

“Rising Tide”

By Lauren Rivers

Deep beneath the waves almost out of the reach of sunlight rested a complex system of caves. Hidden from view of any but those who lived there was a network of these passages large enough to support a thriving population. Most of the underwater dwellers, those commonly known as mermaids, were going about their business, attending classes or carrying out their respective responsibilities.

Most, that is, except for Harumi. While generally considered a good girl by the majority of those that lived there one could not deny her penchant for trouble. It was not something she did intentionally, but she was gifted or cursed (depending on who you asked) with an almost insatiable curiosity. The young red panda maiden had always gone deeper than the others and further than most of her fellows. Some considered this boldness but her teacher considered it somewhat of a trait to be tempered. Today she had slipped out of her lesson and swam out towards the mouth of the caves eager to see if the rumors were true. Someone had told her that a fleet of surface dweller boats would pass over their home this morning, and she was curious to watch.

Generations of caution had claimed interaction with the world above the water's surface was dangerous. While the common wisdom was that in general those that lived there were not inherently hostile it was more a matter of what happened when the people there were confronted with a living legend. It had taken countless years for their existence to fade from memory to myth but for their mutual safety it was determined to be necessary to keep it that way. Most mermaids knew better than the venture too close to the surface, as the oceans depths provided their best line of defense after their anonymity.

However, despite a degree of separation from the events above ignorance of the same would leave them vulnerable. To that end several merfolk were tasked with keeping an eye on the activities of those on land. Most of this was done through careful observation but a few were allowed to slip amongst the land dwelling population to learn what they could but never interfere. Through these two sources they gathered most of their intelligence on where it was safe for them to catch fish and when it was advisable to remain in the cave systems.

Today was such a day, but Harumi could not resist her fascination with the world around her. While she had no desire to leave her ocean home she wanted to see all that it had to offer. Her curiosity had brought her to the mouth of the cave beyond which lay the open ocean. She hesitated for a fraction of a second and looked up at the surface. This far down little light penetrated but if she wanted to see the boats she would need to get closer. No sooner had she started to flip her fins when she heard a voice behind her.

"And just where do you think you're going?" a male voice asked.

"I was going to watch the ships pass over us," she said, seeing no point in lying. "I promise I'll be careful. They won't see me."

Her mentor held up a webbed hand with a reproving stare. "And what if they do?" he asked. "I can't allow you to go off when you know full well you're to be inside today. Even if we weren't due to have a lesson right now going to see those surface ships is only asking for trouble."

"What harm could it do?" she asked.

"I know I don't have to remind you of the reasons we stay far away from the surface. You know as well as I do what would happen if they caught one of us." He shook his head. "No, you're staying down here with me. Now come back inside." He

gestured back into the caves, but in the split second he had taken his eyes off of her she swam upwards towards the surface full speed.

Giggling and moving her tail faster than she thought possible she rose from the depths becoming bathed in more and more light as she reached the topmost layer of the ocean just deep enough for her to see anything that would pass above her. There was light all around her and above she could see the movement of the water's surface. She kept herself at the same depth, searching the waters to see if she had been followed.

A few seconds later she felt a webbed hand grasp her arm and the irritated face of her mentor. "I told you to come back inside." His equine visage delivered the stern rebuke he always managed to relay without so much as raising his voice. He barely held on to her arm but even still she knew the force of his reprimand. Despite the certainty she had earned his disapproval she continued to stare up at the surface.

"They won't see us at this depth," she offered weakly.

"Even so, it is not advisable for us to be this close to the surface. Our scouts told us that they believe it to be a single war vessel approaching our location. We cannot be here when it arrives." The equine merman looked into her eyes. His cream colored fur and white hair shined beautifully under the gentle illumination of the light from the surface. It was never quite captured in their underwater energy sources. She let the water flow from her gills and shook her head.

Harumi knew if she wanted to she could pull away from his grip. He would never harm her and never lay hands on his charge even for her own good. The true punishment when it came to Hisoka was the certainty that he would be disappointed in her. The pain in his eyes would hurt her every time she tried to make up for her choices. Perhaps the reason he was such a good teacher was because she truly cared what he thought of her and vice versa. Harumi hesitated a moment and sighed. "I just wanted to see the surface ships."

"I know, but it isn't safe for us here." He placed a webbed hand on her back.

She allowed herself to be directed back towards the ocean depths when the sun was blotted out without warning. The red panda mermaid cast her glance back up towards the surface to see seven shapes traveling above them in formation. The large oval shapes darkened the sunlight as they moved in a single unit across the surface of the water. Harumi found herself frozen at the sight of these massive objects gliding across the water carrying countless souls from the world above. She felt her heartbeat quicken as the massive vessels kept pace towards their destination, wherever that might be. She had not even noticed that her mentor's hand had fallen from her back as they watched the sight with not a word spoken between them.

