

“Rising Tide”

By Lauren Rivers

CHAPTER 4

Harumi stirred from her sleep to find Rhodes beside her, his hand still cradling her own. He had fallen asleep in the chair, resting his head on the soft sheets. The sensation was unusual compared to her sleeping arrangements under the waves. As she moved her legs underneath the warm bedding she could not deny her enjoyment of the strange tactile sensation of the fabric against her body. She rolled gently onto her back and indulged herself in a luxurious stretch allowing each muscle to transmit the pleasant feeling to her sleepy brain.

When the sensations arrived she let out a deep and rumbling moan loud enough to awaken her companion from his nap. Harumi sat up in surprise as he arose suddenly and pulled his hand away.

"Harumi," he said, settling his eyes on her. "I'm sorry, I must have fallen asleep while I was watching over you," the horse said. He swallowed and smiled. "Did you sleep well?" he asked.

She tilted her head and considered the question. "I am rested," she said, sitting up more fully and curling her legs beneath her. "It was very pleasant."

"I'm glad," he said. "The others have gone out to secure a boat. I hope you don't mind but we were hoping to enlist your help to find Diana."

Harumi had already told the land dwellers she knew where she had seen Diana last and where she believed she would go, but she was still uncertain in this strange place who she should trust and how much to tell them. The others suspected her true nature in part because of things she had let slip in their initial conversation, but for now all they had were suspicions. Nevertheless they had been kind to her but she did not know how they would react if she confirmed what they already believed to be true. If she were wrong she would be without allies and at their mercy. "It's hard to remember," she said.

Whether Rhodes could sense her hesitancy she was uncertain, but he simply smiled and offered his hand. "I know we haven't earned your trust yet, but I'm hoping you'll give us the chance to try." She took his hand and swung her legs over the edge of the bed, allowing them to dangle for a moment before setting them upon the floor. Walking on two legs was still something she had to get used to even though she had done so on previous occasions, but it was still disorienting at first. After a few clumsy steps she fell forward into the stallion's arms. "Oh, be careful there," he told her. "I wouldn't want you to get hurt."

She looked into his eyes and despite his hesitancy to believe her when they had first met she could sense a gentle nature which she had never felt in anyone before. Coupled with it was an uncompromising strength of will, making her feel safe and protected in this strange world of the land dwellers. Her heart beat quickly at the closeness and she could not help but press into him. "Thank you, for catching me," she said.

"It's my pleasure," he replied. "Allow me to carry you?" When she nodded, he swept her up in his arms and brought her into the main room towards the sofa at the center.

Harumi rested her head against his chest, holding him close for as long as he would allow. When the stallion reached the seating area he placed her gently against one side of the couch with a nod before taking a seat in a nearby chair. "You've all been so kind to me," she said at last.

“Of course,” he replied with a gentle smile. “You needed help,” he said. “What else could we do?”

Uncertain whether or not she should respond, she placed her paws on her lap and stared downwards. Despite her lessons on the surface world she had never needed to practice land dweller behavior like this before. The scouts were the only ones given in depth training on how to blend in with those they might encounter. Individuals like Harumi were only provided with the most basic of information so they might be informed of the world above the waves. She knew what a ship was, for example, and her lessons included things like common land dweller concepts such as cities and roads but the finer things it was deemed were only relevant to the scouts.

As such she found herself rather ill prepared for the role of a land dwelling maiden, but fortunately for her the people who had taken her into their care did not press overmuch. “Nevertheless, I am grateful for your generosity.”

Rhodes offered a smile. “Even if we didn’t need your help we would still do what we could to help someone in distress.”

Harumi returned the smile, noting the stallion’s face brightened slightly when she did. She could not tell what normal land dweller behavior was but she knew she felt strong emotions towards this one in particular. The moment she had run face first into his arms had been the first time since coming on land that she had felt safe and protected. The stallion had clearly had his doubts about her but at the same time he had seemed drawn to her as she was to him.

The red panda reached out her paw towards him. She did not know what she expected from this action, but she felt a flush of warmth pass through her when he took it in kind.

“Are you hungry?” he asked. “I don’t have anything here, but there is a kitchen downstairs. We could go get something, if you like.”

Harumi felt a rumbling in her stomach at the mention of food. It had been some time since she had eaten last with the crocodile and the meal had already worn off. Before she could answer he helped her to her feet paws and used his arms to steady her.

“Come on, you need to eat,” he said. “Plus it’ll give us a chance to talk. I hardly know anything about you.”

Uncertain whether she should agree but seeing no logical reason to refuse, she nodded. “Thank you,” she said.

Rhodes smiled. “You don’t need to be afraid. I promise I won’t let anything happen to you.”

