

It was wicked of her heart to ache for him so. Wicked because she could never hope to have him. His crown made him unattainable. It sat atop his golden hair like a warning sign, and the rippled sunbeams that penetrated the water from the surface world above glinted off it, making it almost wink at her, mocking. His friends, sons of royal guards and wealthy families, surrounded him like a barricade as they swam down from the second level of the palace to the large atrium where Serena scrubbed the polished stone floors with a rough sponge, scraping free the algae, polyps, and coral trying to take root there.

Her scrubbing slowed as Prince Triton and his friends drew nearer. She snuck eager glances at him under the cover of her dark brown hair as it swirled around her head in the water. Each time she found herself in the same room with him, she felt as though she had a strong current at her back, pushing her toward him. Everything about him drew her in, and her heart thumped until she thought he must surely hear it calling for him. His tail and eyes were the same rich blue of the ocean—fitting, since he would one day rule it. His thick, golden hair brushed his shoulders, and she longed to touch it and find out if it was truly as soft as it looked. He had recently started to grow a short beard, and she thought it was a good choice. It hugged his jawline, accentuating the strong lines. He exuded power, from his thickly-muscled arms and chest and broad tail, to his high forehead and the intelligent light in his eyes. He held himself with dignity, raised from birth to be nobility. He was sure and determined in everything he did. From the day he was born he was told he was important, special, and it showed in the way he moved and talked.

Serena hoped he would look her way. She hoped he would notice that she'd rubbed down her royal blue tail with jellyfish extract to make the iridescent scales shine. She hoped he would notice that she'd swapped the light blue shell top she usually wore for a new coral-orange one. She hoped, but she knew she was kidding herself. Even if she wasn't a maid, he wouldn't notice. She wasn't his type. She was too thick in the waist, too broad in the tail, too dark in the hair and eyes, and too full-bodied in the brain. Triton liked his trysts to have curves, but small curves. He preferred redheads above all others and, despite his considerable intelligence, seemed partial to girls with a head full of bubbles. He grew bored of them quickly, though, and Serena knew eventually he would quit playing around and settle down with someone who could match him wit for wit—something she would have no trouble with. Unfortunately, she didn't see him changing his taste in appearance any time soon, unless she could somehow convince him otherwise—a tough feat, since the only words she'd ever spoken to him were, "Yes, your Highness," "No, your Highness," "May I fetch you anything, your Highness?" and, "The queen wishes to speak with you, your Highness." But she watched and listened. She was good at that, always had been, and it was easy to observe and go unobserved as a maid. And all the while her heart went on aching.

"I remember you being much better at Fifty Clams, Triton?" Ira, one of Triton's friends, said, a teasing half smile on his face as he jangled a bag of pearls in his hand—his winnings from the betting game.

The other young mermen laughed good-naturedly, and Triton grinned.

"I'm still not convinced you didn't cheat," he said.

"Of course he cheated; his father's an urchin salesman," said another of his friends, whose name Serena didn't know, and that got them all laughing again, even Ira.

"How about we have another go at it again tomorrow?" said Ira. "If you catch me cheating, you can get back everything I took from you today."

"Funny, how he's not saying he doesn't cheat," said Kale, who had recently become one of the Royal Guard just like his father. "He's just saying we're not going to catch him."

Ira shrugged and smirked again, which set off another round of laughs.

"Get out of my house before I hook you like a trout, your dirty cheat" said Triton, a grin on his face.

They all exchanged a few more insults before saying their goodbyes, leaving Triton alone in the atrium with Serena. He spared her his first glance, and she snapped her eyes back to the floor and revitalized her scrubbing. His eyes only rested on her for a moment. He looked absently around the large atrium. The entire palace was carved out of a rock that was once a mountain before it was eroded and submerged by the sea. The water gave the grey stone a pleasant greenish hue. The atrium was the main entrance that the merpeople of Adamar flocked through when the palace doors were opened for parties and coronations and audiences with the king and queen. The palace was very open with very few doors. Light poured in from oval windows not quite large enough for a merperson to swim through. The atrium had no ceiling, and the very roof of the palace could be seen from the floor. Triton's eyes flitted up past the seven different stories of the palace, denoted by the carved banisters that ran in circles up and up to the base of the largest central spire of the palace. The balconies all led off to corridors and countless chambers, all with stone ceilings, but the atrium was wide and open like the ocean itself.

Triton seemed to be deciding what leisurely activity he would do next. Serena snuck another look. He caught her eye and gave the smallest of nods with his head. Her heart leapt to her throat and continued pounding there, making her short of breath. He began to swim off across the atrium to the corridor leading to the kitchen, and a crazy, desperate idea took hold of Serena. He had acknowledged her, but it would mean nothing if she let him swim away without some other form of contact. He was already forgetting her; she could feel it. She had often tried to get his attention in small ways: stopping her work to fuss with her long hair, swimming into his field of vision as often as she could, shining her scales and making new tops. That wasn't enough. He'd never once even asked her name. When he needed something, he addressed her as "maid," or "you there."

She swam as fast as she could without looking odd, shooting across the atrium with her stone scraper held in her right hand under the pretense of going to scrape a barnacle off the far wall. She watched Triton's powerful tail from the corner of her eye and made sure to swim too close to the two back fins on the end of it. As his tail swept upwards in an arch, preparing to thrust down again to propel him forward, his fins smacked into her arms, and she dropped her scraper and her sponge. The scraper sank to the floor with a small clank, but the sponge hovered near her tail, its descent to the floor much slower. Triton whirled around, confused and then surprised.

"I do apologize, miss," he said. "I didn't see you there."

"Oh no, your Highness," she said, feeling the blush on her cheeks brought on by the racing of her heart at his proximity and the sound of his voice, "it's entirely my fault. I wasn't looking where I was going. I beg your forgiveness."

"It is you who must forgive me, miss. You aren't hurt, are you?"

"Not at all, Prince," she said, struggling to keep up the nerve to go on looking him in the eyes.

"I'm glad. I would never want such a pretty face to come to harm."

He gave her one of the flirtatious smiles he bestowed on all his lady admirers who flocked to the palace for parties and dinners. It was mischievous and playful. It was not even her favorite smile of his (her favorite was the beaming, caring one he gave to his subjects when they came up to him to shake his hand or wish him well), but just the fact that he was smiling at her threatened to make her faint, or perhaps vomit up the kelp she'd had for breakfast.

"Your Majesty is too kind," she said, her smile so full of joy it hurt her cheeks. She stifled a nervous giggle, refusing to be anything like the bubble-headed girls he usually surrounded himself with.

"Nonsense, just speaking the truth. Now please grant my wish and give me your forgiveness. I won't sleep well if you don't."

"Your Majesty had it before he even asked it."

Triton smiled her favorite smile and stooped to pick up her scraper and her sponge, which had finally completed its slow descent. He offered them to her, that same smile still on his face, and she took them with shaking hands.

"Thank you, your Highness."

"You're most welcome..."