

Pania of the Reef

Karitaki was a handsome young man, tall and strong. He was admired greatly by all the young women from near and far. But Karitaki showed no interest in any of them.

One evening, at dusk, he was walking alone on a sandy beach, lost in his thoughts, when he noticed a movement over by some rocks. He stopped still and observed. He could make out the shape of a young woman. This young woman was unfamiliar to Karitaki and he moved closer to have a look. She was covered in seawater and her eyes were as green as the seaweed. As Karitaki gazed he felt a warm stirring in his chest. The next moment the young woman turned and on seeing Karitaki gasped in surprise.

“Don’t be afraid, come and talk to me,” whispered Karitaki, and they gazed deeply into each other’s eyes. Karitaki gently took the young woman’s hand and asked, “Who are you and where is your home? I have never seen you before.”

The young woman looked away out to sea and said, “I am Pania of the Reef. My home is the wild ocean; my people are of the sea. Every evening my sisters and I come and play on these rocks. We watch the beautiful sunsets and we watch you from afar.”

Now Karitaki understood why he had never seen her before.

“I am Karitaki and I love you, will you come and be my wife?”

Pania shook her head sadly. “I cannot, I am of the sea, you are of the land,” and still they gazed into each other’s eyes.

At last, Pania agreed to leave the sea and live on dry land with Karitaki, as his wife. Karitaki knew the pull of the sea was very strong and he made Pania promise never to go back to her people. Karitaki was afraid of losing his beautiful maiden of the sea.

Karitaki and Pania were very happy until one day Karitaki came to Pania and said “I must leave you alone. It is time for me to hunt the fat Kereru. I will be gone for a few days.”

Pania begged her young husband to stay but his mind was made up and he would not change it. That night as Pania lay alone in her bed she listened to the sound of the breakers rushing in and she could hear her sisters calling, calling her from the reef. “P-A-N-I-A, P-A-N-I-A, P-A-N-I-A.” Pania turned over and tried to block out the sound of her calling sisters but they called on and on. Very soon Pania felt the longing too great and she climbed out of bed and walked down to the sea.

There were her seven sisters sitting on the reef with their arms outstretched.

“Pania, come and play with us” they called.

Pania replied, “No, I am married to Karitaki. I love him and I am never returning to you. Please stop calling me. I have made my choice. I am going to live on the land with Karitaki,” and she turned to go home.

Her sisters called again “P-A-N-I-A”.

Pania turned and looked back at her sisters.

“Come in for one last game with us” they urged.

Pania thought, one little game with my sisters wouldn't hurt and my husband would never know. She waded out into the sea and her sisters came to meet her and joyfully they all dived and bobbed amongst the breaking waves. Then they rested out on the reef.

The eldest sister said, "Pania, our beloved parents have grieved since you left. Come down for a short visit. Your husband will never know."

Finally Pania agreed. She agreed to go into the ocean depths for one last visit to her parents. Down she plunged, down, down. The cool water soothed her skin and the little fish came up to greet her. Pania wept for joy when she was reunited with her mother and father. She told them of her love for the man of the land, Karitaki. A shadow passed over her father's face.

That night as Pania slept beneath the ocean her father built a cage around her bed and when she awoke she realised what had happened. Her family had trapped her and now never again would she be able to live up on the land with her Karitaki. She wept bitterly and begged her parents to set her free but they would not.

"You belong here Pania. You are of the sea. This is your home," they reminded her.

When Karitaki arrived home he realised at once what had happened. He rushed down to the beach and called for his wife.

"Pania, Pania, it is me your husband, Karitaki. Come home my beloved, come home". And far below Pania heard his desperate calls. She called back but her voice was lost in the sound of the waves breaking on the rocks.

Night after night Karitaki returned to the beach and sadly waited for his wife to return. But she never did. When the moon is full on the glistening sea, sometimes Pania comes to the reef with her sisters. Pania gazes longingly at her home and she thinks of Karitaki. People say at times you can hear Pania on the reef calling, calling, ever calling. Longing for the love of her lost husband.