

A Princess of Wind and Wave

Nereus – Chapter 16

I moved swiftly through the trees, keeping out of sight as much as possible but favoring speed over stealth. I had seized the first opportunity to leave the raiders' camp alone, but it didn't sit right to run away like that. Not now I knew what was really going on there. If it hadn't been for Isla...But I needed to make sure the princess was safe.

I moved parallel to the beach, hidden among the vegetation beyond the sand. I had been above the water long enough to adjust to the number of growing things all around me. Swimming through giant strands of kelp didn't startle me in the least, but walking among trees felt different.

Sometimes it frightened me a little. Not the trees themselves, of course, but how easy it was to get used to it. Why did it feel so much more natural to walk up here than in the enclosed bubble I had known my whole life?

I slowed as the murmur of distant voices caught my ears. There were people near me, out on the beach, hidden from my sight as I was from theirs. I hesitated, coming to a complete stop. I was close enough to the palace now that this could be a group from there.

A rapid debate took place in my mind over whether I should investigate the group or skirt around them. Before I could take action either way, however, a familiar note separated itself from the other sounds. In two quick strides I had approached close enough to peer through the greenery.

A small group of guards stood to one side, but it was the group in the distant rock pool that held my attention. I shook my head. Isla. I should have known she would turn up somewhere unexpected.

I stood too far away to catch their conversation, or even get a good look at their faces, but I didn't need either clue to confirm their identities. I had spent my life around both royalty and guards, and the demeanors of the two groups was enough to tell me what company Isla was now keeping.

A tightness inside me loosened. The curses of the leader of the raiders had been enough to tell me his opinion of both the royals of this kingdom and their guards. It hadn't taken great intelligence to perceive that the raiders were the rot in this place, not the kingdom itself. Nothing was as we had been led to expect, and it itched at me. I intended to get to the bottom of what was going on here, but first I needed to talk to Isla.

The minutes ticked by, and I tried to formulate a plan, but it was difficult without knowing their intentions or anything about the palace. If they remained on the sand, I would have no way to attract Isla's attention.

As if drawn by my thoughts, she parted from the others with words I couldn't hear, crossing the sand toward the tree line. With several quick strides, I positioned myself among the greenery, in line with her approach.

She sighed softly as she left the sand, gazing up at a coconut tree and showing no inclination to venture further from the sand. With a wary glance in the direction of the currently obscured guards, I grabbed her and pulled her back further out of sight.

Isla gasped, her hand flying to her waist as if she expected to find a sword there. But the weapon she had foolishly insisted on bringing with us no longer hung in place. She barely missed a beat, our training kicking in as she whirled, dropping into a defensive stance.

I stood still, my own weapon gripped loosely, and watched as her eyes locked on it, widening. It only took a moment for her gaze to travel to me, and then she was screaming.

Despite my irritation at her noise, I couldn't help smiling at her. It was never much use getting worked up with Isla.

"Greetings, Princess!"

"Shhh!" She glared at me. "Don't call me that here! And goodness I've been so worried. Are you hurt? Did they just let you go? I've been feeling terrible about it all. What happened?"

I didn't even try to answer her flow of questions, but they continued anyway.

"And where did you get a *trident*? Are you sure you should be carrying one around openly like that?"

I shrugged. "Apparently some of the men from small fishing villages use them. This particular one saved my life, so I have no intention of relinquishing it." My grip tightened slightly on the weapon. I had never been more grateful than when I first caught sight of it.

Before she could resume the questions, the vegetation behind her rustled. I stiffened. I didn't know enough about her situation yet to want to be found together.

She reacted with alarm, twirling to face the noise and backing toward me, just as a tall young man burst through to confront us. I responded instinctively to her alarm, sweeping her behind me and bringing up my trident.

Anger consumed the newcomer's face, and he drew his sword. He struck at me, his movements showing training and skill, but I blocked easily with my longer weapon.

Isla darted out from behind me.

"Stop! Stop it at once! Teddy, I'm not in any danger. This is my uncle." She looked at me. "And this is Teddy. Prince Theodore."

So this was the one from the rock pool. And she already called him *Teddy* despite being unable to reveal her own royal status. Of course she did.

She continued. "The one whose family has been generously hosting me. *The last person I would ever want you to attack.*"

I couldn't miss the strange emphasis on her last sentence, and disbelief warred with amusement as I lowered my trident and drew back. *This* was her storm boy? She had already found him, and he was a prince?

A flush filled her cheeks, and I bit back a laugh at the way she kept her face averted from him.

"Well then, that changes everything," I said. "Did you say *Prince* Theodore?" I couldn't resist adding, just to watch her squirm.

She gave me one of her Isla glares and then turned pointedly back to the prince. His anger had disappeared, overtaken by confusion. It appeared Isla had been with the royals since my capture, but she had no doubt failed to prepare them for the fact that her uncle was a mere three years older than her. She was too used to Merrita where everyone knew both our families well.

