" I shouted back. "You tried to kill me!"

"What?" Bridget yelled. She dipped underwater. I did too. When we both resurfaced again, I screamed, "You were going to kill me!"

"You're delusional!" Bridget shouted.

"You pushed me!"

"You slipped! Then you tried to drag me!"

"Because you pushed me!"

We submerged again. I kept my eyes open this time. With the waves crashing this way and that, it was difficult to keep track of which way meant safety and which way was death. Only with my eyes open could I see the light of the sun breaking through the surface of the water.

Following the light, I found my salvation.

Yet, this time, I saw movement flickering through the light beams illuminated in the water. I recognized a distinctive fish tail.

My heart stopped dead. Then, all at once, it took off running as if in a marathon. My adrenaline surged, forcing me to kick to push, to reach the surface again and scream at the top of my lungs.

I would fight him. To the death, most likely. But I would also do my best to save my life. And to save my life, I needed help.

I needed Nicholas.

Elva was back on the island waiting for me. I wouldn't abandon her like her biological mother did. I would fight for my life to get back to her.

I kicked. I breached the water. And I screamed.

"Nicholas!!"

Bridget continued to glare at me. "Who do you think you are? If he should rescue anyone, it's me!"

I couldn't argue back. A merfolk head was starting to appear at the water's surface, and panic and fear clawed so tightly at my throat that I couldn't breathe anymore.

I didn't care what happened to Bridget. I knew she wasn't going to help me. That was reason enough for me not to even think of her.

I could focus on nothing but my survival now.

If Ronan surfaced, I could try to punch him in the throat. That might give me some advantage. If he pulled me under the water, I would never come up again. I would be lost.

The merfolk surfaced. I readied my punch.

I did not throw it.

This merfolk was not Ronan. Instead, it was one of the Ambassador's soldiers who had been brought to protect us and our island.

He wasn't an enemy. He was a friend.

I still couldn't speak, but I lowered my arm back into the water.

"Stay calm," the merfolk said. His voice sounded straight above the water, as if it was raw from disuse. "You will not drown."

I listened closely to his words. I tried to take them to heart, but my heart was too busy beating out of control. "May I touch you?" the merfolk solidier asked. "I can lead you back to the ship."

I swallowed hard, trying to find my own voice. A wave crashed over me, pushing me underwater. I reached out to the merfolk who took that as the consent it was and lifted me up above the surface once more.

The merfolk was only touching my arm, but the strength of him and his massive fish tail made certain that I never dipped below the waves again. I was eternally grateful.

"We've alerted your ship that you have fallen overboard," the merfolk said. "They are stopping. I will take you there now."

I looked where he directed. Yes, it did seem as if the ship had stopped. Nearby, I noticed that a second merfolk had stopped to help Bridget as well. Back on the yacht, I watched as someone jumped over the rail and into the water.

Hadn't Nicholas been wearing that outfit?

That person began to swim towards us at a full clip.

"Your eldest prince," the merfolk said. The merfolk hesitated then, though he seemed like he wanted to say more.

I waited and was rewarded. "He cares deeply for you."

I swallowed again. Some salt water had gotten into my mouth and burned the whole way down. Yet for this comment, I still found my voice, "I know."

The merfolk kicked his massive tail and we began to move at a steady pace near the boat. His grip on me ever assured I was safely lifted above the waves.

Bridget and the merfolk helping her were ahead of me.

When the swimmer who had abandoned the boat reached them, he passed them by without slowing.

"Nicholas?" Bridget called, but the swimmer did not stop.

Only when he came to be near me did he slow. As he did, I realized it was in fact Nicholas. When he reached me, he did not hesitate, but pushed forward and kissed me.

It was a brief kiss, a mere press of lips to lips made slightly awkward by our close-by merfolk audience. He politely turned our head at our reunion.

"Piper," Nicholas said. He bobbed up and down. I gripped onto his shirt with both hands, holding him above the water. "Are you okay?"

