



## *The Mermaid's Madness (Preview)*

by Jim C. Hines



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**The Mermaid's Madness**

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## Chapter 1

Princess Danielle Whiteshore of Lorindar clung to the rail at the front of the ship, staring out at the waves. If this wind kept up, she might become the first princess in history to welcome the undine back from their winter migration by vomiting into their waters. The weather had been mild for most of the morning, but the skies had changed as the sun passed its peak. It was as if the sea now took a perverse glee in tormenting her.

“Drink this.” Queen Beatrice’s voice was sympathetic as she climbed up from the main deck, a steaming tin mug in one hand. She pressed the mug into Danielle’s hand. “Tea laced with honey, just the way you like it.”

The queen had discarded the royal gowns of court for clothes that bordered on improper. With her dark blue breeches and loose, pale shirt, she could almost have passed for a sailor. A worn blue flat cap covered her hair, save for a few wisps which fluttered by her ear like tiny gray banners. Only her long jacket, decorated with white ribbon and trimmed in gold, marked her as royalty. That and the silver necklace she wore, which held a black pearl the size of Danielle’s thumbnail.

Anyone could see the queen’s delight at being out to sea. If not for the rules of propriety, Danielle had no doubt Beatrice would right now be climbing the rigging with the crew or manning the crow’s nest to watch for merfolk.

For *undine*, she corrected herself. That was what they preferred to be called.

Casual as Beatrice’s attire was, she looked far more comfortable than Danielle. Danielle’s handmaids had packed for her, and they apparently had as little experience at sea as Danielle herself. The heavy cloak and cream-colored gown might have been acceptable for a casual day back at the palace. Here on the ship, she was constantly struggling to avoid tripping over her own skirt. Spray from the waves clung like tiny glass beads to the purple velvet of her cloak. She was tempted to ask permission to raid the queen’s wardrobe.

For the moment, she merely sipped her tea and did her best to keep from throwing up. The honey wasn’t enough to mask the more pungent taste of ginger

and other spices.

“Too strong?” asked Beatrice.

“Not at all.” Danielle forced herself to take another drink. She had grown spoiled over the past year. Living with her stepmother and stepsisters, she had been lucky to brew the occasional cup of lukewarm tea using leftover leaves, and honey was a luxury remembered only from her most distant childhood.

Beatrice laughed. “Snow never has learned to make proper tea.”

“What did she put in here?”

“I’ve learned it’s best not to ask. She said it would help your stomach.”

Though Snow White’s culinary skills left much to be desired, Danielle trusted her. Snow *had* saved her life the year before, after all. The least Danielle could do was drink her overly pungent tea.

If nothing else, the tea helped wash the salty taste of the sea from her mouth. She took another sip, then turned to watch the *Lord Lynn Margaret* following in the distance. The *Saint Tocol* trailed them on the opposite side, the three ships forming an elongated triangle in the sea.

“You’ll adjust.” Beatrice clapped a hand on Danielle’s back in a manner more fitting a deckhand than the queen of Lorindar. “I do feel for you. I’ve never suffered from seasickness, but when I was pregnant with Armand, I spent three months unable to eat anything more exciting than oatmeal. Even then, it was an even wager whether I would keep the oatmeal down.”

“Yet in spite of your sympathy, you still chose to inflict this misery on me?” A year ago, the mere thought of joking with the queen would have driven Danielle to her knees to beg forgiveness. Now she narrowed her eyes in mock anger. “I never imagined such cruelty from you, Your Majesty.”

The laugh lines on Beatrice’s face deepened. She leaned closer, lowering her voice. “If I wanted you ill, I’d let your husband take the helm.”

Danielle grinned and cupped her eyes as she turned to search for the prince. Though Beatrice had formally given command of the ship over to her son, Prince Armand had yet to take the wheel. The last time Danielle saw him, he had been inspecting the cannons on the right side of the main deck.

The *starboard* side. Armand had inherited his mother’s love of sailing, and while they both tried to hide it, neither Beatrice nor Armand could conceal their amusement when Danielle stumbled over yet another nautical term.

Beatrice folded her arms on the railing and leaned out, peering into the water. “I spared you this voyage in the fall when Jakob was born, but there are limits. King Theodore can avoid these journeys if he chooses, but as future queen of Lorindar, you must be presented to the undine.”

