

~ GUEST OF THE SEA ~

INTRODUCTION

Fortune can be defined as an external, arbitrary force affecting human affairs and manifests itself in many but unpredictable ways; yet, when it does, it will always leave a life-changing mark on lives it touched...

In this story, *Fortune* manifested itself during a clear, starry night on a big cruise ship that was traveling away from the coast towards the open sea, with the promise of exclusive luxuries and amusements for its lucky passengers. Many gladly paid full price to experience such 'exclusivity', synonymous with anonymity and risqué activities for some, but just as many were instead chosen by fate: lucky participants of a lottery that granted them a free ticket on board. And thus, people of all kinds were enjoying themselves as they chatted, gossiped, flirted and played together, sharing snacks and drinks... But sitting at the far end of the bow of the ship, overlooking the ocean through purple-framed glasses, was a young brunette girl named Katherine, or Kate for short.

Instead of interacting with the rest of the passengers or stopping by one of the many attractions available, the girl was enjoying a moment of solitude, content with just looking out over the horizon, letting the red-dyed tips of her hair gently flow in the night breeze while sipping at the sweetened iced tea in her hands. She admired how beautifully the moon and the stars seemed to reflect off the water, reflections that rippled and warped with the waves or with the occasional passage of fishes and curious cetaceans, making the stars dance amidst that mirrored firmament... She even got a glimpse of a particularly exotic and large aquatic creature, who seemed to look at Kate for a moment before putting its head back underwater. She couldn't identify it amidst the darkness, and perhaps that made her observations all the more interesting, waiting to see if it would surface again. It was so peaceful and relaxing, she didn't mind being there alone.

In fact, she was actually taking a break from mingling with the rest of the ship's guests; while she didn't want to waste her lucky ticket, in retrospect she felt almost out of place there. All the exclusive leisures were merely fun distractions from her usual life since they weren't her favourite activities, and she didn't meet any 'Prince Charming' able to conquer her interest either... that, or maybe she was just too shy and modest to give in to the cruise ship's attractions. In any case, she was simply grateful for the free vacation even if it weren't the promised experience of a lifetime.

However, lost in her thoughts, she almost didn't notice how the wind was picking up speed, nor the approaching stormy clouds; only when the reflections of the firmament became a blur due to the rising waves and the stars got obscured did she look up and gasp! Most passengers either had already retreated into the safety of their cabins by then, or were being escorted back there by the crew, but all were equally distressed. Katherine herself was quite scared as she slowly started to make her way back inside, holding onto

the railing in hopes of not getting tossed over by the ship's now vigorous rolling and pitching motions. But copious rain soon followed and with the wind getting stronger, her wet grip eventually slipped and she suddenly found herself falling into the cold, salty sea waves below!

Trying to keep her head above the water, the girl desperately called for help. But the cruise ship was getting farther and farther away from her and no one was left outside to hear her cries... Kate's heart sunk deep into her chest at such a grim realisation, her body already shivering and weakened by the unforgiving cold waves, which kept growing stronger and higher. Her efforts to stay afloat were soon all for nothing as the stormy sea engulfed her multiple times. She tried to swim back up for air each time, but the waves just wouldn't allow it; soon fatigue began to take over and her lungs felt like they were going to burst as she tried to hold her breath. She guessed that this was how she was going to die, her tears drowning under the rain and sea, where she would eventually drown too, alone in the dark depths where no one could ever find her... And soon enough, the lack of oxygen took its toll and her vision slowly faded into unconsciousness, but not before her eyes met one last time that same, unknown aquatic creature she saw earlier...

While unconscious and sinking, Kate's mind somehow seemed to still run wild in what the girl could only imagine to be some kind of near-death experience, feeling pulled and dragged away, as if grabbed by ghostly hands... Was someone finally coming to rescue her? But how could anyone come this far so quickly... Could it be angels taking her soul to guide her towards the afterlife? Or was it just the rough sea carrying away her limp body, like a lifeless puppet thrown in a whirlpool of uncaring currents?

Time had long lost meaning in this state and so these questions remained unanswered for what could be an eternity... during which she couldn't even tell if at least she was still alive, or if this is what death truly feels like... An ever-lasting, dreadful suspense. Except eventually, she awakened.

