

~ GUEST OF THE SEA ~

CHAPTER 1

Katherine had fallen asleep, but it wasn't a very restorative sleep; despite how tired and stressed she had been, she shivered and cried in her sleep, tormented by anguish. This was her first night underwater after all... and she had gone through so much in so little time.

First, she almost drowned after falling off the cruise ship. Then she found herself trapped inside a small glass bubble, far from the surface. Later, she had a first and shocking encounter with the merfolk, who brought her to their hidden underwater city... only to put her into her current cell, a room under a glass dome impossibly deep below the sea, where the sky was made of water and dotted by schools of fish instead of flocks of birds, and where the nearest land was the seafloor.

Kraikugree, the merman in charge of the guards and of her custody, had showed courtesy towards her and acted friendly, but was relentless when declaring that she was going to be his 'guest' forever, whether she liked it or not...

Eventually, the girl found the courage to open her teary eyes again; previously, her surroundings had become frighteningly dark, slowly engulfed by pure blackness while the sun set over the sea. It was worse than the blackness of space: in fact, one could reason that space is full of light in comparison, with countless stars constantly shedding light through the dark voids of the universe... but down there, it was as if the sun itself was drowning, leaving no light source behind. Thankfully, the sun was now back to shine above the water surface, illuminating the blue world around her once again.

However, even now that the dreaded darkness was gone, she still shivering under her bedsheets. Kate felt cold and vulnerable in her current claustrophobic environment, and reasonably so. But she didn't simply need more time to adjust to the idea of living underwater: the girl was cold for real after a night spent with soaking clothes on! In her distress, she had forgotten that she was still wearing the very same wet garments from when she had been dragged through the submerged corridors of the Palace...

To avoid getting sick, Kate managed to find the will and strength to finally get up, wiping the tears from her face and eyeglasses to look through some of the stuff that was available in the room.

One of those things was the wardrobe: opening it, she was surprised to see it was full of clothes, human clothes! She couldn't help but wonder how or where the merfolk managed to get so much stuff that shouldn't belong in the sea... had the clothes been scavenged too? After all, they were clean but smelled of sea, plus they came in seemingly random

sizes, shapes and colours... whoever left this wardrobe for her, either didn't know much about human fashion or had to make due with what they had available to cater for her clothing needs. In any case, she ended up choosing a set of garments that looked passable together, but at least they were warm and comfy.

Afterwards, her attention shifted towards the chest near the wardrobe. Its lid was closed, but the lock was left with its key inside; Kate figured it was probably left like this in order to give her a place in which she could store her personal belongings. If so, it should be empty now... but the girl couldn't resist the temptation to peek inside, especially since she had nothing else to do anyway in her room.

Kneeling in front of it, she carefully turned the key until she heard the lock snap open. Putting her hands over the lid, she hesitated a moment, not sure what to expect, before lifting it for the big reveal: it actually contained a jaw-dropping amount of precious jewellery, all made with many combinations of pearls, corals, gems, gold and silver!

Looking at them, she was overwhelmed with awe, surprise and bashfulness, so much so that she had to pinch her arm and caress those jewels to convince herself she wasn't dreaming! Each piece of jewellery alone could impress any lady, and now she had a treasure chest full of them!

Could Kraikugree... the merman... have intended to leave this treasure just for her?! Katherine had never received such an amazing gift before, almost feeling unworthy of it. Maybe the merman only wanted to impress the girl and win her trust... yes, it was definitely a possibility, showering her with gifts so that he could have his way with her! But at the same time, she couldn't resist picking up some of that jewellery by the handful and wonder: would it make sense to give her these gifts if she was only a prisoner?

Lost in her thoughts and busy admiring her new treasure, little did the girl know that in the meantime, a few merfolk began gathering around her just outside the glass dome, attracted by the rare sight of a real human... only when she suddenly noticed the flick of a fishtail in the corner of her eye, she turned around and was shocked to find a dozen or so of them watching her!

The marvel was mutual as they shared surprised faces and curious looks; the merfolk swimming around her to see every contour of her body, while Kate observed speechless their fascinating diversity in colour and aquatic features, plus their agility and grace in the water... Flippers flapped, fish scales glistened, webbed hands waved and faces smiled around the girl in a sort of dance.

She shyly waved back at the incredible spectacle, causing them to cheer in unison; although she couldn't hear them through the thick glass dome, she could easily guess they were talking about her in excitement.