Her words brought Danielle’s nausea back in full force. She gulped the rest of her tea and took a deep breath.

“Also, it was past time you set foot on this marvelous galleon.” Beatrice’s

eyes positively twinkled. "It was named in your honor, after all."

"Yes, I know." Danielle remembered her horror the first time Armand broke the news. "They couldn't come up with anything better than the *Glass Slipper*?"

The queen shrugged. "I'm told *The Midnight Pumpkin* was also discussed."

"There was no pumpkin! I never--" Danielle caught herself. "You're teasing me again."

"Perhaps."

Danielle frowned. Beneath the queen's exuberance, she sounded distracted. Her smile faded too quickly, and she kept turning away. Normally, Beatrice gave her undivided attention to whoever she was with, whether that was an emperor or a stablehand. "Bea?"

"Does the tea help?" Beatrice asked without looking up.

Danielle nodded. "Why didn't Snow make some when we first left?"

Another absent smile. "Over one hundred young, strong, hardworking sailors crew the *Glass Slipper*. You should be grateful Snow remembered you at all."

From a platform near the top of the front mast--the foremast--came a shout. "Undine ahead!"

All at once men were racing about, hauling ropes and furling the sails. From the quarter deck, Armand cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, "Ease away tack and bowline! Stand by to take in fore topsail!" He waited a beat, watching the men work, then yelled, "Haul taut, and up topsail. Stand by on main topsail!"

He might as well have been speaking a foreign language, but Danielle could hear Beatrice whispering the commands along with him.

Danielle leaned back, studying her husband. His sleeves were pushed back, exposing the lean muscles of his arms. Armand had allowed his dark hair to grow longer over the winter, and Danielle still hadn't decided whether or not she liked the new beard. It filled out his narrow features, but tended to tickle at inopportune times.

Smiling at the memories, Danielle edged around the foremast to the very front of the railing, trying to stay out of the way as the crew climbed up to take in the sails. Nobody had ever warned Danielle how crowded a ship could be. The three masts--four if you counted the bowsprit spearing out from the front of the ship--all trailed ropes and rigging, as though a giant spider had spun its web over the entire ship. With eight cannons secured to the main deck, as well as the longboats, there was hardly room for two men to pass each other.

Danielle watched as her friend Talia made her way across the deck. The chaos didn't seem to bother her in the slightest. She glided through the crew like

she had been born at sea, though from what Danielle knew of Talia's past, she hadn't even set foot on a sailing ship until her late teens when she fled her desert kingdom in the south.

Shortly after Talia's birth, fairies had bestowed upon her a number of gifts, not the least of which was supernatural grace. Danielle might have been jealous if she hadn't also known the price Talia paid for those gifts. Few knew the true story of Sleeping Beauty, how her century of slumber had been broken by an awakening to make nightmares pale.

"Are you ready?" Beatrice asked, drawing Danielle's attention back to her responsibilities as princess.

"Does it matter?" She knew she shouldn't be nervous. All she had to do was stand there . . . stand there and represent the entire kingdom of Lorindar. She who had spent most of her life in rags, with only the birds and the rats for company. Her short time as princess of Lorindar couldn't overcome a lifetime as Cinderwench, and there were still times she thought this new life a dream, an illusion to be swept away come midnight.

"Not really, no." Beatrice gave her a reassuring smile.

To the undine, nobility flowed from mother to child, so it was the queen who was most revered. The former queen of the undine had passed away several seasons earlier, leaving the husband to rule, but they still expected to be greeted by the queen of Lorindar. The queen, and now the princess as well.

Danielle should have been presented the year before, but she had been touring the kingdom with Armand when the undine returned to Lorindar's waters. She had planned to see the undine in the fall, when they left for warmer waters to the south. Her stepsisters had ruined that plan, kidnapping Armand and enslaving Danielle, then trying to steal her unborn child. Even after Danielle returned home, she had been in no condition for a voyage at sea.

She touched her stomach, remembering the dark magic her stepsister Stacia had used to rush her pregnancy along. Danielle had been terrified of what that magic would do to her son. She still thanked God every night that Jakob had been born healthy. No healer could find the slightest problem, and even Snow assured her he was free of any taint or curse.

