

## Marina's Journey

By Emily Cooper

*At least the Ocean never lies.*

Love blossomed in Marina's chest. She was about to mate the male of her dreams, Tritus. Captain of the king's army. She had worked so hard gathering her offerings for the mating event to win his affection. She had so much competition but somehow, somehow, she won. He had taken her specially polished shells and pearls into his rough webbed hands and inspected them closely. Just the sight of her hard work in his masterful hands made her heart stutter.

Then Tritus' black eyes looked up to meet hers. The bio-luminescent orange stripes that framed his rugged face seemed to fill her vision, blocking out all the other colors of the merfolk of the deep. She swallowed down her fear.

*Did he approve of her collection? Why was he looking at her like that?* Marina's webbed hands rung together as her powerful blue and silver luminescent tail swished side to side keeping her in place. Tritus' eyes tilted up as if to watch her shining braided hair follow the slight current around them. Her hair was on the longer side of normal merfolk, they normally cut their hair short, so it didn't get tangled or caught so easily. But Marina took pride in her hair and kept it in neat braids that danced around her body like the seaweed of the coast.

Tritus still hadn't motioned any words. The items in his hands seemingly forgotten as they drifted back to her platform. Then he reached out and caught a braid in his claws, feeling it with the pads of his fingers.

Inhaling deep through her gills, Marina bit her cheek with her sharp teeth. He was acting unusually. Since Tritus' gaze was still caught up in her hair, she allowed her gaze to roam around Tritus' strong body. It flashed with yellow and orange stripes accentuating each dip and hollow of his muscles down to the thick tail, it was so bright it reminded her of the sun. Even his fins flowed out around his body like the rays of the sun giving him an even more magnificent appearance.

Tritus released her hair, catching her attention, she looked back up to his dark gaze and saw a slight smirk on his face. He had caught her looking. Heat flooded her cheeks.

*He caught me looking!* She wanted to swim away. She wanted to hide in her den. Bury herself deep in the sand and never see the light of her people again!

“Like what you see?” Tritus gestured in the sign language of their people. His lips still twisted in a cocky way.

If it were possible, Marina would have blushed harder. She vaguely wondered if her blue and silver stripes would turn red next with her embarrassment.

Marina's hands trembled as she gestured, “You are a handsome male.”

“And you are a beautiful female.” Tritus used the last gesture to capture her face in his hand, the pad of his scaly finger swiped over her plump lower lip. It felt so nice on her own scales. So soft. So warm.

Warmth was something merfolk rarely found in the deep of the ocean. Only the surface and underwater volcanoes could warm their chilled blood. But his hand, it was warm enough that

made her want to lean in and see if his entire body was just as warm as the sun his stripes mimicked.

Tritus' mouth opened and a resonant bellow exploded from his throat. It caught everyone's attention making the gathered merfolk swim over to them. Tritus didn't look away from her as he waited for everyone's attention.

"I have made my choice." Tritus motioned, his movements confident. Each swish of his hands stole her breath.

He was choosing her. *Her*. It was far more than Marina had hoped for. Even dreamed for. She was chosen by *him*. She couldn't stop the excited quivering of her fins, they practically vibrated the water around her, probably making her stripes blurry.

Then his clawed hand pointed toward her. This was it. Their king nodded his head, accepting Tritus' choice. But there was something odd about the way the King held himself. Not with the normal pride of the king accepting a betrothal for his head guard. But Marnia pushed that thought aside. She was probably imagining the tightening of the king's lips. Or the way the king wasn't meeting her excited gaze.

"Come. The ceremony will be at the surface. We have long to travel and little time." The king turned and with a mighty flick of his tail, he shot up out of the underwater cave where their collections were arranged.

Marina looked back toward her offerings sat, but they were now scattered. Some still drifting toward the ocean floor. She wanted to collect them, make sure no one would steal them before Tritus could bring them back to his den. But Tritus' tail flashed as he followed his king.

She wondered why he hadn't waited for her before he left, but it didn't matter. He chose her. That's all she would allow herself to think about as she swam after their ascension.

Marina's life was about to change. Forever. She could only hope it was for the best.

###

The king paused almost to the surface, the moonlight shining against his scales. It wasn't dark enough for their bio luminant stripes to be highlighted, but enough where they were at least visible. Marina's tail was aching trying to keep up with the males, they barely stopped for their bodies to adjust to the changing of water pressure. Her lungs and bones were aching due to the drastic change. But she couldn't stop. If she stopped, she would lose the males.

As Marina trailed behind the king and Tritus while ascending, she could only keep an eye on Tritus's golden tail like a fish to an angler's lure, she was captivated. She felt as if she could never lose the sight even through the darkness.