Over time however, the constant staring and pointing of so many inquisitive eyes and fingers made her feel increasingly uneasy under so much attention. On one hand, she was pleased and relieved to have visitors come to see her so gladly... but on the other, she felt being treated as a mere attraction for them, like a reversed aquarium, or a human zoo...

Could this be the reason why she was being kept like this underwater? To be the personal 'pet' of Kraikugree, who would show off his new 'specimen' to his peers?

The moment this thought sunk in, reawakening her previous fears and concerns, Katherine felt tears coming up once again.

"E-Enough... Stop it! LEAVE ME ALONE!" she shouted at them, covering her face.

She had nowhere to hide from their sight inside her room; all she could do was jump back on the bed and curl up into a ball under the bedsheets, where she proceeded to cry once more. Feeling rather uneasy themselves after seeing the girl like this, the merfolk began to silently disperse one by one, returning to their daily errands... Except for one.

A gentle knocking sound eventually came from the thick glass next to her bed. Peeking from the bedsheets with teary eyes, Kate saw a mermaid looking at her with sympathy through bright, mesmerizing green eyes. She was among those who stood out from the rest earlier for how beautiful she was. Her visage was quite human-like, with long and black hair adorned with flowers majestically flowing behind her with the currents. The rest of her body was very much aquatic though, with rose-red arms and underbelly set against a darker back dotted with bioluminescent green spots, almost like freckles. Similar spots adorned her arms and shoulders too, while bioluminescent stripes exalted the profile of her fins and gills.

The mermaid placed a hand on the glass separating her from the girl, as if offering a hand to Kate... who returned the gesture after a moment of uncertainty. Of course their hands could only feel the cold touch of the glass in between them, but their contact wasn't any less meaningful: the mermaid's bioluminescence glowed stronger for a moment and while Kate didn't know what that meant, she liked it. She was now fine with looking into the eyes of just this one mermaid, who seemed to be telling her "Don't worry, I understand what you're going through..."

The girl's sad face gradually turned into a warm smile, and the mermaid smiled back. Katherine almost wished to stay some more with this mermaid when their moment together was interrupted by an unexpected *splash* sound; turning towards the pool that was the only entryway to her room, she saw none other than Kraikugree himself, emerging with his head and shoulders from the water.

"Ah, it appears that my favourite guest just woke up... I assume you really needed a long nap after all. Hopefully my sudden entrance didn't interrupt your sleep" said the merman, leaping out of the water and making a standing land close to her.

"Oh! I... uhm actually... well n-nevermind..." she tried to explain, quite impressed by his leap, before sighing after noticing how the mermaid was gone already, seeing only her fishtail disappearing in the distance for a moment... What a mood-killer, he made the mermaid go away!

"My apologies if I disturbed you... was the bed comfortable? Did you manage to rest well?" he asked.

"Uh, the bed was comfortable, yeah..." she answered, looking away with a sad face and avoiding going into the details of her not-so-good night...

An awkward silence followed as the girl wasn't much in the mood of chatting and the merman didn't know how to cheer her up... he noticed however she had left the chest open.

"Ah, I see you opened my welcome gift! I reckon we didn't have much time yesterday for a proper presentation and gift exchange, but I hope you appreciated it nonetheless. Our first meeting probably didn't start with the, err... *'right foot'*... but we can still fix that" said Kraikugree, swaying his tailfin and chuckling at his own improvised pun; hopefully that would help with, err... 'breaking the ice', as a land-dweller would have said! His time spent learning their language was proving very useful right now, despite the self-doubt constantly lingering in the back of his mind whenever he pushed his language skills to the limit with those idioms!

Katherine found it rather corny but giggled nonetheless at the merman's tailfin wag and pride over his own pun, which indeed eased her mood enough to come out of the bedsheets and keep her engaged in the conversation.

"S-so all of those are really just for me? I... am not sure what to say, they are probably worth more than anything I was ever gifted before... a-and if you expected a gift-exchange, well you must have surely realized I have nothing else to offer in return here..." she bashfully replied.

"Oh, worry not... your mere presence here is a gift for the eyes"

Kate smiled at the compliment to show courtesy, but didn't fully trust his sincerity yet... If Kate herself was a gift to him, did it mean that he had the right to own her? And if he owned her, what sort of things may he wish to do with her? The thought of the merman 'toying' with her body sent shivers all over her back and made her gulp hard.