I shook my head because I wasn't really. Not at all.

"What happened?" he asked.

I didn't know how to tell him. I was struggling to comprehend it all.

Yet I knew one thing for certain. No matter how much she had screamed at me, denying it.

"Bridget pushed me," I said.

A moment passed and then, suddenly, Nicholas's eyes went red.

Chapter 0577

Nicholas, even with his eyes blazing with Alpha rage, had no other reaction while we remained in the water. He held onto me, kicking forward. I'm not sure how much help he was being with the strength of the merfolk tail driving most of our speed. But I imagined the exercise was still good for him.

Perhaps if he worked off some of his anger before we reached the boat, he wouldn't be quite so dangerous once we were upon it.

During our journey, a feeling of safety slowly returned to me. Between the merfolk soldier and Nicholas, Ronan would never be able to reach me here.

When we finally reached the boat, Bridget had already been lifted up onto it.

"Tell that fishman to keep his hands to himself!" she snapped at the attendant on the boat trying to assist her.

Julian himself pushed her to the side, making room for my arrival. As I came near, he reached down for me. Nicholas and the merfolk soldier both worked to lift me up. Content belong to NôvelDrâma. Org.

"Thank you," I made sure to tell the soldier, especially seeing how Bridget treated him.

The salt water, it seemed, had rubbed away Bridget's veneer. Maybe fear helped too.

I wondered what she would be like when she realized the ass she was making of herself. I looked forward to seeing her face when she understood that she would not be getting away with her lies this time.

I knew what happened. The memory was burned onto the forefront of my mind. And nothing would make me forget it.

At the boat edge, I grabbed Julian's hands and he yanked me up onto the boat. He didn't care that I was soaked down to the bone, Julian pulled me into his arms and held me tight as together, and we waddled away from the railing of the boat.

When we reached the benches, he helped ease me down so that I could sit. Veronica stood nearby. Even Jessica had sat up to watch me.

"I'm okay," I told all of them, though the salt water still burned in my throat.

Nicholas emerged from the water next. He walked over to me. His eyes were still red. Julian did a double-take when he saw them.

"Nicholas? You okay?"

"I... can't..." His voice was low and dangerous, with a grow underlying his words.

"It's okay, brother," Julian said in the calmest voice I had ever heard him use. "Whatever it is."

"Bridget... pushed... Piper..."

Julian growled on reflex. His eyes didn't turn red, though he was still raging. "Where is she?"

Bridget was nearby, sitting on the ground halfway between the bench and the railing. When Julian spotted her, he rushed toward her. Nicholas followed.

I was too tired. Every muscle ached from the strain of keeping myself above the water. I was jelly form. I couldn't move even if I wanted to.

Fortunately, I didn't have to. Julian seemed determined to be my mouthpiece, and Nicholas, my muscle.

They both stood over Bridget, who lifted her head away from the towel she was dabbing her face with to look up at them. "Nicholas... your eyes..."

"Explain to us," Julian said through gritted teeth, "exactly what happened before you two fell over."

Bridget would have had to be blind not to notice the tension in their bodies and the utter seriousness to this conversation. Even if she had been blind, she should have heard Julian's barely concealed rage.

"Piper and I were just messing around," Bridget said. She laughed a little, nervously. "Then Piper slipped. I reached for her, but I wasn't strong enough to pull her up. So we both toppled over the rail."

Julian let her tell her lie without interruption. When she had finished, he said, "You pushed her."

Bridget paled. It was clear as day without her typical makeup. "Piper shouldn't take it so seriously. She knows it was an accident."

"So you did push her?" Julian asked.

"We were playing around," Bridget said. She seemed panicked now. Her nervous smile slipped away. "I didn't mean for her to actually fall into the water."

"If it was a joke," Nathan said, approaching, "it was a tasteless one. You should have known better, Bridget. Especially with Prince Ronan lurking around, waiting for the opportunity."

"An opportunity that you nearly handed him," Julian added.

