

UNDER DE SEA
by Paul Watson

The tropical sun shines down on the deck of the SS Melinda. Seagulls bank and swoop for cast-offs from the luxury liner. The sea sparkles below, the azure blue skies allowing an occasional cotton-wool cloud to float across them.

Besides the pool, people lounge, some grumbling that the pool itself is roped off.

A young man in floral Bermuda shorts walks up to the pool, stepping under the ropes with a flame-haired woman beside him, her slim, toned body in a tight sea-patterned blue and green swimsuit, cut high at the hip and low at the chest. He sets a small music player down, taking up a mic, "Ladies and gentlemen, children of all ages, apologies for commandeering the pool for a few minutes, but none of you were coming indoors to the Danse Macabre and, well, we do have to earn our passage somehow. I am the Magician, and the lovely lady besides me is my Assistant. No, you don't need more than that. And some of you apparently don't even want this much information." he directs his gaze to some of the adults lounging. "So, we have come outside to perform a feat of wonder and tempt you all inside when the weather is a little less wonderfully clement."

The assistant starts to climb the diving boards, which gets a lot more attention, while he sets the music player up, the cheery calypso tones of 'Under the Sea' capturing the attention of the children who start to cluster around, forcing their grown-ups to follow suit and form the audience.

The magician pulls an impossibly long pole and equally large hoop from his shorts as the Assistant reaches the top board. "Now, ladies and gentlemen watch as my Assistant performs her death-defying routine." he pushes the hoop into the middle of the pool, holding it in place.

The Assistant stands straight, arms straight up above her head, her red hair shining as it falls over her shoulder, shifting in the sea breeze. As the song gets to the line "Darling, it's better..." she dives, grabbing her ankles and turning over and over as she plunges towards the clear water. At the last moment, she straightens out, back rigid, and knifes through the hoop into the water with barely a splash. There's polite applause, but a high dive, even an impressive one, hardly counts as a spectacular that needs the pool shut down. And the adults aren't shy about saying so until the Assistant breaks the surface, tossing her hair back, revealing that below her waist is not a low cut swimsuit, but a thickly muscular fish's tail, scales in the same iridescent swirl of colours, as she leaps from the water. The children shriek with delight, clapping and squealing as she swims languidly around the circuit of the pool.

The magician pulls part of the rope away, and the children scramble to leap into the water with chants of "Ariel! Ariel!" she swims around and through them, letting their small hands touch her scales, flicking the children with her flukes.

The adults lean back, letting the sun beat down on them, not noticing the sky darkening above, the azure blue churning with dark grey clouds. Spots of rain begin to fall. A few at first, then faster and faster, but barely disturbing the placid surface of the pool. Adults call for children, grabbing towels and sun clothes to retreat.

"Ok, kiddies, time to get out of the pool. We don't want you getting wet." the Assistant smiles, keeping her voice light as she tries to herd them towards the shallow end. The pool turns dark as the Assistant swims to make sure all the children are out of the water and back in the arms of their parents. "That's not good."

The pool continues to darken, even darker than the angry skies overhead. Thunder rolls. Lightning cuts through the clouds and the speaker changes to play "Poor Unfortunate Souls".

"Hey! Get me through that hoop and out of this place!"

The Magician looks down confused, as the last child is scooped out of the water. He shakes himself awake and starts to move the hoop out over the water.

A black tentacle, as thick around as the Assistant's legs, when she had them, breaks the surface, tossing the hoop back at him.

"You know what? I think I'll get out first and hoop secAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!!"

The Assistant screams as a second tentacle wraps around her tail and a third clamps on her shoulder,

the suckers raising welts on her pale skin. Her scream cuts off as a tentacle wraps around her face, and the black squirming mass drags her under the midnight dark waters.

For a moment, there are a few ripples, some bubbles, but no other sign of life.

"Ursula got Ariel." a plaintive voice whimpers.

The braver guests move closer, some to help, others with cellphones at the ready. A tentacle bursts through the rain-lashed waters, tossing a scrap of iridescent cloth aside before withdrawing and those brave souls decide on the better part of valour.

Once more the pool is quiet, almost calm. Until the streaks of bright scarlet start to appear in the water, drifting into slicks of red. That's when the screaming really starts.

A bony hand breaks the surface, disturbing the crimson surface of the pool. The screaming intensifies as the skeletal mermaid swims around the pool. It stops as its empty black eye-sockets spy the Magician, beckoning him closer. Rather sensibly, he flees ungainly in the opposite direction, almost colliding with the ship's captain.

"Ah, quite a trick there, son, but maybe dial it down a bit. It's scaring the little ones."

"What? Oh, right, trick, yes. Captain, by any chance do you have a chapel on board?"

"Of course. Planning on making that girl of yours honest?"

"What? Oh, no, not for that."

"Well, you let me know if you change your mind. A captain's blessing is worth more than a priest's at sea."

"You do the blessings yourself?"

"I do. Priests are unlucky on ship."

"Right." he replies weakly, as the music changes to a distorted, slowed down haunting version of "I Want to Go Where the People Are", staring at the pool as pointed bone fingers dig into the deck and drag a skeletal figure out. Empty black eye sockets fix on the open doorway. A mouth too full of too many too sharp teeth opens. "I'd...I'd best get to my room." The thunder rolls, sounding like mocking laughter.