As her senses gradually came back to her, the girl found herself inside some sort of... giant bubble? No... it was solid to the touch... she tried to focus her vision and that's when she noticed she was missing her eyeglasses; she must have lost them when falling in the water and... drowning? No, she was still very much alive! But what was this place then and how did she end up there? Kate tried to move around and explore her surroundings but she eventually realized she had been curled up and enclosed inside a clear sphere of glass; judging by the seam she could feel across its circumference, there had to be a way to open it but she found no way to do so from the inside... not that it would help much: much to her surprise, it was underwater, chained to the seafloor! Thankfully there was air inside, but it was quite unsettling to still be stuck underwater like that after what happened.

"H-Hello? Is anyone there?" - She called, knocking on her strange prison and looking around; with her limited vision she couldn't see much besides the silhouettes of a few fish

casually swimming by and the surface of the water above her, which was probably too far up for her to swim to the surface without drowning in case she ever got out of there...

"P-Please, if anyone can hear me, I need help. I want to go back to the surface. I wanna go home..."

All around her there seemed to be no one to hear her pleas... she barely managed to notice the spherical shape of a few other glass cages around her but couldn't tell if there was anyone inside them. Someone must have built them though; but who? and why?

For a couple hours she remained alone, imprisoned deep under the sea, a new sense of dread filling her heart as she was completely helpless, especially when a pair of sharks swam by and tried to bump and bite at her, perhaps thinking they could get an easy snack, only to be disappointed by the sturdiness of the glass... When suddenly, they swam away as a different kind of creature approached.

At first Katherine couldn't really make out what the creature was, although for a moment she couldn't help but think it was the very same unknown aquatic creature she saw from the cruise ship, and before losing consciousness... until it got closer. And what she saw was something she never thought to see with her own eyes in a million years. The girl didn't need eyeglasses to recognise it; there was no other possibility, no matter how unbelievable it seemed: the distinctively humanoid torso and arms, coupled with a fish tail and fins matched with the descriptions from their tales...

...it had to be a *merman*!

He appeared to be followed by two more people and the closer they got, the more she couldn't believe her eyes in confirming they were indeed merfolk... They swam gracefully in the water around her and she could only assume the other two were some kind of guards escorting their master, who gave such an impression due to the long purple cloak that floated around his back.

The trapped girl felt her heart beating fast in a mix of excitement and nervousness, feeling small as she watched the cloaked merman approach her bubble-like prison. He definitely gave some bossy vibes and she figured he was likely someone respected and not to be messed with, but eventually she found her voice nonetheless as she looked up at him.

"H-Hello. My name is Katherine. A-Are you the one that brought me here?" she asked, but the merman didn't seem to pay attention to her.

Was the glass too thick for her words to pass through or was he just ignoring what she was saying? He appeared to simply keep staring at her with a very inquisitive look, every now and then moving his tail or flippers to reposition himself, looking at every detail of her body... meanwhile the two guards were swimming around the sphere holding some kind of polearms, probably tridents, almost like sharks swimming around their prey...

Katherine felt a bit shy and self-conscious for being stared at; she knew she wasn't ugly, but that didn't mean she liked being eyed very much. Her cheeks turned rosy pink just from feeling the eyes on her.

"I-I don't know if you can hear or understand me, but please. I don't want to be here. I wanna to go back to the surface. I wanna go home. I don't belong here..."

Suddenly the cloaked merman gestured something to his underlings; they nodded affirmatively and got closer to where the glass cage was anchored to the seafloor. With the back end of their polearms, they struck the chains repeatedly until their anchoring point broke off. Then they grabbed the chains and soon enough, the girl found herself being transported by the merfolk across the sea, the cloaked one leading them to who knows where... no matter how much she protested inside of her enclosure. And Katherine's protests soon turned into panicked cries, helpless against the aquatic brutes who swiftly carried her around and worrying about what plans they had in store for her... until they arrived in a strange place.

The girl wished once again to still have her eyeglasses on to better understand her new surroundings; she could see lights... and strange rocky formations, or buildings. Some tall like sunken towers and some small, some blending with the seafloor covered in colourful marine flora and sponges and some standing out with their glass-domed tops... and she saw other merfolk who lived there. Despite the tears of fear still running from her eyes, she stared in awe at the surreal marine landscape, mind-blown by the discovery of what had to be an entire town or city existing submerged below the surface...

How could no human being have already found this place? Even with her limited vision it seemed hard to miss... Was this all just a dream? She could swear she was awake though as her attention was brought back towards her immediate surroundings and the aquatic people with her; they had just stopped before the entrance of an underwater cave, which appeared to be part of a bigger complex, similar to a castle. However, the entrance looked quite narrow, probably fitting only one person at a time and certainly not her spherical cell; thus the cloaked merman issued another command to his guards and Kate soon learnt what it was: they were opening her glass bubble!