It was a strange sight to see: Nathan, Nicholas, and Julian a united front against Bridget. More so that they were standing up to Bridget for me.

"We were just having fun," Bridget said.

*Should we ask Piper if she had fun?" Julian said.

Nicholas growled.

"There's a fugitive on the loose, Bridget," Nathan scolded. "This is no time for foolishness."

Nathan looked over the lot of them. When he looked closely at Nicholas, he sighed.

"Prince Nicholas," he said. "Go sit with Piper and calm yourself down."

The remark startled me. For one, Nathan, even as the King's Beta, was in no position to order the prince around. And two, for him to insist Nicholas come and sit with me seemed beyond the pale.

Maybe I had died in the water. Maybe this now was my afterlife.

Nicholas, despite so near Alpha rage, did as he was told. He left Bridget to Julian and Nathan's interrogation and came over to me. Veronica made room, and Nicholas took her place, sitting directly beside me.

"Piper..." he growled, turning toward me.

He needed my scent. My closeness. I didn't know how I knew that, but I did. I would not deny him. So I leaned into him. His arms wrapped around me at once, boxing me against the wide expanse of his muscled chest. His shirt was cold and slimy from the ocean, but I didn't care.

I needed his scent and closeness too.

I clawed at that damp shirt, clinging to him as much as I could. He lowered his nose to the space near my ear and hair and breathed me in.

"Piper," he said. The growl was gone now. He was more like himself. Thank God.

I'd never seen anyone lose themselves to Alpha rage before. I had heard that a thing like that could only happen with true mates. But Nicholas didn't have any mate, let alone a true one. The only person in danger had been me? And perhaps Bridget, but he did not seem overly concerned with her.

I wondered what could have caused such a strong reaction.

He breathed me in for a long moment, just as I did him. Then he raised a hand to cup my cheek. He coaxed my gaze upwards, tilting my face until I was looking straight up at him.

Then, gently, as if I was the most precious thing in the world, he leaned down and kissed me.

It was a soft, lingering kiss that did not press for more.

Anyone who looked could see. All they had to do was turn their heads.

But I trusted most of the people here. And those I did not trust, already knew.

Except perhaps Jessica, but... I didn't think she'd be all that bothered about it.

Nicholas pulled back slightly, but only so much as he tilted his head, repositioning. Then he returned for a second

kiss. And then a third. None were deep, but all felt intimate.

My heart was warmed by each press of lips. I felt like I was coming alive again.

"From now on," he said, when we broke, "I will never leave you alone again."

Chapter 0578

Nicholas continued to hold me, even as the ship neared the dock of the familiar island. By this point, Julian had also joined us and was pacing back and forth in the small space in front of us. Veronica sat quietly nearby, observing all with watchful eyes. Jessica was still laying down, clutching her stomach.

The crew worked to tie off the ship to the dock. I was ready to be on dry land again. Truthfully, I was ready to leave this island. I didn't think I'd avoid water for the rest of my life, but as it was at this moment, I didn't even want to visit a large pool for a while. Forget the ocean.

Nicholas words were still echoing inside my head. He wasn't going to let me go anywhere alone. I didn't know if he meant while we were on the island or for much longer. Just while we were on the island, I could understand. For much longer, I was secretly hoping.

My paranoia had not ebbed. For now, I was simply relieved that Prince Ronan did not jump out of the shadows at any point and murder me. Having Nicholas helped keep those wild fears under control, at least in part. I still thought them, but now, I knew Nicholas would protect me and that gave me peace.

As we were waiting for the crew to give us the all clear so that we could go ashore, Bridget approached us. She walked right behind Julian's back as he was pacing, moving closer to me.

When Julian turned, he spotted her, and then rushed to intercept. He held up his arm, blocking her path, keeping her from going farther.

"Where do you think you are going?" Julian snapped. Any sympathy Julian had shown for Bridget was long gone now. He doesn't even attempt to feign niceties for diplomacy's sake. His voice now was as harsh and cold as I had ever heard it.