She pressed close to his body as he wrapped an arm around her and escorted her out of the room to the tavern below. The place was somewhat empty at this time of the afternoon but there were still quite a few parties spread throughout the room. Harumi watched the various individuals as they went about their business trying to see what she could ascertain about proper behavior. Guided by Rhodes, she found herself a moment later before a rectangular table in the corner of the establishment.

“Have a seat,” he said, easing her into the large blue sofa set up on one side of the table. As he moved to sit on the opposite side, her paw shot out to grab him. “I’m not going far.”

“Please, don’t go. Sit beside me?” she asked.

Rhodes considered her for a moment longer before exhaling and taking the seat next to her. "If it'll make you feel more comfortable."

Her grip on his arm loosened once she sensed he was no longer intending to move away and her thoughts once again turned to hunger. She looked around at the plates on the other tables still not quite used to how land dwellers chose to eat their food. Many of them had what looked like things she recognized on their plates but they were all strangely prepared. Beneath the waves if one usually wanted dinner one went out and caught it yourself. Without her tail and the ocean to provide for her she had needed to rely on these strange beings to feed her. Looking from one end of the room to the other she did not see anything she recognized as food until her eyes settled on a square glass box across the room. She looked at Rhodes as he examined the piece of paper that had been deposited on their table by a passing land dweller and tilted her head curiously.

"Do you see anything you like?" he asked.

Harumi blushed, uncertain if she should nod. She shrugged and lowered her head. "This is not like the food I eat at home. It's different there."

Rhodes seemed to understand and gave her a gentle smile. "It's good, trust me. I'll order something I think you'll like, okay?" he asked.

She nodded, and he signaled the man in the rather fancy vest and told him to bring them the salmon plates. Harumi's ears perked up at the mention of her favorite fish, and she eagerly awaited its arrival. When he returned with two identical platters she poked at it curiously. "Fish?"

"Yes, it's the salmon. Try it, it's good." He placed a forkful in his mouth to demonstrate, and the curious mermaid did the same. While it seemed to resemble the flavor she was used to, she was not certain what else they had done to it. Rhodes, sensing her confusion, attempted to explain. "It's the lemon butter sauce. It's really good. I guess they don't make it that way where you come from?" he asked.

Harumi shook her head and stared again at the tank. Rhodes turned away to address the waiter, and she took her opportunity. Walking across the room to the tank she reached in and picked up the wriggling fish in her paws, holding it up to show him. "This is what fish looks like."

Rhodes, his jaw open and his eyes darting about, held up his hands apologetically to the waiter in the vest and handed him a few coins to pay for the fish Harumi held in her paws. As she returned triumphantly to her seat she held the fish in both paws with a gleeful smile before biting into it and chewing to the surprise of most of the restaurant patrons.

These land dwellers are so strange.

Harumi proceeded to eat the rest of her fish, devouring the entire thing in fifteen minutes while her companion proceeded to meekly take bites of his own food in an attempt to dissuade the many curious eyes. Once she was finished and all that remained was the head and tail on the skeleton, he touched her paw and met her eyes.

"We should head back to the room, the others will probably be back for us soon," he said.

Taking her arm in his, she walked back towards the place where they were staying, sensing something had changed. Rhodes no longer looked at her as if she was confused or making it up, he looked at her as if he believed. Harumi could feel him close to her but it was not until they returned to the room that he voiced what he was thinking.

“You really are a mermaid, aren’t you?” he asked.

Harumi briefly considered lying, but finally nodded. Her inexperience with the surface was simply too great for her to pretend any longer. Despite her hesitancy Rhodes gave her a reassuring smile and she sighed. “Yes. We aren’t supposed to speak of it with outsiders but your friends already seemed to guess what I am. Some of our people are trained to blend in with your society but I’m not one of them. I’m not even supposed to be here.”

Rhodes sat down in one of the chairs and patted the one beside him. She walked over slowly and joined him. “So why don’t you start at the beginning?”

She turned her thoughts over in her head. Merfolk depended on their status as legends and myth to stay safe and in less than twenty four hours she had put that at risk by indulging her curiosity. Try as she might to blend in Harumi knew she was no land dweller and her efforts to try had only resulted in making it clear exactly what she was to her companions. Seeing no benefit to keeping the truth to herself any longer, she confessed. “I was swimming outside of my home when I saw a fleet of surface ships pass above us. Against my mentor’s advice I went to investigate and was trapped away from my people when I met your friend.” She held up her paw towards him. “She put on my magical ring before I could stop her and became one of my people. I did not have time to restore her before the people that were chasing me came upon us. All I know is she got away.”

