

A Princess of Wind and Wave

Nereus – The Ball

The doctor had fussed but stopped short of ordering me not to attend the ball. Which kept my life simple since I would never have obeyed such a stricture. I hadn't seen Millie since Isla dragged her out of my room, and I'd been chafing all afternoon. What had my irritating niece said to her?

A few people at the celebration attempted to approach me, but something in my bearing and face must have scared them off since no one got as far as actual conversation. Isla wouldn't have been so timid, but she seemed to have disappeared to a shadowy corner for reasons known only to herself. I couldn't imagine she'd stay there long, despite having chosen a shocking dress that seemed designed to taunt these unsuspecting land dwellers with our secret. It wasn't often, but every now and then she reminded me of Avalon. Avalon would never have hidden while wearing such a dress—especially not in these circumstances. Which only reminded me I was glad I wasn't in this mess with Avalon as companion.

The thought of my many relatives back in Merrita made my head pound, and I resisted rubbing at it. I had told myself the ball would be a test of my readiness to make the journey home, but I wished I could be sure there was no selfish motivation in the decision to attend. At home there would be only unpleasant truths to face, while here there was...something far more pleasant.

As if cued by my thoughts, the herald announced the arrival of Princess Millicent. His echoing voice announcing her full name made my lips twitch. She had made her feelings on her name clear and insisted I use Millie, and yet for some reason, she still refused to use my nickname.

And then all my thoughts dropped away as I caught sight of her. She seemed almost to float, her gown soft blue and her golden hair piled formally on her head. She looked elegant, and beautiful, and regal. She looked like the princess that she was. A lurching in my chest, almost like pain, accompanied the thought. I had grown up beside royalty, but I wasn't royal myself.

Millie's eyes latched on to me, their expression almost painfully full, and I stepped forward to meet her, all thought of status pushed from my mind. I was here at this ball for one person alone, and she had arrived. In this moment, nothing else mattered.

I gave her a deep bow, as befitted someone of such life, intelligence, heart, and beauty.

"You look beautiful." My voice emerged rougher than I had intended.

She flushed slightly, the color triggering a surge of satisfaction in my gut. But when her eyes looked up to meet mine, they held a look of concern. I frowned.

"Are you sure you're well enough to be here?" she asked. "You look very pale."

I relaxed.

"You need not worry about me, my princess," I said. "I am well enough."

She looked as if she wanted to dispute the matter but thought better of it, instead smiling at me.

"*Your* princess? Does that mean you and Isla intend to settle here permanently?" Her voice wasn't quite as casual as she had no doubt intended, and her words brought back the pounding in my head. I couldn't stay, no matter how much I wanted to.

Music sounded, floating over from the distant musicians and saving me from answering. I held out my hand, and she placed her own into it without hesitation, the warmth of her ready grasp once again driving other thoughts from my mind.

On the dance floor, I slipped my other arm around her waist, careful to hold her gently although everything in me longed to pull her tight. Having my arm around Millie was even more intoxicating than I had expected, and I wasn't used to feeling out of control. But I clamped down hard on my emotions, leading her through the dance without any sign of my inner turmoil.

At least the movements were easy, like weapons practice or swimming. I missed the ocean with an ache so dim and distant, I sometimes forgot it was there. How I would love to introduce Millie to the mysteries and wonders of the depths. I rejected the thought before it could take further root. Of every impossible thing I had let myself dream, this was the most impossible. Some things could not be.

The music changed, the dance changing with it, but Millie and I remained on the dance floor. After a while, Isla and Teddy swept past us, seeming lost in each other in a way I didn't dare allow myself to be with Millie. If I fell that hard, I might drown us both.

The song changed again and again, Millie's soft voice and warmth keeping me anchored to the moment. Eventually her eyes grew concerned, however, and she began to talk of her desire for rest and refreshment. I knew she wasn't thinking of herself, but she knew me well enough to know she would have more success framing it in such a way.

I grinned ruefully. She knew me too well already. Or Isla had been coaching her. And I couldn't deny she was right. While I had no desire to relinquish my hold on her, my steps were coming less effortlessly than before.

When I agreed without protestation, the concern in her eyes grew. I hated seeing such an expression on her face, so I let her coax me into finding a seat while she fetched us drinks, hoping it would alleviate her worry.

I tracked her with my eyes, watching as she paused beside her brother and Isla who had just finished their own extended dance. I caught her movements as she subtly reminded her brother of his responsibilities as crown prince, and a smug satisfaction filled me that she apparently felt no such necessity for herself. It was a good thing, since I could not have borne to see her dance with someone else. This was our night, and I did not intend to share it.

Millie lingered on for a moment, talking with Isla, and I smiled again to see their heads bent close in whispered confidence. Had I been irritated with Isla earlier? I could no longer remember the emotion. Instead it warmed me to see the favorite of my relatives such firm friends with the woman I had so quickly grown to love.

Isla was claimed for the dance by a boy I didn't recognize, but with a smile and a few laughing words, Millie shook off everyone who approached her. She reappeared at my side

with drinks for us both and resolutely took her place beside me, as if she expected me to attempt to send her away. I made no such effort.

We watched the dancers, talking quietly in the comfortable way we had done each day in my sick room. Millie repeatedly expressed wonder and admiration at Isla's dancing, and I couldn't blame her when compared to the wooden movements of the land dwellers. I wished she could see a ballroom of merfolk dancing.