It was strange to hear Julian's voice, usually so full of life and teasing, bereft of emotion.

Bridget looked at him. She smiled but her eyes were narrowed. The mismatched gave her an unnerving expression.

"I merely wish to apologize once more to Piper," she said. Funny, I don't remember her apologizing at all. When we had been in the water, she had shouted and accused me of ruining her hair and makeup. "I want to clear the air before things get serious."

Things were already serious. Content belong to NôvelDráma. Org.

"There's no reason for us to all hold onto our hard feelings," she said.

"No," Julian said. "Absolutely not."

Bridget clucked her tongue. "This isn't about you, Julian. This is solely between Piper and me. Don't stand in my way."

"You lost your right to speak privately with her the moment you pushed her into the water," Julian said. "At this point you'd be lucky if she doesn't press charges on you."

"I committed no crime."

"Assault at best. Attempted murder at worst," Julian said.

"Ridiculous," Bridget snapped.

"Bridget," Nicholas said. I felt his words vibrate through his chest under my ear. "If you are truly sorry, you can wait and formally apologize when we have all returned to the palace."

That, I believed, was a fair trade-off.

Bridget did not seem to agree with that. Her face twisted, becoming sad and pleading, her bottom lip sticking out. "I can't wait that long," she said. "What will the public think if it takes me so long to say sorry?"

"If you didn't want to look back in front of the public," Julian said, "then you should have thought of that before

you shoved Piper into the fucking ocean!"

"Julian," I said, recognizing his rising rage. I felt privileged to be one of the few he would rise so valiantly to protect, but he really didn't need to right now. Bridget had already lost. Now she was just trying to damage control the situation.

Chapter 0579

Julian glanced back at me. I gave him the best calming look I could muster. He closed his eyes and inhaled a deep breath in through the mouth, out through the nose.

"You had better listen to her, Julian," Bridget said. "Calm yourself and act like a gentleman to me for a change." Julian's calm face hardened once more. He opened his eyes and glared at Bridget.

"You wouldn't want to be cruel to me. After all, I know certain secrets about you that you wouldn't want others... like, your brother... to know."

"You don't know anything," Julian growled. Though we all knew that wasn't true.

After all, Bridget knew that Julian had a crush on me, something that Julian later admitted to me was true. If she told Nicholas that... Would it start a war between the brothers? How would that possibly resolve?

I cared for both the brothers. The last thing in the entire world I wanted was for the two of them to ruin their relationship with each other because of their feelings for me.

"Back off, Bridget," I snapped. I gently shoved against Nicholas's chest. He reluctantly loosened his hold so that I could sit up straight on my own.

"If you want me to stay quiet on this, then you should accept my apology," Bridget said. She smiled sharply. "We wouldn't want Nicholas to get the wrong idea."

"If my brother wants me to know his secrets," Nicholas said. "He can very well tell me himself. I certainly don't need to have some middleman trying to lord things over us." Nicholas was getting angry now. Though his Alpha rage was gone, he was still tense as a taut bow string.

"You aren't the first person who tried to sew discord between us,* Nicholas continued. "Nor will you be the last. But to think you might actually succeed where all the others have failed speaks to your hubris. Piper will not be hearing your words now, neither will I, or my brother."

Bridget's eyes went wide. Her mouth opened, slacked.

Julian smirked. He leaned toward Bridget. "That's your cue to leave."

Bridget snapped her mouth closed.

From the dock, one of the crew yelled, "It's safe now. You can all depart!"

Bridget huffed, and turned from us. She stormed her way downstairs.

Jessica groaned as she stood and followed. Veronica stood as well. She looked between the two princes and myself, and said, "I'll see you ashore."

I wanted to be off this ship, but the air between the three of us remaining felt charged beyond belief. Julian was the one setting the tone. Nicholas had told off Bridget on his defense but he still lingered. Guilt weighed heavily on his face.