"W-what if I don't want to be present here though... it's not like I have much of a say about it, r-right?" she asked with a shaky voice... but Kraikugree was quick to avoid her topic and derail the conversation back to a frivolous chat.

"I think you should try on your welcome gift..." he said, moving to bring that chest closer.

That's when she observed for the first time how he would move around on land and suddenly she had to stifle her laughter! He didn't just drag his piscine lower body all over the floor, forcing himself forward with his flippers at a pace so slow that made the short distance between her bed and the chest seem ten times longer... his motion was rather more similar to the galumphing of harboured seals, which made the scene even more silly

in her eyes. Images of chubby seals wriggling and bouncing on their own fat as they moved on the ground flashed in her mind and the comparison was simply too funny!

Of course, she knew it would be extremely inappropriate now to laugh in front of the merman, but she couldn't offer to get the chest herself either without running the risk of insulting him; rather unwise since she still depended on him in this submerged palace after all. Often times though, the social pressure to hold back your laughter is precisely what escalates a silly situation into a comical scene!

She would cover her mouth, attempting to hold her laughter all in, yet a few giggles escaped her lips. Kraikugree would turn his head over his shoulder, scolding the girl with an annoyed glare; he was still Chief of the Royal Mer-Guard after all, not some kind of jester! The girl on the other hand, would be caught giving the most fake innocent look while still holding her hand on her mouth. Neither of them dared commenting the unfolding scene, and so eventually the merman made his way back to her with the chest in his arms.

The way he could effortlessly lift and carry that chest reminded Kate that although he may seem clumsy on land, he was still larger and stronger than her, which finally made her regain some composure. She could easily beat him in a running contest, sure, but had he wanted the merman could... well, beat her. Literally...

"...if anything, to return the courtesy I have been treating you with, right?" huffed Kraikugree in a rather passive-aggressive tone as he finally lowered the open chest at her feet.

With a gulp, Kate would thus feel obliged to seek something to try on amidst that impressive treasure, awkwardly swaying her legs as she sat on the side of her bed, undecided. Her eyes glistened with the reflections of the shiny jewellery before her; should she go with the biggest piece in the collection first? Or the smallest? Or the most elaborate?

"T-they are just so... plentiful... and beautiful... where could one get so many?" she asked, trying to make up her own mind in the meantime.

"The seafloor houses many secrets and treasures... some natural, awaiting only to be spotted by the right person like these pearls and corals... some, like these jewels, expertly crafted by either my people or by your very own kind, only to be claimed by the waves from sunken ships..." he began to say while going through the various items inside the chest; she couldn't help but notice a strange glee in his last words.

Unbeknownst to her, it was actually common for many merfolk to believe that everything, including whatever was on land, belonged to the sea and consequently, to them: they would reason that it was where all life had originated... and that just like the cycle of water, any creature or object would ultimately find its way back to the sea; it was only a matter of time. Thus, shipwrecks could only reinforce this concept.

"Perhaps you want to first check if these rings and armbands fit you?" he asked, and she nodded, more than happy to let him guide her choice at that point.

He would then offer the girl a golden ring from the chest and watch with satisfaction how she took it directly from his hand without saying a word. Slowly and carefully perhaps, but without hesitation. The previous day Kate was much more wary of him and would not have allowed him this close to her, he noted.

She tried the golden ring on; it fitted her nicely and she couldn't help being fascinated by it, until a concerning thought occurred to her, making her suddenly and hastily take it off. She had reasoned it would resemble an engagement ring, and she wasn't going to be engaged with that sea creature now, was she?! And what if it used to belong to a couple drowned years past? She couldn't bear its weight... no rings then!

"I wanna try those bracelets" lied Katherine, before quickly adding a "please" at the end of her sentence to not sound rude.

The merman gladly offered her a handful of those: they came in many different types and materials, all precious of course. And she would try on each one, without ever deciding which one to wear. Part of her wanted them all: they were too good to refuse, making her look as fabulous as a princess! But maybe the merman would negatively judge her as a snobby person for that, and certainly she couldn't be wearing everything all day long either...

"I believe you could even use some of these bracelets as, err... anklets?" he suggested, struggling to find the correct word for a moment. "Many mermaids fashion jewellery to embellish their tails, so it would only be reasonable if you similarly embellished your legs, don't you think? Merfolk might even find it flattering if you were to follow our vogue... well I, for one, would certainly be, eheh~"

As he said so, he reached forward to gently grab one of those odd limbs of hers, meaning to help her with wearing an anklet. But she instead pulled them away from him with a gasp, avoiding his touch.