Light returned as the massive shadow of the largest vessel passed by. She looked at her mentor and then back at the fleet above them. "One war vessel, indeed."

"The fact that there were so many is all the more reason we should be well away from the surface," he argued.

Harumi swam away from him in defiance. "We need to know what's going on. I'm going to go closer to find out where they're going."

"No!" he shouted.

Harumi returned a pained expression but she could not turn back. With all her strength she sped away after the ships and approached the largest vessel underneath the surface. She followed it for some distance but noticed her mentor had disappeared. Most

likely Hisoka had returned for help, but she would be back before he was. She would make it up to him later. She watched the surface ships swimming beneath the largest war vessel for some distance.

Breaking the surface she kept pace with the fleet trying to stay as close to the hull as possible to minimize the possibility of detection. Her tail drove her forward through the water while she searched for a way to get close enough to learn something she could bring back to make her excursion worthwhile. The portholes were too high and she would never be able to make it to the deck with the speed at which the ships were traveling. Her only option was to swim between the ships and hope to see something she recognized.

The red panda mermaid pushed away from the ship's hull and out of its wake, casting her glance upwards towards the deck. She could see more than few cannons mounted on each side as well as men patrolling their decks. It was clear these were not commercial ships in any manner of the term. She watched the activity with interest but could not make sense of what the legged creatures were doing. Harumi was about to consider her efforts as pointless when she looked up as the light caught the flag of one of the ships. The emblem upon it struck her memory looking like a red star with an elongated fifth point looking almost like a sort of weapon in front of a white circle surrounded by clouds.

No sooner had she taken note of the unusual sight when a light fell upon her. Harumi's eyes widened and soon men with torches held them above the water trying to catch sight of her. She dove beneath the surface but not before her tail had broken the surface just enough to gather their attention.

"Mermaid!" a male voice shouted.

Harumi darted off in a random direction hoping she would not draw them anywhere near her ocean home. Even though she knew they could not reach it with the technology they had she refused to betray it's location to these people. She swam with all of her might away from the fleet but at least three of the smaller craft broke off to follow her. She knew she could not outrun their faster craft but at least she would be able to confuse them if she was quick enough. The red panda mermaid swam faster and broke the surface to be certain they were still after her, leading them in the wrong direction. Her fins moved the water propelling her forward. She moved along the coast, heading up towards a series of jagged rocks.

She swam straight through them knowing they would be unable to follow. When she had gotten far enough ahead she turned around seeing the ships as they held their position. At least for now, they would not be able to follow her, but she would need to do more to be certain they would not be after her again.

Harumi made for the coast and once she had propelled herself onto the beach she opened her muzzle to breathe in air, the unusual sensation filling her with an odd euphoria while her lungs converted from breathing water to air. As the last of the liquid emptied out of her gills she laid down on the sand, her chest towards the sky. She only needed a short while to recover. She would stay here for a short while until the ships were gone, and then she would return to the water. She would accept whatever punishment Hisoka had prepared for her, but at least she had done what she came here to do. Her eyes drifted closed and a moment later she was asleep.

NOVA BLADE – CAPTAIN’S CABIN

Resting in the bed of the largest ship in the Crimson Sun’s fleet was Silas Werner, the terminally ill owner and founder of the aforementioned corporate entity. Propped up by more pillows than he cared to count, his physician checked to be certain the African wild dog had enough blankets to cover him before rising from his chair to fetch some water. The canine had been dying for some time but whether it was due to his ministrations or pure force of will death had yet to claim the stubborn businessman. For the last two years he had done everything he could to keep him alive. The money was good. It was certain the doctor was paid well and given comfortable accommodations, though he had been tasked with doing the impossible.

There was no cure for the condition which ravaged his employer’s body. At thirty five he should be in peak physical condition yet the affliction he had reduced his body to that of a man more than twice his age. He was physically weak and always suffering from some ailment or another. Even so he refused to rest in his manor, ordering his fleet to search the world for anything to keep him alive a few months longer. To minimize the time it would take to get him this cure which the squirrel physician was certain did not exist, he insisted on being with the fleet every step of the way.

Knowing it was futile to argue with the wild dog he relented. They had been out to sea for six months in this latest pointless effort. Doctor Daniel Gray placed a carafe of water beside the bed and poured some into a glass as the door opened.

The captain of the *Nova Blade*, a German shepherd by the name of Adam DeMornay, held his hat to his chest and his eyes downcast. He stepped into the room with a nod of deference to the physician before moving to make his report. “Forgive the interruption, sirs.”

“You obviously thought it worth my time, captain, so out with it,” the African wild dog said.

“I hesitate to bring this to you because it seems so unusual, but some of the men claim to have seen a mermaid,” he replied. The African wild dog sat up, an act which for him took no inconsiderable amount of effort.

