

THE

A Short Story

# MERMAID NECKLACE



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# The Mermaid Necklace

by

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Warm, early morning sun beat down on the wooden deck. Cerulean sea lapped at the moored vessel. The Delta mainland slowly came to life: tavern owners set chairs outside, and shopkeepers pulled up the blinds.

Janni leaned on the deck rail, taking in the scene. Niels strolled back towards the boat from a nearby food cart; he carried their breakfast.

"Here." Niels walked over the gangplank and then handed Janni a plate.

Janni grimaced at it. "I miss my bacon sarnies. Feels like I've eaten way too much foreign muck the last few weeks."

Niels nodded and sat on a barrel. "I know what ya mean. I got the standard brekkie, but I dunno what the little black things are."

Janni poked one. It had a hole through the middle. He picked it up, chewed it, and then spat over the side of the boat into the water. "Really salty. Foul." With his fingers, he clumsily wrapped the greasy fried egg inside the pancake. "Talk about oily! What's wrong with a good pat of butter?"

Niels chuckled and flicked his black things into the sea. "Quit yer moaning. It's good ter give the locals some custom."

Janni stared at the ocean as he ate. The white shores of the Delta, that seaweedy, salty smell, and the unending azure expanse

beyond never failed to hold his attention. "What's today's plan, then?"

"The usual." Niels used his pancake to mop up the dripping egg. "Unload. Check stock. Decide what we'll do now we're here."

It was ten days since Janni had been in Kamikan. They hadn't intended to come back here now, but the bomb in their home country, Pallexon, and the subsequent trade and travel restrictions had meant it was the best option.

He and Niels hadn't rushed down the river. They'd done a little trading on the way, knowing they may as well make the most of the unexpected journey. The only frustration was not knowing if their Ma was alright, back in Pallexon. She'd been nowhere near the bomb, so Janni could only hope she'd been sensible enough to keep out of the upheaval. When Niels's face clouded over from time to time, Janni knew it was on his mind, too.

He gulped down the mint tea Niels had bought. It tasted like grass and didn't have the same kick as coffee. He stood and stretched. The view made up for the weird food.

The Delta, the trading and fishing town at the mouth of the Great River, was dominated by a series of islands at the river's mouth. Most were home to sumptuous pearly-white villas with bright climbing plants and private courtyards.

The Sultan's palace draped itself over the largest island. Janni took in the elegant white and blue edifice, overawed, as always. Pallexon had nothing like that—their buildings were far more utilitarian.

A plethora of graceful arches and towers adorned the island palace, and palms waved from hidden gardens. Terracotta tiles

lined the roofs. The glint of metal catching the sun showed where guards were stationed.

A more welcoming air surrounded the mainland town. It consisted of cheerful yellow and orange stone houses. The wharf was backed with a row of compact warehouses, and a market often ran along the seafront and back into town.

"Come on, stop daydreaming. We've got a ton of boxes t'shift. And we'll have to do 'em by hand as I don't have the dosh to hire a fancy magic person." Niels knelt on deck and fiddled with the lock on the hold.

Janni sighed. He'd lost his enthusiasm for this trip. It took longer than normal to kick himself into gear. "I'll go get a trolley an' ropes."

As he trudged over the gangplank, a Tamarin on the next ship along made a crate neatly sail out of the hold with Tangible Magic. The dark-skinned woman stacked it on top of a pile without even touching it.

If only he and Niels could learn to do that. The Tamarins thought charging to hire all the wharf equipment, or a Tangible magician for the day, was a great plan to make life more difficult for foreigners like them.

Elina, a friend back in Kamikan, had tried to explain Tangible Magic to him, but it went over his head. All that stuff about connecting to objects with your mind. Admittedly, he'd been a tad distracted. Something about being with Elina had made it hard to concentrate on anything.

Janni reached the warehouse they rented space in. Niels had already unlocked their storage area, so Janni extracted the trolley, piled the ropes on it, and trailed back to the ship.

He dragged the wheeled cart over the gangplank and carried the ropes up to Niels. "Here ya go. I'll get into the hold." He climbed down the ladder into the depths of the boat and attached the hooked ropes, which Niels had lowered down, onto the nearest crate. Then he shifted it under the deck opening and banged on it twice as a signal.

Niels hauled it up and then chucked the rope down for the next.

The morning dragged. Shifting crates of fruit and veg was never going to be as exciting as flying on magic carpets, trekking through jungles, and rescuing people from prison—his adventures of the last few weeks. Everything felt flat and boring now.