Beatrice offered her hand, gently guiding Danielle to the railing at her right. "Lorindar is fortunate to have such a princess." Turning back toward Armand, she raised her voice. "Lorindar would do well to have a less distracted prince, though. Hurry, Armand!"

Armand was already making his way toward the bow. Etiquette didn't actually require his presence. Indeed, he could have stayed behind with King Theodore, who was known to have the same reaction to sailing as Danielle. But Armand was his mother's son, and rarely passed up the opportunity to sail.

Behind him, two sailors lugged a wooden chest. The chest was watertight,

sealed as tightly as the ship's hull with pitch and beeswax.

By tradition, Lorindar presented the undine a gift each year to welcome them back from their winter migration. For as long as King Posannes had ruled, that gift had been a chest of strawberry preserves. Last year, Posannes had given Beatrice the pearl she now wore in return, saying he had gotten the better part of the deal.

"Man the yards!" Armand shouted. The crew in the yards came to attention, arms held back so they could grasp the ropes for balance. It was an impressive salute, over fifty men stretched out on the horizontal beams which held the now-furled sails.

Talia climbed onto the forecastle, then stepped aside to make room for Armand to follow. The prince leaned down to haul the chest after him, aided by the men below.

"There." Beatrice rested one hand on the rail as she pointed toward the distant shapes. "Where is Snow? I wanted her here as well."

If not for Beatrice, Danielle would have mistaken the undine for rocks in the water. Only their heads and shoulder broke the surface. They swam in an inverted V formation, reminding her of geese.

Without warning, they disappeared beneath the water.

"What happened?" asked Danielle.

Armand stepped toward her, sliding one hand around her waist. Such informality would have earned stern words from the chancellor back at the palace, but such rules were less important here at sea. Danielle leaned against him, the warmth of his body a pleasant contrast to the cool winds. He pointed to the waves where the undine had vanished. "Watch."

The lead undine launched into the air, arching over the water and disappearing with hardly a splash. Two more followed, leaping even higher than the first. Faster and faster they flew from the water in pairs, so close Danielle was amazed they didn't collide.

"There are more than I remember," Armand commented. "I wonder if another tribe has joined with Posannes'."

"Perhaps," Beatrice said, frowning.

Armand flashed a boyish grin as he turned around. "Load the cannons!"

On either side of the main deck, men jammed long rods down the cannons, packing the powder into the barrels. They hadn't bothered to haul cannonballs up onto the deck, as this was only a show for the undine.

"Wait." Beatrice was still studying the water, though the undine were too far away to make out any detail.

"Hold!" Armand shouted. To his mother, he asked, "What is it?"

"I'm not sure." Beatrice sounded troubled, but uncertain. She started to say more, then shook her head.

Armand watched Beatrice a moment longer, then turned back to the crew. "Ready salute!"

The men used ropes and pulleys to haul the cannons into position at the edge of the deck, the barrels protruding through wide gaps in the railing.

Armand glanced at the queen again. When she didn't speak, he raised his arm and shouted, "Fire!"

At each cannon, men brought long poles with burning fuses over the cannons. The resulting explosions sent a shudder through the *Glass Slipper*. The cannons bucked from the recoil, straining at the ropes. Dark smoke billowed from the sides of the ship. Danielle wrinkled her nose at the burnt-metal smell.

"I'm sorry," Armand said, still smiling. His tone sounded not the slightest bit apologetic. "I forgot to tell them to only use half a charge."

"Yes. I seem to recall you 'forgetting' last year, too." Beatrice shook her head. "Your eyes are younger than mine. Do any of you see King Posannes?"

Talia stepped to the railing on Beatrice's left, peering through the smoke. "Not yet. What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I hope," said Beatrice. "But you should get down to the main deck. All of you."

By now, the breeze had begun to clear the worst of the smoke, and the undine were close enough for Danielle to make out individuals through the haze. Their skin was a deep tan, a few shades lighter than Talia's. Most were bare-chested, the men and women both, though a few wore tightfitting gray skins that left their arms uncovered. Some wore weapons, mostly knives and slender fishing spears, secured to harnesses around their arms and chests.

A single mermaid surfaced ahead of the rest.

"Who is that?" Armand stepped past his mother, cupping a hand over his eyes. "Where is Posannes?"