"AH! N-no I actually don't think they would fit as anklets, t-thanks!" replied the girl, getting defensive once more: Kate reminded herself that this was the same creature that had her snatched from the surface, taking everything from her! No amounts of compliments, gifts or good manners would let him have his way with her!

"What about this necklace then? Its emeralds seem a nice match for your wonderful eyes, exalting their beauty..." he insisted, opening the latch and moving to put it around her neck himself, his hands inching closer and closer to her...

Katherine wasn't going to allow the merman to lay his inhuman hands around her neck though, refusing any form of physical contact with him! She thus promptly interposed her hands to block his... only to end up doing the very thing she had almost sworn to avoid: touching! Feeling each other's hands, they both reacted in surprise, him by twitching his hair-tentacles and her by gasping.

Following their touch, their eyes also met, and the girl could only stare with her mouth agape in speechlessness, her cheeks turning red as she was overwhelmed by a plethora of emotions: part of her felt betrayed, tricked into being touched under her own volition... another part of her secretly wished to know more of this merman, his people, his city, in awe at the sheer novelty of such a creature who she had believed to exist only in fantasy books! And yet another part of her actually yearned the comforting touch of a kind, consoling soul after her tragedy at sea...

"Are you ok? Your face is turning red..." asked Kraikugree, unsure whether to be worried or not by the changing hue of the girl's cheeks. It was something new and alien for the merman, which intrigued him just as much as her warm and soft human touch. Forcefully dragging her through the corridors of the Royal Palace didn't count, this was the first time for him as well in which he could actually appreciate her touch! And these were his first proper interactions with a human too, all he knew about mankind he had gathered only through second hand experiences. Which despite being many thanks to his role as an Ambassador granting him access to all reports of any type of contact with other intelligent species, they just couldn't compare with conversing and handholding with the girl.

Meanwhile, only incoherent mumbling came out of Kate as she struggled to find her voice again. Her mind wished to escape his clutches and this damned underwater world she was now stuck in, yet her trembling fingers eventually closed in between his, locking together... sweetly... tightly... longing for the heart-warming hand-holding. Although his wet palms weren't exactly warm, his touch wasn't as scary as she had thought either... plus she had to admit he had only been doing his best to look after her so far; not once had he shown true hostility towards her.

In fact, the merman had gone above and beyond to care for her: looking deeply into his eyes, she remembered that time when he didn't hesitate to kiss her lips to perform mouth-to-mouth breathing... and suddenly she blushed even more, and her heart began beating faster, and she felt butterflies in her stomach, and...

Gurgle.

Following that fuzzy feeling in her stomach, a sudden, audible gurgling sound came from the girl's tummy, awkwardly catching the attention of both Katherine and Kraikugree.

"Heh, I suppose it means that you are hungry, correct?" he said, before gasping at the sudden realisation: "Oh by the Abyss, of course you are! You still haven't had anything to eat since yesterday! How could I have not thought of that! Please forgive me Katherine, I shall soon bring back plenty of food, and treat you with some of our culinary delicacies!"

With that he broke their handholding and turned as quickly as his piscine lower body would allow to dive back underwater, disappearing in a splash.

Katherine found herself alone again, blinking with her arms still outstretched, almost paralyzed in her handholding pose while struggling to process what just happened between them. Indeed, now that she thought about it, she was very hungry! But what was that thing she felt deep within her before the hunger?

During that brief moment together, time had seemed to stop around her and everything else had ceased to matter... in that moment, there were only the two of them: the girl and the merman. And her heart was beating so fast... actually, it was still beating hard against her sternum right now!

She tried to calm down by not thinking about him, but any attempts of removing his image from her mind only brought the merman back at the centre of her attention! Her hands went to her cheeks and noticed her blush didn't want to go away either... what kind of sorcery could this be?!

The girl couldn't yet decide if those were positive or negative feelings; she simply kept developing feelings towards the merman. If anything, they distracted her from her growing sense of hunger for a while, until she remembered she hadn't chosen what kind of jewellery to wear. She didn't have any obligation to do so, but she reasoned it would be a nice thing to do; even the merman deserved some gratitude after all... didn't he?

Rummaging through the treasure chest, she found a beautiful golden leaf garter belt with little branches tipped with pearls. Remembering Kraikugree's suggestion, she carefully slipped it onto her thigh before continuing her search for something else. Following a similar motif, she spotted a pair of emerald earrings with a leaf cut. They seemed to go well with the garter belt, and the merman had found emeralds to compliment her eyes, so it sounded like a perfect choice. Good thing she already had pierced ears too.