"Come, my child." The king gestured toward Marina to swim up beside Tritus. She felt so small next to Tritus's bulk. So protected. Something she had never felt before. Her parents had been killed while serving in the king's army, leaving her alone as a young fry. Marina had to fend for herself from a young age, but now she was about to be mated. Maybe she could have that family she always wished for.

Then the king began the mating ceremony. His elegant motions moved through the water with power and purpose. As if he had done this so many times, he could do it in his sleep.

While king recited the ceremonial motions, Tritus reached out for her hand. It was so large compared to hers. The warmth of his scales stunned Marina again. She wanted to be

enveloped in that warmth and told she would never have to worry about her safety again. That she was safe with him.

“Do you Marina, accept Tritus as your one and only mate beneath the Goddess’ moonlight?”

“I do.” Marina nodded and gestured with her free hand.

“Do you Tritus, accept Marina as your mate, beneath the Goddess’ moonlight?”

“I do.” Tritus gestured before he reached out and took her other hand. There was a triumphant grin spreading across his face. It was blinding in its intensity. So blinding that Marina couldn’t stop and wonder why Tritus’ vow was different than hers. Then his lips crashed down on hers. They were so smooth and warm. They seemed to search for something as his sharp teeth bit down on her lip causing her gasp, opening her mouth up to his invasion.

This was Marina’s first kiss. She had had to be so concerned for her safety and finding food that she had never had a suitor. But now she was mated, and the idea thrilled her. His tongue swept across hers, startling her. Was this what a kiss was? It was odd. But the excited shivers that Tritus made let her know that this is, what he wanted, so she would comply. It stole her breath as he ravaged her and the more his hands worked across her body the more she was enjoying this part of mated life.

Tritus pulled away, his eyes seemed darker than normal. Was it desire? His gills seemed to be working hard to suck in water and his tail was undulating more raggedly than what was needed. But she didn’t mind. His body heat was warming the water around her and she wanted to sink into the warmth.

“Began the next ceremony.” Tritus had turned toward the king, he didn’t look at Marina as she gestured a question.

“What?” But the males didn’t pay attention to her confusion.

“Are you sure?” The king motioned slowly, his face guarded. It made Marina nervous.

“Yes. Do it.” Tritus demanded, his hands cutting through the water harshly.

“Do what? What is happening, Tritus?” Marina’s gestures were less sure. She had a bad feeling about this. Something was wrong. Were they planning something?

The king sighed and then began to gesture, but Marina couldn’t place them. She didn’t understand the old language. Her heart began to pound in her ears, she didn’t know what was going on, but she needed to leave. Get to safety.

Marina turned to swim back into the depths, but Tritus caught her arm with a bruising grip. She let out a gasp of pain as he held her in place.

“Tritus, please let me go.” Marina signaled wildly. “You are hurting me.”

But neither the king nor Tritus paid her struggles any attention. She beat her tail hard, trying to dislodge Tritus’ grip but he just closed his hand around her other arm. She was stuck. She watched the king’s unintelligible movements until the king gave them a nod.

“Do it.” Then the king looked away as Tritus released one of her arms. She didn’t have time to fight back as his hand moved to her neck, his claws pressing into her scales.

“Tritus?” Marina tried again, but she was barely able to finish his name before his claws dug into her neck and ripped.

Pain seared through Marina as Tritus sliced open her neck, from gill to gill. Her hands went to her neck as bright red clouded the water around her. She couldn't scream. She couldn't even breathe. The pain was so intense she lost sight of the king in front of her. Not even the golden color of her mate made sense in her eyes.

Why? Why was this happening? Why were they just watching her as she pressed against the severed scales around her neck. There was no saving her. Her injuries were too much and she knew that. But why?

Marina's vision was darkening as her blood seeped into the water. Part of her warned about attracting sharks. But the other part, a more cynical part, whispered it was her kind, that was the threat. They mated her and then killed her. It made no sense.

Then she saw it. The king's gestured words. "The curse has been fulfilled. You are free to mate whomever you want without fear of the curse."

*No... this was all planned. They killed me so he could mate someone else?*

The pain in her chest swelled as tears leaked from the corners of her eyes. At least she will be with her parents again. No need to be safe when she was dead. No need for warmth when her blood fused with the chilled water.

Marina tried to gasp for breath as her lungs seized. But her gills refused to work. All she knew was pain and panic. Her mate killed her. Why fight anymore? What was the point? She was a tool to the males. Nothing more.

A sense of calm washed over her. Marina didn't care about her aching lungs anymore. A logical side of her brain said that was a bad sign, but there was no fixing herself. So why care?

Her lids felt heavy. She was tired. And so cold. She wished she could touch her mate one more time, she wanted to feel that warmth again, even if he did kill her.