My amusement disappeared at the sound of more rustling, and I swung around in time to see someone new burst through to join us. If it was one of the guards, the situation might be about to escalate again.

But the newcomer was no guard. The young woman's long skirts didn't reach the ground, leaving room for her bare feet to sink comfortably into the grass, but there was no mistaking the quality of the gown. And although her pinned hair had become wind-blown and almost disheveled, it was the exact shade of Prince Theodore's.

But even as the reality of her status and identity registered in some distant part of my brain, other things consumed my notice. The light in her bright, sea-green eyes. The beauty of her features. Her confident posture. I tried to pull myself out of my confusion. I had been raised beside six beautiful princesses and trained beside numerous female guards—there was no reason for this girl to so disconcert me.

“What in the kingdoms is going on here?” she asked, confused but not afraid. “Daisy wanted to stay in the rock pool, so I told the guards to stay down there with her. Only then you all disappeared, and I thought I heard...” She frowned, still beautiful despite the expression.

“It was just a misunderstanding,” Isla said quickly. “They were both just trying to protect me.”

The girl raised both eyebrows and turned the full force of her eyes on me. Her face demanded answers in the manner of one born to command.

“Teddy, Millie,” Isla said, “this is my uncle, Nereus.”

Millie. The name suited her.

She gave a choking cough. “I'm sorry, did you say your uncle? The one who was abducted, I assume.”

I winced internally as Isla nodded, although I was better at concealing my emotions than her, so my dismay didn't show on my face. This was my first time seeing her, but she had already seen me—carried off across the back of a horse like a sack of clams.

She addressed me directly. “I have to admit, you're not what I've been picturing.”

Did her astonishment mean I still had the chance to make a different impression?

Isla started the tangled explanation of our relationship while I tried hard not to stare at Millie.

“I'm glad to see you're alive and well,” Prince Theodore said, addressing me. Apparently he had finally accepted that I was neither threat nor competition. The last thought brought a wave of uneasiness. What exactly had been going on between Isla and this prince in my absence? She had been dreaming about her lost storm boy for too long to see him clearly now, and the last thing we needed were more complications in an already complex situation.

“Isla has been extremely concerned for you,” he added.

“I can see she's been wasting away with grief and fear.” I gave her a pointed look, having already concluded that her time had been spent far differently from my own fraught hours. Not that I would have wished it otherwise.

She put both hands on her hips and glared at me. “I *was* worried. But I also trusted that you could take care of yourself.” She waved at me. “As you clearly have been able to do.” A triumphant gleam entered her eyes. “Plus, we sent out spies, and they reported back that you were in good condition.”

I raised my own eyebrows. Now that was interesting. I hadn't seen any sign of spies, but then I wouldn't. Not if they were any good. Spies would change everything.

“Spies at the raider camp? Within the raiders, you mean?”

She shook her head, and my heart sank. I wasn't off the hook, then.

“Just observing from the outside,” she said. “We only just found you all.”

I nodded. That was hardly a surprise with the paranoia of the raiders and the way they moved location constantly.

“I’m glad you managed that much,” I said. “When the rumor reached us that your prisoner was proving uncooperative, I thought I had better come and find you.” I couldn’t resist needling her again. “Plus *I* wanted to check on *you*, at least.”

She just rolled her eyes at me. “No doubt you knew I was just as likely to land on my feet as you.”

I chuckled, letting her off at last. “More likely I imagine. Plus, it was fairly clear you were in good hands once it became clear what had the raiders so worked up.”

“So you’ve managed to escape then?” Millie asked.

I hesitated. The situation was more complex than that. “Not escaped, precisely, since I’m no longer a prisoner.”

“But that’s wonderful!” Isla said. “Now you can come back to the palace with us, and we can—”

She paused, glancing at the other two, something about that thought causing her a concern I didn’t understand. But she needn’t worry. I couldn’t go back with them.

“The situation with the raiders isn’t good,” I said. “They’ve been—”

“We know,” she said, cutting me off without hesitation, just as if we were back in Merrita. “They’ve been using hostages to force men to join their number.” She smiled proudly. “Millie and I worked it out. And then the prisoner confirmed it. The rumor was spread by us so we wouldn’t tip the raiders off.”

Her and Millie. My eyes were drawn back to the golden-haired girl. So the land princess wasn’t just a beautiful face and compelling presence. Isla was unlikely to give credit unless it was legitimately due. It gave me a foolish surge of satisfaction to know I had correctly read the gleam of intelligence in her mind. I forced my mind back to the matter at hand.

“Then you know that we have to find that hostage camp,” I said.

“We have patrols searching right now,” Prince Theodore said.

I nodded slowly, my mind racing through various potential strategies.

“Once you know where they are, you’ll free them, and then come for the raiders.” I was talking aloud, not needing confirmation of such an obvious statement. “Unless they move again, and you manage to lose them.” There was no way to avoid it then. “I need to stay with them.”