When I saw her foot tapping, half-hidden by her skirts, I insisted we return to the dance floor. She agreed with only the smallest of protests, and the feel of her once again in my arms washed away my lingering exhaustion.

After a while, however, something pulled her attention from me. As we rotated around the floor, I looked for the cause of her abstraction and found her brother. He stood beside the refreshment table, a storm on his face. As we whirled around again, I found the focus of his attention. Isla. There was trouble brewing there. I had known it since the moment I realized she had found her storm boy in the crown prince of Trione.

The dance ended, and in the confusion of bows and curtsies from separating partners, I lost track of Isla. I found her again, just in time to see her slipping out onto the sand. I could just make out her figure through the shining crystal of the ballroom wall.

"He's going after her," Millie said softly, and I couldn't tell if it was hope or dread in her voice—or perhaps some mix of the two.

I could feel it pressing against me now, the coming storm—the pounding in my head beating out its rhythm. I swayed slightly. I was more exhausted than I'd realized.

"I wonder if I should go after them..." Millie sounded distracted, torn. "I'm not convinced Teddy won't do something stupid."

Taking care of her twin was the habit of a lifetime, and I had no desire to come between them. I took the escape offered, not wanting her to see how close I was to collapse.

"Certainly go, if it will put your mind at ease," I said. "It's my turn to fetch us refreshments anyway."

She smiled gratefully up at me before hurrying off through the crowd. I watched her for a moment as the pounding in my head grew stronger. When I swayed again, worse this time, I broke off my gaze. Striding to the closest wall, I selected a seat half hidden behind a potted shrub.

Leaning my head back against the wall, I closed my eyes and drew a deep breath. My body had never failed me like this before, and I hated it.

Time passed, although I didn't know how long.

Finally the weakness abated somewhat, although my head still ached. I opened my eyes and looked around the ballroom for the blue of Millie's dress. Was she wondering what had become of me? I had said I intended to fetch us refreshments only to disappear.

But I couldn't see her anywhere. I stood up, my gaze sharpening. There was no sign of Isla's sea-green, either.

Now that I was paying attention, I could hear snatches of murmured conversations all around me. Isla's name caught my attention, and I moved closer to the lady who had spoken it.

"She's a nobody, I'm afraid," she said, "despite the way the royal family have taken her up. And despite her elegant dancing." The woman, apparently answering the question of someone else in her small circle, didn't sound impressed with Isla's skills.

A half-smile pulled at my lips. Little did the woman know.

"Ah, but you must remember her efforts in defeating those troublesome raiders," said an older man beside her. "We can all of us be grateful to her for that."

"She looked upset," said another woman. "I hope the ball hasn't overwhelmed her. It's probably the first one she's ever attended."

I frowned. Upset? Isla wouldn't be upset by a ball. I glanced around the ballroom again. Now that I thought about it, there was no sign of Teddy, either. What exactly had happened out there on the sand? Was Millie still out there?

I hurried from the room, my eyes searching the sections of beach lit by the ballroom's lights which spilled through both the open doors and crystal walls. But I could see none of the missing royals. Peering into the more distant gloom, I made out a group standing close to the water's edge. I began to cross the sand, and as my eyes adjusted, they latched on to a familiar blue.

"Millie? Are you down there?" I called. "Have you seen Isla?" My steps took me closer, leaving the light of the party behind me, and I repeated myself over the sound of the distant waves. "Have you seen Isla? I can't find her anywhere, and someone said she was looking upset."

I reached her and looked down into her face. She looked back at me with wide eyes and trembling lips, devastation all over her features. My stomach dropped away, and the gathering storm washed over me. I looked from her to her brother, and then my eyes found Isla. In the water. In her mer-form.

Although I opened my mouth, I wasn't sure if I intended to protest or explain or just berate her, but the enchantment must have mistrusted my intentions. Only a strangled cough emerged.

I tried again. "Isla! What are you...?"

"Nereus," Millie whispered, and I instantly forgot about Isla.

I could read our reality in her face. All the impossibilities I had tried to push away while I let myself stay in the enclosed world of my recuperation. I had been inexcusably selfish—not only toward my own people but toward her. Even at the ball I had monopolized her, as if I had some legitimate claim to her. And worse, I had let her grow close to me, knowing I would have to leave. Knowing I was keeping far too many important things from her.

I had known the truth of what was happening for too long and done nothing. It was time for me to be the kind of man I could respect—no matter the personal cost, both here and at home.

I just wished—more than anything, but far too late—that Millie didn't have to share my pain.

"Millie, I'm sorry," I said, speaking just for her. "I wish I had never—"

"Never what?" she asked, a spark appearing in her eyes, but the answer was too complicated, too full of things I wasn't allowed to say.

"Ray." Isla's voice broke in, full of urgency. "There was another wave. A big one. I have to go."

So that was why they had caught her in her mer-form. She had been trying to sneak away without me. I forced myself to adopt my normal tones, addressing her with familiar long-suffering.

"So that's what you were trying to do. I'm not so weak I'm going to let you go alone."

She bit her lip, but somewhat to my surprise didn't protest.

“Fine,” she said instead. “But we have to go now.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What? You’re not going to fight me about it?”

She rolled her eyes. “Come on!”

I told my legs to move, but my body hesitated, stealing one last look back at Millie. I didn’t know what might happen beneath the waves. I might never see her again.

But I had no right to do so, in any case.

It tore at my heart, but with the enchantment in place, the only response I could give to the pleading questions in her eyes was a shrug. And then I forced myself to dive beneath the water and not look back.