*Just shut your eyes. There was no point in fighting anymore.* Then she did. A darkness heavier than the depths of the ocean greeted her behind her lids, pulling her deeper and deeper.

*Maybe I will see my mother again.*

###

Marina floated in a deep fathomless void. Only to surface with pain. It was different than having her throat slit. Different than being killed so a merman could mate someone else. This felt like her soul was being torn in two. As well as her tail. Her mouth opened in a silent scream. Until finally her body collapsed into something cold. Almost frozen. And wet. Then she sank back into the cold painless void.

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The next time Marina breached the surface, she was warm. But her skin felt wrong. Weirdly not wet. She inhaled deeply, but no water filled her lungs. Only air. It made her cough. But that made her throat burn.

“Calm your breathing.” A deep voice resonated around Marina. It made her eyes pop open. At first her vision was blurry as if the current swirled around her too quickly for her to see. But after a few blinks, her vision cleared.

Marina couldn't stop the scream that burst from her throat. In front of her sat... lay? A man... or at least the bare torso of one but as her eyes trailed down his muscled chest to his hairy abs, down to his lean hips and.... And...

“Woah there.” His hands dropped to her bare shoulders. They were so warm against her skin, but she couldn’t get past the glossy black fur of the horse body that met his hips. She couldn’t look away from his horse torso as he took in a deep breath. The light glinting as his muscles rippled with each breath.

The man’s hands traveled up her shoulders to her neck until he used his knuckle to lift her chin up so she met his dark eyes. “My eyes are up here.” His lips twitched as he fought his smile.

“W-what?” Marina stuttered. Her brain wasn’t quite functioning. She didn’t know where she was. She didn’t know why she was in... air? Where was the ocean? Why wasn’t she dead? Who was the man in front of her and why did he have the body of a horse? When his hand dropped from her skin, she couldn’t keep her gaze up, so she dropped it to her hands. Her pale white hands. Five fingers individually slender. No webs. No dark claws. Just pale delicate nails.

Her gaze traveled up her pale arms over and then down to her bare chest. Her breasts small and round. But no blue and silver scales. Where were her scales? She touched her flat belly and trailed her fingers down to her swell of her almost white hips then to the legs attached there. Human legs. Her legs. No tail. No scales. Human.

*Maybe I did die.* It was the only thing that made sense. She was in some kind of afterlife cursed to forever to be a human. A strangled cry tore from her throat making it ache. That reminded her of the king slicing her neck open. Her hands went to it, but there was some kind of soft material covering her neck.

“You shouldn’t touch that.” The man’s hands found hers and pulled them down, his rough thumb making small circles in the back of her hands.

“Am I dead?” Slipped from her lips as she looked back up into those deep brown eyes. Beautiful eyes. Deep. Fathomless. Part of her wanted to dive deep into them to find the secrets he hid there.

“No, little one. You are alive and healing well.”

*Little one.* She supposed she would be little to him. She felt so small next to his huge horse body. Even if he had human legs, he would be massive compared to her. If she wasn't so overwhelmed by not being dead, she would appreciate the magnificent beauty of this man in front of her.

“How?”

The corner of his lips twitched drawing her gaze. He was far more handsome than... than... Marina mentally shied away from the name. His name. Her mate. Was he still her mate? She didn't want him to be. He lost that right when he sacrificed her for the curse.

Marina didn't know about any curse, other than what the king had said.

*“The curse has been fulfilled. You are free to mate whomever you want without fear of the curse.”*

Did Tritus have some kind of curse that would kill his mate? Was that why he chose her? She was supposed to take the curse and die so he would be free to mate his real love?

“I found you on the shore.” His voice brought Marina back into the present. “I brought you back to my village.”

“Village?”

*Were there more men like this one? Were they all half men half horse?*

“Yes,” His eyes lightened with humor. “You are in my home.” Then a darkness fell over his expression, “If you are nervous being alone with me, don’t be. There are others nearby. I would never hurt you.”

Marina hadn’t thought about that. She was in new territory here. No longer in the ocean, but now on land. Much less in a village full of...

“What are you?” Marina clapped her hand over her mouth as embarrassment filled her. She couldn’t believe she had just blurted that out.

But this man didn’t seem offended, his head tilted back as he burst out laughing. Laughing... at her. The red flush on her cheeks shifted from embarrassment to anger. How dare he laugh at her? She opened her mouth to snap at him, but he raised one hand stopping her, his other gripping his side as he continued to laugh. Even his hooved feet seemed to kick as he lounged on his side.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to laugh at you. But,” He released a few more chuckles, before he was able to regain control, “it’s fine. You don’t have to be embarrassed by your question. I have a similar one for you.” He reached out and tucked her hair behind an ear, his rough fingers trailing over her cheek. It sent shivers across her skin. She liked it far more than she wanted to say. “I am a centaur. My name is Galenos, or Galen for short.” He paused and seemingly chewed on his cheek. The idea of such a creature showing a gesture of hesitance allowed the anger to wash away. “May I ask your name?”