"You don't have to say anything," Nicholas said. He knew Julian even better than I, sometimes.

"I don't want her to be able to have this thing that she can use to hurt us," Julian said. "You're right, I'd rather tell you myself."

I sucked in a shaky breath.

"It has taken time," Nicholas said, "but we have both come to see Bridget for the person that she truly is. Whatever lies she tells -"

"I'm afraid it wouldn't be a lie this time," Julian said. "That's why I have to tell you. Here. Now. You can punch me if you want, but the truth will be out there and that's that, for better or worse."

My heart raced out of control, I didn't know what I could say to help this situation.

"Julian, you don't have to -" Nicholas began.

"I romantically like Piper," Julian said.

Nicholas's mouth snapped closed.

Chapter 0580

My breath caught. I braced myself. I didn't know what would happen next.

Nicholas had gone very still beside me. His arm around my waist tightened slightly. Then he removed it and stood.

"Nicholas," I said.

He didn't acknowledge me. He puffed out his chest and faced down his brother. He didn't growl, didn't make any sound, but his posture alone screamed Alpha.

Julian, meanwhile, just sighed. "You don't have to do that. I know all about your feelings for Piper and hers for you, even if you two don't recognize it yourselves. I know I will never be anything more than Piper's friend. I'm no threat to you or your relationship."

Nicholas marginally relaxed. His shoulders released some of their tension.

"You don't have to worry about Piper, Nicholas," Julian said. "She's head over heels for you. My feelings are entirely one-sided."

Nicholas lowered his head. He was quiet for a long moment, and Julian didn't say anything else. Eventually, Nicholas lifted his head back up and said, "Thank you for telling me."

Julian nodded. "Bridget wants us to fight."

"We won't," Nicholas said. "I know better than anyone how wonderful Piper is. What kind of hypocrite would I be for blaming you for seeing those same traits in her that I do?"

"Thank you," Julian said. He seemed genuinely relieved a moment, but then his gaze turned mischievous. "Don't think you can relax, though. You better watch yourself and stay in line. If you mess anything up with Piper, I'll be waiting in the wings, ready to swoop in and steal her."

I blinked, startled speechless.

"I won't forget," Nicholas said, though he didn't sound particularly angry about it.

"Good." Julian glanced at me, then quickly darted his gaze away. "I'll see you both ashore." With that, Julian left us and headed for the dock.

Once Julian had left from earshot, Nicholas turned back to me. He held out his hand for me and then helped me stand up. When I was steady on my feet, he did not release my hand. Instead, he squeezed it tighter.

"You knew, didn't you?" he asked.

"I did," I said. "I'm sorry that I kept it from you."

"No," Nicholas said. He shook his head. "I haven't given you reason enough to think I wouldn't rip his head off. In fact, I've given you plenty of evidence to believe otherwise. I haven't been kind to him or to you. I should have trusted that he wasn't a threat to us."

"Nicholas -"

"No, I was wrong, and I won't hear otherwise. When it comes to you, sometimes, I feel like my emotions are too strong to control. My rage, my hope, my happiness.... they all become tangled."

I didn't exactly like the sound of that. Did that mean that he wanted to back out of what we had? To reevaluate somehow?

He must have seen the sudden abject terror on my face. He immediately wrapped his arms around me and pulled me against the brick wall of his muscled chest.

"Stop whatever it is you are thinking," Nicholas said. "I would never trade any of these feelings, no matter how much of an ass they sometimes make me appear. For all the anger, I also now feel deep passion and happiness too."

"Nick..."

"When I didn't have you, Piper, it felt like the world was black and white. I was missing something so crucial from my life. I was just going along with the motions, not really living."

He leaned down and kissed me softly on the corner of my mouth.

"When you came back into my life, you brought me back to life," he said.

Nicholas dragged his lips over to more fully center on mine and then he kissed me. The kiss started sweet, but quickly added more heat as his tongue swept over my bottom lip. I opened my mouth, allowing him access into my mouth.