"N-NO WAIT!" she screamed, gasping with fright when the bottom half came off and her feet splashed into the water.

Quickly, one of the guards got under and tried to pull her out by her feet! The girl whimpered and tried to kick him away from her, more tears forming in her eyes. She was now too scared of drowning and didn't want to be kidnapped by a merman and his brutes. Unfortunately, she couldn't escape his grip for long and her kicking wasn't as strong as the guard who eventually grabbed her legs.

"NO PLEASE! I DON'T WANNA-"

Her pleas were cut off as she was forcefully pulled underwater, gurgling since she barely had any time to fill her lungs with air before the immersion. Soon the other guard joins in, embracing her fast in a tight hold with her arms pinned by her sides, making the girl's attempts to squirm out of their hold futile. Seeing the girl now overpowered, the cloaked merman seemed satisfied and swam past the narrow opening.

Against her will, Kate followed as she was unceremoniously shoved inside, where the cloaked merman picked her by the arm and began to personally drag her along, leaving his underlings behind.

His grip was as unrelenting as that of the two guards but she kept resisting nonetheless, needing to breathe once more.

Katherine felt like this was cruel. Why were they doing this to her? She was innocent. She did nothing wrong; yet there she was, fighting for air through the dark, labyrinthine corridors and chambers of that unknown marine structure, fearing that this was going to be the end of her...

The merman didn't seem to care about her struggles and just kept going at first. But when he turned around to check her and noticed how desperately she was trying to catch some air, he didn't hesitate to act. And much to her surprise, he moved to firmly grab her by her cheeks and...

...kissed her!

With that, the girl suddenly tensed up and stopped in shock, overwhelmed by countless contrasting feelings, unable to look away from the merman's eyes that stared deeply into hers while his lips remained locked on hers...

It was so sudden and unexpected, it made her heartbeat faster, her mind frozen while still processing what just happened... she needed a few seconds to realise he was actually sharing the air of his own lungs with her, doing mouth-to-mouth breath. But for a moment it *did* feel like a kiss, a kiss of life and her very first as well; she just never knew a merman would be the one to give it to her...

She didn't know whether to be thankful, flattered, or insulted in such circumstances; nonetheless, her cheeks became a burning cherry red in colour...

Now that she could rely on the air provided by the merman dragging her along, Kate managed to calm down a little, somewhat reassured by the fact that he was not letting her drown inside the strange submarine castle. To her it looked as if they swam left and right aimlessly, until they eventually started swimming upwards in a sort of tower.

And at the very top, she finally saw the water surface again! Glimmering before her like a magical portal, she couldn't wait to escape the sea and return to her world... The girl rejoiced, feeling the merman letting go of her and even ushering her with a gentle push, allowing her to swim on her own towards it.

The moment her face went through, she took a huge, liberating, gasping breath of fresh air before falling and crawling further out. She also coughed a bit as she tried to get her breathing back under control, exhausted by the whole experience.

"O-Oh God. That was intense. I don't think I wanna ever do that again" were her first words out of the water.

Shortly after, she heard the merman resurfacing as well, but that wasn't concerning her at the moment, busy with catching her breath and relaxing a few seconds after such an ordeal.

Only later Kate took the time to elaborate where she was. The first thing she noticed was that she was laying on a smooth, unnatural rock-solid floor; this was no shore she concluded. Raising her head, she saw blue all around her, which she initially assumed to be the sky; but something didn't feel right.

She then got back on her feet, which also felt liberating as she took a moment to enjoy the sensation of finally standing up and walking around, before suddenly bumping into a solid barrier... a glass wall.

"No... it can't be..." she thought out loud...

She had wished for freedom so hard, she almost tricked herself into believing she was now free and far from danger; that glimmering portal was just a disillusion, and as such it vanished like magic. In reality, it was just the entryway to a bigger cell, a glass dome at the very top of one of the many tower-like structures of this damned submarine castle she was now in... or so she thought, staring at the blue water around her in anguish until a voice broke the silence.

"I suppose you have many questions..."

That's when Katherine heard for the first time his voice; the voice of the cloaked merman... a resolute yet soothing voice, conveying a certain feeling of benevolent authority. Putting a strange emphasis on his words, as if trying to choose them carefully. It occurred to her that this was probably not his native tongue, despite rarely mispronouncing a word; actually, it was quite impressive how a formerly fictional creature was now talking to her.