Satisfied, she closed the treasure chest and pushed it off to the side while waiting for his return, giddily walking in circles around her room and looking through the glass dome. Even when there weren't merfolk around, there still was the spectacle of the marine world itself, like standing at the centre of a huge aquarium. Except she didn't own the aquarium, but rather the other way around... Nonetheless, she had to admit it was an enjoyable view.

Eventually another splashing sound signalled the return of Kraikugree as he resurfaced from the entrance pool.

"My dear guest... I brought meal for two!" he cheerfully said, coming to sit by the edge of the pool and letting his fish tail hang into the water.

"I thought it would be nice for you to eat in company" he continued with an inviting smile... as much as a smile full of pointy shark teeth could be.

He gestured for her to come sit next to him, pulling out a shiny metal container from under his cloak. Her stomach seemed to growl on cue to the mention of food, so Kate had to accept his invitation, shyly copying his pose as she sat with her feet submerged into the fresh water below. It sent shivers up her back: she wasn't feeling safe this close to the water, and she probably wouldn't feel so for quite a while after falling off of a cruise ship... but at the moment her hunger beat any fear.

"Ah, and I see you dressed up for the occasion" he chuckled, appreciating her choice of jewellery; the earrings intrigued him the most, so he gently moved a hand to touch and inspect them more closely.

She still tried to resist his touch at first, pulling her head back, yet she eventually let his fingertips reach her as she felt a delightful massage on her ear lobes. Little did the merman know he was making her heart and those butterflies in her stomach flutter all over again... stopping only after realizing she was blushing hard again. He wished to investigate what it meant but was worried it would be impolite to bluntly ask the girl about it.

"Ah~! T-thank you. I take it that you like my new earrings..." she said.

"Indeed... Normally the merfolk avoid piercings, or similar permanent body modifications. They are taboo because they are generally used to mark people as criminals or betrayers" he began to explain. "But I heard that on the land are instead used quite profusely for cosmetic purposes or for showing higher social status"

"Oh... that's quite interesting to learn. I wonder which other things our kinds do differently, eheh... We indeed do appreciate earrings, especially on women. And I hope no merman or mermaid mistakes me for a criminal" she giggled.

"I believe they'll be able to tell the difference" chuckled Kraikugree in response, opening the metal container...

He revealed a tray inside, filled with exotic food, all nicely decorated and cut into mouth-watering little morsels! The portions primarily consisted of many kinds of fish, seafood and what seemed to be 'algae salad', all placed into large shells which acted as dishes for each meal. Some were served raw, other cooked, and some had a strange black sauce on the side... cuttlefish ink perhaps? She heard it is used as an ingredient for a certain 'risotto' recipe back on the land, it would only make sense for the merfolk to also use it in a similar fashion. A good question would be how they managed to cook anything underwater... but she was feeling more hungry than chatty now!

"Oh! This food looks delicious..." she said, not minding to quickly grab a morsel with her hands. It appears they would be eating with their hands anyway since cutlery was nowhere to be found in the tray...

"Mmh! These are really good!" she exclaimed, making the merman happy.

"I am very glad to hear that. This is all but a small taste of what a meal at the Royal Palace could be like when welcoming a noteworthy guest. Here, try this one..." he said, and gently brought one of those delicious looking morsels right in front of Kate's lips, as if to handfeed it to her...

Once again, she very awkwardly stared into his eyes for a moment: perhaps he was just trying to be nice with her? It seemed impolite to refuse his food offer now, but why would he feed her like a baby... or worse yet, an animal? Her lips quivered in hesitation, but for the sake of sating her hunger she eventually gave in.

Consequently though, the merman kept hand-feeding the rest of the food to her: the girl was accepting his gesture after all... He even dared playing with her by holding a morsel a bit too high over her mouth so that she would have to stretch her neck. To him, it was an innocent play meant to cheer the girl up... but Katherine disagreed. Especially since she was growing too embarrassed of each time her lips touched his fingertips...

"The food is exquisite, I can now eat on my own thank you" she told him with a sigh, meaning to say 'enough is enough' as she blocked his hand and took the next morsel away from his fingers. However, the merman was visibly taken aback by that, those ear-fins of his drooping almost like a sad dog!