“Are they certain?” he asked.

“Not especially so, only a few of them saw it, but they deemed it important enough to pursue a short distance. They lost track of her upon arriving at some jagged rocks, but that was all. They are holding position there.”

Doctor Grey scoffed. “What ridiculous men you have working for you that they should be distracted by flights of fancy such as that.” The squirrel grumbled as he handed him the glass of water. “They are no more than legends, like Aldris or the flying craft some claim to have seen.”

“They seemed quite certain at the time, but they admit it was dark and hard to see,” the German shepherd said. “What do you want me to do?”

The African wild dog coughed into his paw and drank some of the water before handing it back to his physician. “Run her down. If they think they saw it then let them pursue her until they have made certain. If they have then it may be the answer to my problems. If not, they will pay for wasting my time.”

“Yes, sir,” the canine said. In a moment he was gone.

“You’re wasting your time,” Daniel said. “What little you have left, that is.”

“It is mine to waste, my good doctor.” He sat up a little straighter. “If they are right, then it is worth whatever time it takes.”

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Few were awake this early in the morning but Diana had never quite gotten used to sleeping late even in her home city of Aldris. The Doberman archer walked along the beach eager to enjoy the sounds of the ocean for the short period they would be by the sea. Their path through the country would take them away from it soon enough and for now she wanted to enjoy it while it lasted. She felt the warm sand on her feet paws and glanced behind herself to examine the paw prints she left behind during her journey along the coast. At least for now she seemed to have the idyllic setting to herself.

Taking another few steps forward she cast a glance towards the ocean. The sea was calm today with gentle waves breaking upon the edge of the water. A part of her wished they could simply spend a day enjoying the waves but internally she knew they could not afford such delays simply for recreation when there was so much to do. It was the life of a traveling merchant, one which she shared with her companions, Ethan, Rhodes, and Lydia. It was not that the group did not have fun now and then, but it was rarer than she would have preferred. Nevertheless, she was here now and she could simply enjoy the sun on her fur.

Another glance back at her paw prints revealed the Doberman had walked further along the coast than she had thought. With some surprise, she turned back to see a naked red panda lying face up on the beach. Diana knelt before her taking in the unusual sight before her. The young woman was unconscious or sleeping, but in either case she was motionless and unresponsive. Diana touched her face, which at the moment felt moist as if she had just been swimming. Wherever her clothes were it appeared they were not in sight.

She was a rather attractive woman in her mid twenties, with her fur a gorgeous pink on her face and outer arms. Her chest, neck, and inner thighs down to her toes were a gorgeous black. Her hair was down to below her tail with pink streaks on either side of her face and ebony strands making up the majority of it. Her tail was wrapped with wrings of both light and dark pink ending in white at the tip.

“Can you hear me?” she called out. When the red panda did not respond, Diana felt her neck. She had a pulse and was still breathing. She was simply unconscious at the moment.

The Doberman looked around for signs of anything belonging to the young red panda but saw nothing. All she had on her was a beautiful pearl ring with seashells on either side of the stone. Diana gently slipped it off of her finger in the hopes it would provide some clue as to her identity but an inspection of the jewelry offered no hints as to her origin. Certain leaving her here would be inadvisable she prepared to replace the ring on her finger, but hesitated for a moment.

It was clear this was no ordinary ring. Diana looked down as it seemed to react to the choker she wore around her own neck. The closer they got the brighter the ring appeared to glow. Unable to resist her curiosity, she placed the ring on her finger and immediately felt a tingle pass over her entire body. Diana felt her heartbeat speed up, momentarily overcome by dizziness. Stumbling forward, she felt the sensation subside.

The canine whimpered, the ring glowing more urgently as the magic within began to work its will upon her.

The dizziness and rapid pulse came back stronger than ever as her legs abandoned her and she fell to the sand, unable to stand. Diana attempted to remove the ring but before she could do so she was wracked with magical energy forcing her to curl up into a ball. Afraid, she struggled to breathe but felt an unusual urge to be in the water as openings appeared on the side of her neck. Reaching up to feel the unusual changes to her anatomy she was shocked to realize she had developed gills!

Before she could vocalize her shock she saw they were not the only things about her that had begun to change. Her legs had begun to develop smooth scales of a deep red color. The fur on her lower extremities dissolved into what looked like the surface of a fish's body. Diana barely had enough time to remove her ankle coverings and underwear before the unusual effect began to merge her legs together sealing the space between them as her bones shifted underneath her flesh.

Paralyzed by her ongoing transformation her eyes were locked on the sudden development of two sets of small fins on either side of her new tail which fanned out into delicate looking but strong appendages to match the color of her scales. The last thing to change was her feet paws, which flattened out and expanded into a gorgeous jewel embedded example of aquatic finery. Reminding her of an elegant gown the tail rested upon the sand as if it were a dress of the finest fabric.