"...you must be confused and scared. But fear not; at the moment, you are safe. And I am willing to answer questions"

She turned around to face him; he was standing next to the small central pool that served as the entrance to the room they were in, holding his torso upright with the large fins below his hips while the rest of his body trailed behind on the floor. Eventually, the girl managed to summon the courage to speak again:

"W-What... or who are you? And why am I here?"

After a solemn pause, he introduced himself with a slight bow of the head:

"My name is Kraikugree. I am Chief of the Royal Guards and an Ambassador among my people. And I believe you actually know what we are, even if you still don't trust your eyes... which reminds me, I might have just the right thing to fix that"

With such words, he reached for something he must have been holding in his cloak, then held it up in the air.

"This... was found near you when you were rescued. To my knowledge, it is a tool used by land-dwellers to enhance their vision. But it does not seem to work on me" he said, extending his arm to offer it to the girl.

Was that her eyeglasses? If so, she couldn't wait to get them back! But could she trust this Kraikugree? He had done nothing so far but holding her captive and mercilessly dragging her around like a pet, and now he acts gentle with her? She couldn't help but still be very wary of him... and the way he held her possession like that, as if to lure her into coming closer to him, next to the pool where she couldn't escape his clutches, kind of looked like a trap.

Tentatively, the girl cautiously approached him and the closer she got, the more she recognised the shape and the unmistakable purple frames of her eyeglasses. As soon as she got close enough, she snatched them from his hand and jumped back, not unlike a wild animal who is offered a treat but doesn't trust the human hand behind it. But Kraikugree remained still and didn't try to trick her; in fact, she even heard him sneer at her wariness.

Once she finally put her eyeglasses back on, not only she could see clearly again, but she could truly appreciate the merman's form for the first time.

He sported a well-toned physique, strong but streamlined to fit with his aquatic nature, complemented by the smooth and tight-fitting fish scales that exalted the contours of his muscles. His body was mostly navy blue in colour, with gradients of lighter blue over his underbelly and other similarly soft body parts. His piscine features appeared to be of the Selachii type, giving him a large asymmetrical tailfin and a rather pointy snout that concealed even pointier shark teeth.

But despite the relatively feral-looking visage, no savagery could be seen in his yellowish-green eyes; they glistened with intelligence and empathy instead, and his face was no less expressive than a human's. His head had large flaring fins in place of ears and was adorned with numerous slender tentacles instead of hair, constantly twitching with almost a life of their own and making cute little popping sounds whenever their tiny suckers slid against each other. She had to admit he had quite the exotic appeal...

Equally noteworthy, was also a large scar on his left pectoral; Kate couldn't help but imagine either a fight against the claws of a sea monster, or a glancing thrust of a trident from an opposing merman duellist.

"Y-you're... a merman, aren't you?" she said, and he nodded.

"Welcome to our domain, land-dweller. You are now standing inside the Royal Palace of the Merfolk Kingdom of Acquaria. And it was my personal request to have this room of the

Palace refurbished to properly accommodate you... consider yourself a guest..." he told her on even more solemn notes with another bow of the head.

Katherine had to admit she was now being treated with some truly refined etiquette by the merman, making her a bit flustered: was she truly guest, or prisoner? If anything, she felt a bit more at ease in her current situation, although the doubt remained.

Glancing around, the girl could indeed see how the room had been adorned with simple furniture, the kind suited to satisfy the basic needs of a human. With a bed, a wardrobe and a chest, it kind of resembled a bedroom rather than a cell, except for the bucket toilet stowed behind some curtains...

Everything was clean and in working condition, yet she observed how most of the furniture seemed to have been either salvaged from a shipwreck or scavenged from sunken rubbish. In fact, a keen eye could recognise all the signs: corners that were still encrusted with limpets, metal surfaces left pitted by years of corrosion even after the rust removal, peeling flakes of old paint here and there and the paleness of the wood showing a typical discoloration caused by salt water.

"...and by what name does our guest go?" he continued.

"M-My name's Kate. It's short for Katherine. And uhm... nice to meet you, Mr. Kraikugree?"

"No need to use human appellatives such as Mister or Mistress here..." he chuckled, and his chuckle sounded oddly charming to her. "So, you are just Kate? No titles?"

"N-no... I simply work in a bookstore, nothing fancy" she replied with a certain embarrassment, worrying she was disappointing his expectations... Why was she even caring about his expectations though? She shouldn't give in to his charm yet, he still had a lot of explaining to do!

