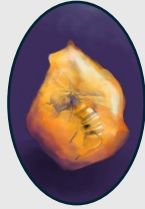


# Prologue



Golden sap wept from a pine and entombed a bee as ancient as Mount Everest. Millions of years later, the amber gem became the prized possession of Jūrātē, the mermaid queen of the Baltic Sea.

The entombed bee bobbed along with the current, the morning sun casting its light through the waves, illuminating the amber's golden glow.

Jūrātē stared into its tiny, ancient eyes. In silence, they spoke: *The Amber Bee chooses the Amber Queen.*

What a fate—to rule over every fish, turtle, seagrass, and oyster in the sea, only to be ruled by a dead bee.

And yet, she wanted this fate with every fiber of her being. She couldn't trust anyone else with this duty. No one else understood the threads that bound everything together the way she did.

How the moon pulled at the sea. How violence and peace spread like tides. The connection between the past, present, and future.

How men on land marched for war while the fish danced for freedom. Better to dance for freedom than march for war, she figured.

Sure, her fate came with its perks. She inherited a castle made entirely of amber that encased an island. Perhaps it was because of the castle — or maybe because she was the daughter of the thunder god, Perkūnas — but the other mermaids revered her.

To the fish, she was a goddess. Even though like every ruler, they still found plenty to grumble about.

That fateful morning, as Jūratė studied the Amber Bee, a hook made of bone dropped into the water before her. She had seen such hooks before—a clever trick humans used to turn fish into food.

However, Jūratė decided that today would be a good day to play a trick back on the human who had set the trap. She reached out with her hands and gently tugged on the rope.

The hook immediately rose, and Jūratė followed. She gave the rope another tug and again, the hook rose higher. Instead of tugging on the rope a third time, Jūratė began quickly swimming up to the surface.

Time slowed for the fisherman as he watched a strange woman shoot up from the water.

Where he expected legs was a fin as wide as he was tall. The giant fin flipped towards him, knocking him off his raft and into the water. In the same motion, she arched backward into a flawless backflip.

She plunged back into the waves, sending ripples through the water.

The two were suspended in the water. The fisherman stared, wide-eyed—clearly, he had never seen a mermaid before.

Jūratė was surprised too. What could she say? He was handsome.

His long hair flowed through the water. His eyes were a piercing green, unlike anything Jūratė had ever seen.

The two swam up to the surface and continued to stare each other in the eye. Jūratė began to giggle, and the person followed suit.

The giggling slowed, and Jūratė introduced herself. She pulled her hand towards her heart.

“Jūratė.” *You – Rah - Teh*

The man had never heard a voice so beautiful. He blushed.

“Kastytis.” *Kuss – Tee - Tiss*

Just then, a sound of thunder rumbled overhead. To Kastytis, this meant he had to get his raft back to safety on the shore.

For Jūratė, it meant something completely different. It was a warning from her father: ‘Don’t be with this person.’

As quickly as she could, Jūratė helped Kastytis back into the raft. Then, she dove beneath the surface, stewing in silence, her thoughts turning against her father.

What the hell is wrong with finding a man handsome?

So when the rumbling eventually stopped and the moon had come up, Jūratė went looking for Kastytis.

She began to call out. “Kastyti! Kastyti!”

Nothing.

Again, Jūratė shouted, her voice rising. “Kastyti! Kastyti!”

Instead of a response from Kastytis, Jūratė saw a lightning bolt crash into the sea. The wrong being had heard the shouting.

Jūratė swiftly dove back beneath the waves and began swimming towards her castle. Ahead, a vast blackness loomed in the sea.

As she approached, she bumped into rocks and boulders, disoriented by the shadow. She wondered if the darkness of the night had played tricks on her eyes.

She made it to the blackness and reached out her hand.

Could he really have done it?!

It was her castle, directly struck by Perkūnas’ lightning bolt. The castle began breaking apart into the expanse of the sea.

Jūratė shrieked. The fish darted away.

Jūratė raced up to the surface, feeling the rain on her skin. She looked to the heavens and screamed. *“I will get my castle back. Whether in this life, the next, or however many generations it will take!”*

Jūratė took a breath, held the Amber Bee, and promised. “Čia pranešimas.” *This is prophecy.*