Still in shock, she gingerly commanded her tail to move and jumped in surprise when the fin responded. Despite her own eyes she had transformed into a mermaid! She attempted to make sense of what had just happened having momentarily forgotten about the red panda resting not far from where she sat. Searching her memory she recalled Aldrisian sailors having remarked about seeing mermaids with a few of them even suggesting the two societies had once interacted, but it was a thousand years ago, long before Diana had ever drawn breath. There were many things about the past that Diana had been curious to learn, but she had found little information to determine how much of the stories about the underwater world were true.

Regardless it would do little to help her now. She cursed and looked at the ring examining its delicate craftsmanship. It was clear it had been fashioned with the greatest of skill and care. No doubt the jeweler had put his full expertise into its creation. The pearl seemed somewhat dimmer than when she had first put it on, but before she could take a closer look the red panda beside her began to stir.

A gentle moan escaped her muzzle while the mysterious woman opened her eyes and propped herself up on one arm. "That was quite a chase," she said. She looked at her paw and noticing her ring was gone she shot up. "My ring! Where's my ring?"

Diana meekly offered a smile. "I might have sort of tried it on. I didn't mean any harm, but I felt compelled by its energy to touch it and I thought maybe it would tell me who you were. You had nothing on and I didn't know if you needed help or who might be looking for you."

"Oh!" the red panda exclaimed. "Who are you?"

"I'm Diana, and normally I'm not a mermaid." She flopped her tail to illustrate. "It happened when I slipped your ring on my finger."

The red panda examined the canine's dark red tail and chuckled. "That explains a lot."

"I sensed its power with this," she said, touching her choker.

The red panda looked into her eyes. "You're from Aldris."

"How do you know that?" Diana asked in surprise.

"Our people know each other, or at least, we did." The red panda blushed. "I'm sorry, my name is Harumi."

"I don't suppose you know how to reverse this?" she asked, flipping her tail again. "My friends are going to come looking for me in a little while and I don't know how I'll explain that." Diana pointed at her fins and blushed.

Harumi smiled and nodded. "I can fix you up, no problem," she said. She walked over to Diana's right paw where the ring sat upon her finger. After a cursory examination she frowned. "Oh wait, that's a problem."

"Excuse me?" Diana shot up, alarmed.

"Not a big one, but you drained the ring when you transformed. I can't change either of us back until it recharges." The red panda girl shrugged.

"How long will that take?" the Doberman archer asked.

Chuckling to herself she shrugged. "About a moonrise."

"You mean I'm stuck like this until tomorrow?" She gingerly touched the smooth scales lining her fish tail still having a hard time convincing her mind of what her eyes were seeing. The sight of an aquatic lower half was certainly something she never expected to experience firsthand, but now with yet another legend proven real she wondered what else lay hidden out there in the world she had yet to see for herself. Diana spared a moment to touch the tip of her tail, running her finger over the smooth flesh which shimmered like gossamer fabric in the sunlight. It was clear despite its delicate appearance that her tail was a powerful appendage, no doubt capable of propelling her at impressive speeds through the waters of the ocean.

She touched her neck once again, remembering the gills, and wondered what it would be like to breath underwater. Before she could explore her new form further the red panda stood up.

"I'm afraid so, unless one of my people happens to find me, but it's not likely they'll come looking for me around here." She cast a glance around the beach, making no effort to cover herself.

No doubt underwater she had little need for clothing, but Diana could not help herself smiling at her brazen nudity. The Doberman covered her muzzle with a paw to hide her amusement and once she had regained her composure looked up at her companion.

"Where do your people live?" Diana asked.

Harumi pointed out to the sea. "My home lies beyond the small islands off the coast, deep underwater. There is a large coral formation just to the north of our home. The entrance is a cave which is lightly patrolled by my people. It is too deep for me to swim or I would go there."

"I could go and get their help," the canine offered. "When they return, they can change you back."

Harumi was about to reply when her gaze was stolen by something in the distance. "They found me," she said. Without explanation, she ran inland.

Diana looked towards the water which now seemed impossibly far away. She rolled her body over not knowing how else to reach the coast and with no small amount of effort hit the water just as the large ships came close enough for her to see.

Diana flipped her fins hard, but she was not yet deep enough for it to provide any real power. She crawled forward under the cool ocean rushed over her altered form and felt the water flow over her tail as she made her way towards deeper waters.

She could hear shouting from behind her as the men attempted to capture her, but she had managed to get deep enough just in time to avoid their efforts. At least for now, she could not return to the surface. Diana cast her glance upwards towards the sunlight filtering through the water and realized in her hurry to get to the sea she was now breathing water. After taking a moment to experience the sensation of breathing through gills, she set off towards the only place she could go.