"But... I was treating you with outmost respect!" he gasped; "Being hand-fed is an honour... don't your people do the same?!"

She gave him a puzzled look, before replying:

"umm... maybe if you're a baby or no longer self-sufficient..."

It took a moment for him to elaborate what she meant, and thus why she didn't feel as honoured as he expected, before letting out a disappointed "Oh..."

"So wait, you weren't kidding? You really do these things at the table among respected merfolk? Even say... during a meal with the Royal family?" she asked.

"Absolutely, the King and Queen themselves even have a waiter just for that. I'm serious!" he answered, and this time it was the girl who reacted with a surprised "Oh..."

"I... suppose that's another thing our kinds do differently" she continued, feeling sorry for assuming any derogatory meaning behind his otherwise kind gesture! The merman was indeed only treating her with courtesy and caring for her... even if his manners were different. And she could do better than judging him or his people so quickly.

"Hey, fancy a delicious morsel of this stuff?" she told him with a subtle smile, offering to his snout the morsel she had previously taken from his hand as a way to apologize.

"Absolutely, my dear guest..."

Kraikugree was happy to reciprocate the gesture. With a happy, innocent look on his face, he closed his eyes and opened his mouth wide, ready to accept the food as he inched closer with his snout. But Kate was horrified by it instead: she saw his big, mean shark teeth menacingly approach her delicate fingers... no, no, no! He was going to bite them off!

She screamed, making the merman jolt in shock; her hand instinctively retracted in panic, the precious morsel falling into the water below...

"Ah! Wait... s-sorry... I got scared for nothing..." she tried to apologize in a shaky voice.

"Scared? Why... are you scared of me?" he asked, lowering his head to reach her eye level and look fondly into them.

Kate stared into his eyes in return, not knowing what to say... she didn't want to admit he had indeed scared her with his mighty jaw, yet she recognized that part of her didn't want to accept him, and probably never would. And that suddenly made her eyes tear up, because the other part of her had grown fond of this merman that treated her like a princess.

"M-maybe I just need more time to adjust to all these new things... b-but what if can't? I am a human being... I can never belong to this underwater world and be like its people... a-and when I'm left alone, I still miss my family and friends... and my life above the surface" lamented the girl, coming to hide her face in her hands.

For a while only the sound of her crying filled her room, and she was worried that no one could truly understand her sorrow in that place. But then, she felt his wet arm around her shoulders, and even one of his flippers reached forth to give her lower back some gentle pats of comforting... and when she raised her face again, her forehead met his snout coming to nudge her reassuringly and felt his soothing warm breath.

"Take all the time you need... I know this has been a hard imposition on you. If a man were to catch a mermaid on his fishnet and bring her to his place, I bet that mermaid would feel just like you are feeling now. Unfortunately, I cannot change your fate. Perhaps... if you were to move the hearts of the King and the Queen..." he began to say; what was he alluding to?

"T-the King? A-and Queen? You think they would listen to my pleas?" asked Katherine, trying to wipe her tears.

"It depends... if you are wondering whether they will let you go back to the surface, I am afraid you would receive the same answer I gave you yesterday. Just like me, their priority is the safety of our Kingdom. But... they could help you in other ways. They are very powerful and you probably would be surprised by what their will can achieve..."

"...and you will present them to me?" she wondered; the idea of meeting none other than the two monarchs ruling over the merfolk was equally thrilling and unnerving!

"Most likely... when the right time comes. You see, the King has left the Palace some time ago to swim abroad for a diplomatic meeting with his homologous from the neighbouring Kingdom. And thus the Queen is currently too busy managing our Kingdom on her own. Besides, you have only arrived yesterday... No need to rush things now" he told her, caressing her back.

"Oh, I see..." she said, her crying finally stopping. She even smiled despite the fact that he was wetting her clothing with his hand: his caressing was much more soothing and meaningful than the accidental dampness on her garments.

"Say... are you finishing those? I'm still hungry" she then asked, pointing at some of the food left in the tray, untouched.

"You can have it no problem. Here..." said Kraikugree, holding her close with his arm while resuming his lovely handfeeding with the other.

She happily ate the rest of it with renewed vigour, gladly taking it from his hands this time. She didn't mind being under his embrace either, knowing she could feel safe in that merman's strong but gentle grasp. Although the girl was still too timid to reach around his bare back with her arm to do the same, she now trusted him. And the idea that the merfolk King and Queen might one day come down to listen to her words... it gave her purpose.

She now had hope.