He'd had his eyes opened to the real situation in his home country: the government exploiting young children as slave labour. For him to return to his normal life after that revelation didn't feel right. A restlessness pervaded his thoughts. He wanted to help, but until he could go home, he couldn't do anything. And what could he hope to do anyway? Janni shook his head as he attached another crate to a hook.

Finally, the hold was empty, and Janni and Niels stacked the crates neatly in the warehouse.

"Right, we need an inventory list. Go and get the records, and we'll update them." Niels pointed at the ship.

Janni wandered back and found the paperwork, and they spent the rest of the morning reviewing the perishable fruits and deciding where to sell them. They made notes on the longer lasting vegetables and, finally, the non-food items. Niels often picked up household and kitchen goods and utensils for a bit of trade when edibles weren't in season.

When the notes were finished, including a list of things to stock up on, they headed over to the nearest eating house for lunch.

Spicy smells wafted out of the door. Old men in kaftans puffed on hookahs in relaxed fashion outside the door, and Janni coughed as the drifting smoke caught the back of his throat.

He ducked to enter the low door and scowled at the bottles of red wine ranged along the walls. "I'd kill for a beer."

"Yeah, me too. Come on, little bro, snap out of it. You've been in a right mood all morning."

Janni just grunted.

"Grab a table, then. I'll find us some food." Niels walked over to the bar where a short dark-skinned man in loose white clothes with a jaunty red fez smiled and bowed.

Janni didn't feel like talking to anyone and squeezed into a booth tucked in the corner. The table next to him had a loud group of well-dressed Tamarins. Janni wondered how long the men took to groom their oily goatees every morning. He ran a self-conscious hand through his own messy, strawberry-blond hair, then sighed. No one cared how he looked, anyway.

Niels slipped onto the chair next to him, carrying a pitcher of water and a couple of tankards. "This is the best they can do if you don't fancy wine."

Janni shrugged and poured himself water, and they sat in silence until the bartender brought food. They thanked him, and Janni picked up a fork.

"What is it?" he asked Niels.

"Some kind of fruity chicken stew."

"Any bread?" Janni poked at the yellow granules on the side of the plate. He couldn't remember what that was, either.

Niels rolled his eyes and indicated the bartender returning with a basket of flatbread.

"That'll do, I guess." Janni dug into the meal, not convinced that fruit and meat really belonged on the same plate.

A snippet of conversation from the Tamarins in the next booth caught his ear.

"... heard it from a council vizier. The Grand Vizier's taking a ship up to Kamikan."

Janni glanced casually at them. The group of five sat close; the man who had just spoken bent forward.

A woman replied. "What does he hope to achieve? So a few dock workers were killed when a bomb went off in Pallexon. What's that to us?"

Janni raised his eyebrows at Niels, who pursed his lips and shuffled closer.

The first man spoke in a low voice. "The Pallexis think the bomb had Tamarin origins. They imprisoned a lot of Tamarins. Apparently, there was an arson attack to attempt to free the prisoners, but they recaptured a lot of them."

Janni winced. His rescue mission a few weeks ago had been to release Kara, an innocent Tamarin friend caught up in the aftermath of the bombing by mistake. He strained his ears to hear the conversation.

"I didn't know about that." A new voice. "Could have some repercussions."

"Yes, I think it could. Not to mention I hear there's been a protest up in Kamikan, petitioning our government to negotiate the prisoners' release."

The woman spoke again. "So, the Sultan has to get involved to keep the peace." Her voice dropped to a murmur. "I'm concerned it will escalate the situation needlessly, though."

Janni didn't catch the next sentence. One of the men called the bartender over for a wine refill, and their conversation turned to palace gossip.

A wave of guilt overcame Janni. He shifted uncomfortably in his chair. His mouthful of food turned dry, and he gulped some water down.

After a few minutes, the group of Tamarins left, without saying anything else of interest.

"That sounds pretty serious. I hope it doesn't lead to anything worse." Niels pulled a piece of bread apart.

"I'm glad Kara hadn't waited this long to be released." Janni muttered. "But it makes me wonder if we did the right thing."

Niels let out a long breath. "Honestly, I think it was for the best. They shouldn't be holding all those people without proof. It was inevitable it would cause problems, and it ain't your fault."

Janni nodded. "But the fact Simeon managed to burn down half the building during the rescue weren't ideal."

Niels rolled his eyes. "Yeah, well that's what happens when you let kids loose with magic."

Janni thumped Niels lightly on the arm. "Hey, they weren't that young. And some of the magic was pretty cool. You should've seen Elina in the jungle. She fought off a giant serpent with magic."