"Armand, I said--" Beatrice's lips tightened. "Talia, get him out of here."

Armand moved to the railing. "If there's a threat, I have to--"

He yelped in surprise as Talia kicked the back of his knees. She caught his collar as he dropped, dragging him toward the ladder.

Armand reached around to grab her wrists, trying to pry her hands free. With a shrug, Talia released her grip, dropping him. Armand lurched to his feet, and Talia shoved him backward. His heel hit the chest of strawberries and he fell again, tumbling down onto the main deck below.

"Talia!" Danielle peered down to see her husband sprawled atop two fallen crewmen. "Are you all right, Armand?"

"He should be. I aimed him at a deckhand." Talia hopped over the chest, following him down.

"You too," Beatrice said to Danielle. "Quickly. Get Snow."

Danielle started to obey, then turned back to take the queen's hand. "If



there's danger, you should leave too.”

Beatrice shook her head. “Please, Danielle.”

The sea just ahead of the ship exploded in a fountain of white spray. The lead mermaid arched through the air, higher than any of the others had leapt. Perhaps her twin tails gave her greater strength, or maybe the others had simply held back.

“Lirea,” Beatrice whispered.

A scream tore from Lirea's throat, a ragged, furious sound that pierced Danielle's ears, nearly driving her to her knees. Danielle lurched forward, grabbing Beatrice's arm and pulling her out of the way as Lirea cleared the railing.

The mermaid twisted to avoid the lines. She staggered as landed, ramming the butt of her spear into the deck for balance. Her tails were gone, replaced by feet. Even as Danielle watched, the fins running down the outside of Lirea's legs flattened against the skin and disappeared. The scales on her feet and ankles sank into her skin, leaving faint trickles of watery blood. The rest of her scales remained, like purple mail protecting her legs and waist.

Lirea was thinner than the other undine. Her skin clearly outlined her ribs and collarbones. Had she been human, Danielle would have guessed her to be in her late teens. A worn harness crossed between small breasts. A dagger hung on one side of the harness, the handle jutting forward. She wore a necklace of polished oyster shells which appeared far too large for her slender form. A small gold hoop shone in one ear.

Before Danielle could move, Lirea leveled her spear at the queen. She coughed, spitting seawater onto the deck, then said, “You're trespassing in our waters.”

Her voice was hoarse, as if she were recovering from a nasty cold. Danielle started to move between them, but Lirea swung her spear, cutting Danielle's arm. Blood seeped into her sleeve.

“You're looking well, Lirea,” Beatrice said calmly. “Where is your father?”

Lirea moved closer, driving Beatrice back until she stood against the railing. Lirea glanced at the chest. With a look of disgust, she placed a foot against the chest and shoved. It slid from the forecastle and crashed onto the main deck. “We are undine. We have no need for human fruits. If you wish to travel our ocean in peace, you'll bring us gold. Gold and my sister.”

“Your sister?” Beatrice glanced at the main deck, where Armand and the men had already gathered with crossbows and spears.

“Don't play games with me,” Lirea said. “I hear *everything*. I heard you conspiring with Lannadae and my father, just as I hear them planning to attack.” She jabbed her spear into Beatrice's side, hard enough to make the queen gasp. A

small circle of blood darkened Beatrice's shirt beneath her jacket.

"It's nothing," Beatrice whispered, waving Danielle back.

Lirea turned to face Armand and the crew. "Take another step and she dies."

Armand raised his hand. "Let my mother go, and I will--"

"I am queen of the Ilowkira tribe," Lirea shouted. "I will speak to your queen and her alone."

"You killed Posannes." Beatrice ignored the weapon pressed against her ribs. "Just as you killed Levanna."

Water dripped down Lirea's face, making it appear that she was crying. "They betrayed me. Every day, the waves whisper of their treachery."

Motion near the rigging caught Danielle's attention. Talia was climbing one of the lines on the port side. She was already high enough to jump to the forecandle, but even Talia wasn't fast enough to stop Lirea before she could kill Beatrice. Not without something to distract Lirea.

Danielle knew little of ships, but she had been to the docks often enough to see the rats climbing the ropes and scurrying over barrels and crates, just as she had seen the cats prowling the docks in search of prey. Every vessel was home to far more than the crew.