“Stay with the raiders?” Isla grabbed my arm. “What are you talking about?”

“If they move, I can get away again and let you know where they’ve gone,” I said. “And when you eventually come to attack, I’ll sow confusion and rally those who want no part in it.”

“We can’t risk alerting them to our efforts too early,” Prince Theodore said quickly, clearly fearing my clumsy efforts would destroy their plans.

“Of course not,” I said, containing my impatience. I had turned my situation around, going from captive to trusted raider, allowed to roam freely. That fact should be testament enough to my skill.

“Ray’s been trained as a guard,” Isla said, apparently deciding I needed more concrete credentials. “And he basically grew up with one of those in his hands.” She gestured at my trident.

I grinned and hefted it into the air. “They’re good for fighting and fishing, so there’s not much more to ask for, really.”

“If you’re sure you want to take the risk,” Millie said slowly. “It’s not something we can ask of you.”

Did that mean she cared what became of me? I took firm hold of my thoughts. I had just met her, and she was a princess. It didn’t matter what she thought of me, beyond her acceptance that I was up to the task.

I nodded once, decisively, and Isla shook her head at me. But she knew better than to protest.

“But you’re not leaving again until you tell us what happened,” she said. “Otherwise I’ll die of curiosity before I see you again.”

Now that I could believe.

“Well, we couldn’t have that now, could we?” I lifted my eyes heavenward. “It’s not such a complicated tale. They hauled me back to their camp, but since they were eager to be gone from it, they hauled me along to their next destination without stopping to discuss my fate. By the time they got set up somewhere new, the leader seemed to have ransom in mind. But I rapidly disabused him of the notion that he would be able to find anyone with coin to pay in exchange for me.”

“I’m glad he didn’t decide to dispose of you on the spot,” Millie said, and I was once again forced to rein in my thoughts.

“Well, they had something of the sort in mind, I’ll admit,” I said. “I realized I needed to do something decisive, so I declared I wished to join them. I said I was sick of being dirt poor, and ready to carry someone else off across a horse instead of being the one carried. That seemed to amuse the leader, but he said men who joined his crew had to prove their worth.”

I shook my head. “It was obvious they didn’t think much of me after seeing how inept I was on a horse and that I didn’t carry a sword, so I demanded a trial by combat. Their leader laughed and agreed, no doubt thinking he would get an amusing show before his champion finished me off. They brought out two swords and the biggest of their own men, but I pointed out that in a trial by combat, I got to pick my own weapon. And, fortunately for me, when they showed me their pile of accumulated weapons, I found a single one of these.” It had been a gamble that had well and truly paid off.

Isla grinned, and I guessed she was picturing the scene. She had seen me fight often enough to know that with a trident in my hands, there was no doubt of the outcome. Not against some raider, even if he was their champion.

“How fortunate,” she said. “Obviously you couldn’t lose once you had that.”

The prince raised an eyebrow at her, apparently questioning her confidence. I just smiled.

“Once I won, I demanded a place among the raiders,” I concluded. “And their leader has taken quite a shine to me.” Black thoughts filled my mind at the memory of his usual method of recruitment. “I don’t think he gets a lot of willing recruits.”

“It seems Trione has cause to thank you,” Millie said. “You have taken our people’s well-being to heart most swiftly.”

I shrugged. “It is the job of a guard to protect the vulnerable—wherever they may be found.” And that itching discomfort lingered. What had Merrita to do with this kingdom and the happenings in it?

“Speaking of guards...” Isla glanced back toward the beach, invisible through the trees. “I don’t think we should let any of them see Ray. And we shouldn’t tell anyone except Captain Flint himself that Ray is working for us. Just in case.”

Both of the local royals nodded willing agreement.

“They’ll come looking for us soon enough,” Millie said, sudden alarm in her eyes. “You must be gone at once, Nereus.”

My formal name sounded sweet on her lips, and I couldn't contain the thought that I would like to hear her say Ray, as my friends and family did.

But I merely nodded and gave them both a half-bow. It was time to be gone, and I needed to be getting back before the raiders became suspicious. Footsteps sounded behind me, and arms flung themselves around me, halting my forward progress.

Isla's voice whispered in my ear. "A tremor beneath the ocean causes a big wave here. There's only been one since we left, and it was a small one."

Another small knot inside me loosened. Isla was safe, and apparently our people were too. I need feel no more guilt about pursuing the strange situation here in Trione. I nodded once, but another worry remained.

"Your ocean boy?" I asked softly, looking for confirmation of her earlier hint. When she nodded, she couldn't meet my eyes, which only increased my concern. We might both find ourselves in trouble if she let childish dreams rule her now.

"Don't get lost in a dream, Isla."

That made her look up, but I was already turning back toward the distant raider camp. I had no choice now but to trust and hope that she would keep her head. A beautiful face flashed in front of my eyes, and I resolutely pushed it away. And I would need to keep mine.