"Excuse me, why exactly am I here and why did you save me?"

His gentle but austere face seemed to lighten a bit at her question, calmly inhaling and letting his hair-tentacles droop over his shoulders before starting to narrate:

"Ah yes... You were spotted by my guards during their duty, that is reporting on and following any vessel crossing the waters above the Royal Palace for the sake of security. But when you accidentally fell in the sea as the vessel fought against the storm, they acted by instinct. You see, normally our policy is to avoid direct contact with the land-dwellers, even if they are at the mercy of the waves; an ironic fate in my opinion for those land-dwellers who go against their nature to navigate, foolishly believing they can rule the waters just as they rule the Earth..." he says, whispering that last sentence with an almost malicious grin before continuing.

"However, we are not cruel people. Moved by your 'beauty and innocence', they instead rescued you and brought you into my custody. A rare exception, but a most welcome one in this case, for I must agree that no such beautiful woman had ever set foot in our Kingdom before. With time, I am sure you will appreciate our hospitality and realise how

fortunate you are. From now on, I shall be your host... and you shall be guest, indefinitely..."

Kate couldn't believe what she was hearing: despite flushing from all the compliments, she still felt her blood grow cold with fear and concern at the idea of living the rest of her life underwater.

"Wh-What? Are you saying that you're keeping me here against my will? But you can't do that. Do you even realize that I have a life back on land? You're taking me away from my job, my home, and even my friends and family. I mean my father will definitely be worried sick and think I'm dead if I don't go back and let him know I'm ok. Please, you can't do this to me. I don't even belong here. I'm not one of you!" she pleaded, almost in tears.

"Bringing you to the surface is out of question now" he answered, crossing his arms with the shocking confidence of a certain and inevitable fate. "You have seen our city. We cannot let any land-dweller have this knowledge for our own safety. Besides, I would like to remind you that the people you so wish to return to are the same that didn't even try to save you. I've seen the ship make no attempts of changing its route: either they knew they had no chance of saving you, or worse, they didn't even notice you were missing until it was too late. In any case, no need to bring back who they believe to be dead anyway..."

Knowing he was at least partially right made unshed tears form and prick at the corners of the girl's eyes. The merman was only acting in his people's best interest, and she didn't have friends or relatives on board the cruise ship who might have cared to look for her. Of course that didn't change the fact that this felt like a big injustice.

"B-but... What about my father though? I don't want to have him think that I'm dead. It would shatter his heart into a million pieces if he did. Surely you have to understand how that would be for him... a-and also, you didn't have to show me your city in the first place..." she sobbed.

Kraikugree remained silent for a while, looking pensive and conflicted for the first time... He understood very well indeed: he was a father too, although she didn't know yet. And she was right: he wouldn't need to bring up the 'you have seen too much' excuse if he also didn't actually have personal reasons to keep her...

"I... bet your father cares for you a lot... he would move heaven and earth if he could find you, wouldn't he? The knowledge that you are still alive would give him reason to find you... and us. No, I cannot allow it. Sorry..." Was all the merman could say, concluding with a sigh.

He wasn't just breaking her father's heart, he was breaking Katherine's heart too... And sure enough, the tears that continued to build up were now streaming down her cheeks as the girl whimpered at the uncomfortable ache in her chest.

"I-I may understand why you're doing this... a-and respect that you're only doing it to protect your people. But that doesn't mean this feels right. I don't even know how you expect me to be ok with this. Plus, like I said, I don't really belong here. I feel so different and out of place here..." she eventually said.

Seeing her crying like that made Kraikugree hesitate, but he didn't want to get emotional in front of her. If he showed too much sympathy now, he might give the impression of being weak or easily manipulated by pulling the right emotional strings, he thought. No, he needed to uphold an authoritarian exterior to keep the 'guest' under control, and to gain her trust through benevolence and kindness, not through feelings...

"Perhaps you already had too much to go through for today... I shall come back another time. Please have some rest" he told her to quickly end the conversation, trying to avoid looking into her crying eyes.

With that, he jumped back into the pool, soon vanishing deep below the waters and leaving the girl alone... who jumped into the available bed instead, overwhelmed by tears. With no hope and nothing else to do, she could only cry herself to sleep...

Why... Why was this happening to her? She did nothing wrong to deserve this... how was she going to spend the rest of her life underwater?

...And why did the merman desire her so much?