All of Danielle's life, animals had helped her. Doves and rats assisted with her chores, cleaning the fireplace or picking slugs from the gardens. Years later, those same doves had blinded her stepmother and scarred her stepsisters. When her stepsisters kidnapped her, the rats had helped her escape.

It was then, imprisoned by her stepsisters, that she had learned to speak to the animals without words. She didn't know how or why they understood her. Perhaps it was another gift from her mother, like the glass slippers and the silver gown she had worn to the ball. All Danielle knew was that they came to her aid.

Never taking her eyes from Lirea, she called in silence. *Help me, my friends.*

"Your father told me what happened to you," Beatrice was saying. "He wanted to help you."

"I've had enough 'help'." Lirea's words were like needles stabbing deep into Danielle's ears. "Give me Lannadae, and we will allow you to return home. Refuse and we will hunt you all, from the smallest fishing boat to your mightiest warship."

Beatrice bowed her head. "Your father loved you, but he was no fool. How did you do it, Lirea? How did you kill him?"

"He forced me to it!" There was no mistaking the tears trailing down her cheeks now. "He thought of me as a twisted freak, a perversion who should have been left to die. I know what he would have done if I hadn't stopped him."

"He only wanted you to be well again. To be happy." Beatrice started to

reach for the spear. Lirea tensed, and Beatrice drew back her hand.

“That’s what he told me,” Lirea said. “But I heard the truth behind his words.”

A stifled exclamation from the main deck drew Danielle’s attention to the three rats scrambling up the ladder. Armand had grabbed another crewman, stopping him from crying out. Armand met Danielle’s eyes and nodded. Armand was unarmed, but a twitch of his finger signaled the others to ready their weapons.

Lirea didn’t notice as the rats climbed the starboard ladder onto the forecastle and raced through the puddles left by her arrival.

*Hurry.*

Lirea spun, thrusting the long horn on the end of her spear at Danielle’s stomach. “Surrender Lannadae, or we will kill your crew, starting with this one.”

Danielle raised her head, trying to match the queen’s calm, though her hands were shaking.

“Killing her won’t end your pain.” For the first time, anger hardened the queen’s words.

Danielle readied herself. *Now!*

The first rat sank his teeth into the back of Lirea’s unprotected ankle. At the same time, Danielle swept her arm up, knocking the spear away.

Lirea stumbled toward the railing as a second rat latched onto the side of her foot. She swung her spear, striking the third rat.

“Take her!” Armand yelled, grabbing the ladder.

Talia was faster. She dropped to the forecastle and kicked low to sweep Lirea’s legs from beneath her. While Lirea recovered, Talia grabbed Danielle’s arm and flung her into Armand. The two of them fell together, to be caught by the crew below.

Armand jumped to his feet and grabbed a crossbow from one of the men. “If you get a clear shot, take it.”

“Your Highness, the undine are attacking the ship!”

Armand swore. “You four, stay with me. Everyone else get to the sides. Raise anchor and signal the *Tocohl* and the *Margaret*. Their archers will have a better angle to shoot the undine off our hulls.”

On the forecastle, Talia was trying to get to the queen, but Lirea had already recovered. Lirea jabbed twice with her spear, driving Talia back and keeping Beatrice trapped at the front of the forecastle. The third time, Talia twisted sideways, catching the shaft and yanking Lirea closer. Talia stepped forward and drove the edge of her other hand into the mermaid’s throat.

Danielle had seen Talia drop men twice her size with that move, but Lirea merely staggered, stumbling into the pinrail that circled the foremast. The undine must have stronger throats, or else their windpipes were better protected.

Talia hadn’t released her grip on the spear. A quick kick to Lirea’s wrist

broke her hold, and Talia yanked the spear free. She spun the weapon overhead and swung.

Lirea jumped around the mast, colliding with Beatrice and knocking the queen into the railing. Beatrice caught herself, then rammed her elbow into Lirea's side. Someone cheered as Beatrice shoved the mermaid back toward Talia.

Lirea pulled her knife from her harness, slashing wildly. Talia rapped the shaft of her spear against Lirea's wrist, then stepped back, using the tip to cut Lirea's arm above the elbow. Lirea barely avoided the follow-up thrust, which gouged wood from the rail.

"Hurry," Danielle urged. She wanted to help, but knew she would only be in the way.