“Marina. I am a mermaid. Or was...” Marina gestured down to her bare legs, or rather, to her lack of a tail. She wasn’t sure why her tail was gone. She had never been on land before. But then, she had never had her throat cut either.

“How did you get-” Galen trailed off, his hand dropping to the fabric that pressed against her throat.

Marina couldn't help the wince. How could she tell him about the king told her mate to kill her. How her mate's claws sank into her skins slicing her neck between her gills. She began to shake as that pain and fear overwhelmed her again.

“Shh, little one. It's okay. You are safe now.” His strong arms reached out and pulled her against his warm chest. She hated how much this felt good. How much she felt like she needed this. She hated how the tears began to well in her eyes. Hated how those tears dripped onto Galen's crisp brown chest hair.

“He mated me so he could kill me.” Marina whispered after her tears finally dried. “The king said there was a curse.”

“Is that why you have legs now? When I found you, you had a beautiful tail. But when you left the water, uh these appeared.” He playfully wiggled her big toe.

Marina blinked, was that why she looked human now? It didn't quite make sense. But then, it did. Maybe. All she could do was shrug.

“I don't know.”

“Well, no matter. You are safe now. You are welcome to stay here as long as you would like.”

Those words allowed Marina to take in a deep breath. Yes. Now she was safe. No longer in the ocean, but now on land. A new territory to her. But at least she was safe.

###

Months later, Galen took Marina back to the ocean. It had been an argument between them, Galen wanted her to visit the ocean again, but Marina wanted nothing to do with it.

“You won’t be able to heal unless you know.” Galen repeated for the hundredth time.

But Marina just tightened her grip on Galen’s waist as he galloped through the grassland. She didn’t want to argue about this any longer. She would stand in the shore and hope that her tail didn’t magically come back. She was human now. She didn’t want to leave Galen and his centaur family. She had never felt so loved and accepted.

The salt in the air thickened the closer they traveled toward the ocean. She didn’t know if it was the thick air or her own panic that made each breath harder and harder, until she was gulping in air.

Galen slowed his gallop until he slid to a stop in the sand. “Breathe Marina.” He reached back and pulled Marina into his arms. “You are safe. I’m here.” He pressed a kiss to her forehead.

“I can’t go back. I can’t.” Marina sobbed.

“You don’t have to. We just need to know what will happen when you touch salt water. Then we can go back home.”

Marina sucked in another ragged breath. Then nodded. “We will go home once we know.” She repeated, her hands shaking.

“Yes, I’ll cook you your favorite meal for dinner.” He pressed another kiss to her forehead.

Marina nodded and allowed herself to slip from Galen's strong arms. The moment her toes touched the warm dry sand, her knees almost gave out. It felt so wrong to her new dry skin. Like she was walking on shattered glass. But she forced herself to take one step, then another. Closer and closer to the edge of the waves. But she couldn't look out at the blue expanse. Just down at her toes amongst the sand. Until the waves stopped just inches from her skin. Then she looked up.

An all-consuming fear wracked her. The expanse of water stretched out before her. An old world. A terrible world. One that would kill a woman because of a prophecy one that might not have even been real. One where a man would mate a woman just to kill her. It was wrong. So, so wrong.

Her knees gave away causing her to sink into the wet sand. There was so much death in the ocean. So much pain. So much darkness. The idea of even touching that monstrous liquid brought tears to her eyes. It twisted her gut almost making her puke with the pain.

A strangled cry tore through her throat. She wanted nothing to do with the sea. But then a large wave rushed up and washed over her legs. The cold salty liquid stung her skin. But it stayed skin. Stayed lightly tanned skin. No scales. No fins. No claws. Just human skin.

"Galen." Marina breathed, "Please take me away from here." Her voice was raw from her emotions, but as Galen's strong warm hands lifted her back onto his back she felt whole. Even with her mermaid self missing. She was whole, with Galen. With his family. Their family.

The ocean wouldn't miss her and she wouldn't miss it. Her old friends in the depths would barely notice her absence. Barely care about the excuses Triton and the king gave them about her disappearance.

Marina was home. On the back of a centaur. One that loved her. And one she loved just as much. And she hoped and prayed that she would never again see the ocean. Never see her nightmares beneath the waves. Never ever dive below the depths. For her life was in the light of day. Light of the land. Uncharted territory for mermaids.

Marina was home.