"Yeah, I know. You've told me, like, twenty times. I think you've got it bad, little bro."

Janni punched him on the arm again, harder, conscious of a flush rising in his face. "Dunno what you're on about."



Niels chuckled. "Whatever you say. Listen, I need to go chat up some business this afternoon. But you don't seem in the mood for conversation. While I do the small talk, you take a walk around the market. See if you can spot any good deals. You know what we're short of. And get some of those weird cooking pots, the ones with a funnel-shaped lid."

"Alright." Janni downed the last of the water, wiped his mouth on a napkin, and stood. "I'll see you back at the boat."

Niels nodded, and Janni strolled out of the eating house, hands in his pockets. He took a left, winding his way down the narrow cobbled streets. Wicker baskets with trinkets for sale sat outside orange houses. Jaunty displays of ceramic pots, ornamental lizards, and multi-coloured floating glow globes lined the paths.

The sun still shone, not as powerful as earlier in the year, but pleasantly warm.

Old ladies sat in doorways on rocking chairs chatting to each other, and a very grumpy looking cat hissed at Janni as he walked past. He ignored it.

On the seafront, the market was in full swing. Janni followed his nose to the food section, where meat was frying, and hessian bags of red, yellow and green spices sat on striped mats. He could taste the fragrant powder on the air.

Janni didn't know exactly what all the spices were. Salt and pepper were fancy enough for him. But the conical cooking pots and ceramics were popular items further up the Great River, back towards Kamikan. He placed a couple of orders for picking up later before wandering through the textiles section.

The gaudy silk rugs and throws were eye-catching, and he kept a look out for flying carpets, but couldn't see any. He supposed they

tended to be found in specialist shops—like the one Elina's father ran.

Finally, he came to the stalls for trinkets and jewellery. Rubbish that women liked, in his opinion. He and Niels didn't trade in fripperies.

Janni slipped behind the stalls and came out on the seafront proper. Bored of the market now, he sat on a flat rock and stared out to sea. The palace sparkled in the distance, and the white walls of the villas on the nearest island were almost blinding. The mesmerising sea beyond calmed him.

Ten days since he'd said goodbye to his new friends. The previous couple of weeks had been such a whirlwind; he hadn't had time to process it properly yet.

Was Niels right? Did he have a mind full of a certain someone? He could see Elina now: her focus as she concentrated on magic, her growing confidence, her dancing black eyes and wavy, dark hair.

He'd only known her a couple of weeks, but it'd been natural to kiss her before he had to leave—and again as he said goodbye. It'd felt right at the time, and as far as he could tell, she thought the same. Now, he had to admit he couldn't stop thinking about her.

She was so different to any other girl he'd met. A fascinating combination of enthusiasm, naiveté, and stubbornness.

The conversation he'd overheard earlier concerned him, too—were his friends safe in Kamikan? What if Elina got caught up in the protests? He clenched his fists, feeling useless. It hardly seemed fair that he, a Pallexi, was in the least danger of all.

A shuffling sound made him look round. An old woman hobbled towards him, toothless, brown, no shoes, and swathed in a shapeless white kaftan.

"Looking for mermaids, ducky?" she wheezed.

"Mermaids?" Janni laughed briefly. Not exactly the first thing on his mind.

"Oh yes. Mermaids. They pop up from time to time. Mainly to magical folks. Those what can do Biological."

"I know someone who's good at Biological," Janni said, without thinking, and then felt his cheeks warm.

"Ah, it's not the mermaids on your mind." The old woman gave him a toothless grin and pulled a square bag off her back. "This might be what you want."

She opened the top flap of the peddler's bag to display a number of necklaces. Pursing her lips, she selected one and handed it to Janni.

He took it, wondering what the old crone was up to. It was a tiny stone carving of a mermaid hung on a gold chain.

"Hematite. Lovely work. Yours for two rykals. Maybe your young lady could be tempted to come mermaid spotting with you." She leered at Janni with another grin.

He rolled his eyes but, somehow, his hand went to his pocket and extracted the coins. It was a bit pricey, but they'd made a profit on their last sale.

"Thank 'ee, young man. All the best to you and your young lady." She took the coins and handed him a twist of paper for the necklace before tottering off.

Janni, bemused but comforted, wrapped the necklace in the paper and slipped it into his pocket.

Elina had told him it would be her birthday while he was away. It would look normal to bring her a present, right? A smile crept onto his lips as he stared out to sea.

Time to admit to himself that he couldn't wait to get back to Kamikan.

Thanks for reading *The Mermaid Necklace!*

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