Beatrice was keeping the mast between herself and the two fighters as she tried to get to safety. The queen was a capable fighter, but Talia's skills were inhuman. Armand was already shoving his way to the edge of the forecastle to help her down.

Lirea screamed again, the sound so painful several men dropped their weapons. Even Talia staggered back. Still screaming, Lirea thrust her knife at Talia.

Talia twirled out of the way, then swung the spear in a wide arc to crack against Lirea's back, breaking Lirea's scream and the spear both.

The impact flung Lirea directly into the queen, driving them both into the railing. Lirea stepped back, and Danielle's heart knotted.

"Beatrice," Danielle whispered.

Lirea's knife was stuck deep in the queen's chest.

"Mother!" Armand started toward the ladder, but one of the crew pulled him back.

The broken spear dropped from Talia's hands, surprisingly loud as it clattered to the deck.

Lirea stared at her hand, still wrapped around the hilt of the knife. She screamed again, a wordless cry of anguish which blurred Danielle's vision. Through watery eyes, she saw Lirea yank the blade free and fling Beatrice toward Talia before leaping from the ship.

Talia caught the queen and lowered her gently to the deck.

Armand was first up the ladder, followed closely by Danielle. Talia already had both hands over the wound, trying to stop the flow of blood.

"She's still breathing." Talia's voice quavered.

"Someone fetch Hoffman," Armand shouted.

"No!" said Talia. "Get Snow."

"I'm here." Snow was already climbing up from the main deck, her face even paler than usual.

“I called for my surgeon, damn it!” Armand stared at his mother’s crumpled form. Danielle could see him fighting to maintain his self-control.

One of the men fired his crossbow into the water. “Your Highness, the undine are leaving!”

Danielle reached out to touch Armand’s arm. “Snow is a skilled healer. She’s helped Beatrice before.”

“My mother is dying,” Armand replied, his voice flat. “Hoffman is--”

“Your mother trusts these women,” Danielle said. “So do I. Please let Snow save her.”

Snow wasn’t waiting for his answer. She knelt beside the queen and spread her hand over Talia’s. “Press harder. Everyone else get back and give me light.”

“Will she live?” Talia asked.

Snow didn’t answer. She touched her choker, a band of oval mirrors connected with gold wire. Light flashed from the mirror in the center, illuminating the wound. “Pull your hand away now.”

Talia drew back, and Snow clapped her own hands down over Beatrice’s chest. Her hair fell like black curtains to obscure her actions.

“Talia?” Danielle asked.

Talia’s hands had begun to shake. She picked up the broken spear and stepped toward the railing.

Danielle followed. “What are you doing?”

Talia jumped lightly onto the rail, one hand holding a line as she searched the water.

“They’ve already fled. You’ll never catch them.” Danielle reached out, but Talia slapped her hand away with the spear. “Even if Lirea remains, she’ll kill you. You can’t fight them in the water.”

Talia might as well have been deaf. She paced along the rail, every step deliberate.

“Snow will save the queen,” Danielle said. “Don’t leave me to explain to her why you threw your life away.”

If Danielle hadn’t been watching so closely, she would have missed the faint slumping of Talia’s shoulders.

“The sea folk have been known to poison their blades,” whispered one of the crew.

Snow shook her head. “It’s not poison.”

Armand stood. The crew fell silent as he turned to face them. “Make sail for home.”

When leaving the docks at Lorindar, he had shouted orders for a quarter of an hour. From the way the crew worked together now, unfurling the sails in near silence, those detailed commands had been little more than a formality.

“What about her?” One of the crew gestured at Talia with her crossbow. “It was her who fought the mermaid and got the queen stabbed.”

Talia turned on the balls of her feet. Her expression made Danielle pray the man had already prepared his will and made peace with God. Then Talia looked at the queen. She bowed her head and dropped to the deck, her anger disappearing.

No, Danielle corrected. The rage wasn't gone. It was simply turned inward.

“I said take us home.” Armand's voice was soft, but the crew scrambled to obey. He crouched beside Snow. “What can I do to help?”

“Give me space,” Snow snapped.

Danielle took Talia's hand and pulled her toward the ladder. It was a measure of Talia's shock that she didn't resist as Danielle led her away.

Read more in **The Mermaid's Madness**, coming in October of 2009.  
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