Rhodes kept his muzzle down for a long while before he finally spoke. “It’s imperative we find her. I promise you we will do everything we can to keep you safe but I need you to help us.” The stallion clasped her paws in his hands and gazed into her eyes. “Please, will you take us to her?”

Harumi felt the conflicting thoughts in her mind as she stared into the gentle stallion’s eyes. She knew the only thing worse than admitting her true nature was to lead them to her home, but she was indirectly responsible for what had become of Diana and could not leave her with her people without her there to vouch for her. After a prolonged pause she nodded. “I’ll help you.”

“Thank you,” Rhodes replied.

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It was almost evening by the time all of the preparations had been completed for launch. Given the current economic state with Crimson Sun controlling practically every business venture in the area it had proven near impossible for an independent contractor to make ends meet in this place. As a result, their captain Nolan Phillips had been on his own for quite some time. Despite a valiant effort to stay afloat, in time all of his crew had been forced to move on to other opportunities. Ethan rose to a standing position as the small sailing vessel rocked gently in the water.

The hawk had been on watercraft before but never as a member of the crew. Nevertheless he was used to getting his hands dirty and had quickly taken to the responsibilities needed for their short journey. The captain had wasted no time preparing his ship and had not stopped working since they had gotten on board. Ethan attributed it to both the significant amount of money they had offered as part of their payment along with the energy that came from having a purpose once more. While Ethan was no Oracle

it was clear the ship had seen little use other than the bare minimum and this was likely the first contract the otter had received in some time.

Ethan suspected the otter would have accepted even without the offer of an answer to a question from Lydia, but he knew firsthand the value of a promise from an Oracle. Their word and their insight were considered of high value across the entire region, and as such one did not take such an offer lightly. The hawk chuckled to himself at the memory of the first time he had met her, when she had pointed out his attraction to Diana before he had realized it himself. The hawk would never have believed he could fall for someone so completely but it was that very revelation which convinced him of Lydia's skill in her trade.

The crocodile had left a short while ago to retrieve their other companions. Once the group was reunited once more they would get underway and begin their search for the missing Diana. According to their newest guest, his beloved was out there somewhere transformed into a mermaid and cut off from her companions. While Ethan was not certain how much he was willing to believe he knew Lydia trusted the young woman and that was enough for him.

The otter who commanded the small ship approached with a neutral expression as he checked some of Ethan's work. "Not bad. When this is all over if you're interested I have a few spots open for a new crew."

Ethan chuckled. "I appreciate the offer, Captain Phillips, but I've already got a job."

"You can't blame a guy for trying," he replied, and the two looked up as the rest of their party appeared on the gangplank. Lydia boarded the ship first, with Rhodes and Harumi following close behind. The red panda appeared slightly more confident in her steps though Ethan noted with some amusement she did not stray far from Rhodes, staying as close to the stallion as possible. While he could not say for certain it did appear that something had transpired between the two in the few hours they'd been separated from Ethan and Lydia.

The crocodile approached the pair. "Is everything ready?" she asked.

"As ready as she'll ever be," the captain replied. "If you're prepared we can depart immediately." He turned his glance to the red panda. "That is, assuming we have a destination."

Rhodes nodded. "We do. Once we're out of the harbor take us towards the islands to the south. Once we get closer Harumi will provide us with additional directions."

"Okay," the otter said. "Even though I think I already know the answer, I suppose I should ask this one more time. Are you sure you want to do this? It's more than likely we'll run right into Crimson Sun somewhere along this journey, and they don't take kindly to competition."

Ethan met his glance. "My Diana is out there somewhere and until I find her and bring her home, nothing will stand in my way. Is that clear?" he asked.

Nolan held up his webbed paws and started to move towards the side of the ship. "I just thought I should ask." He pulled the ropes holding the small sailing vessel to the dock aboard and once free the craft maneuvered out to sea.

The hawk stared out towards the open ocean hoping that wherever Diana was that she was all right.

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To an outside observer it would appear that Diana was simply restless. She had spent the time since Hisoka's last visit swimming around the room that was currently her prison, mastering her technique and learning how to swim as a mermaid. More than once she had needed to remind her muscle memory that she did not have two legs but rather one rather long and powerful fish tail. After a few awkward attempts she had gotten fairly good at propelling herself through the water at a fair rate of speed. No doubt the guards had gotten some amusement when she had swum face first into the wall. Given the fact that she had only been a mermaid for less than two days she thought it was probably pretty good, regardless.

Either way her failures probably only helped in her planned escape attempt. The more incompetent they thought she was, the less prepared they would be when she made her move. To that end she did not try to hide it in any way when she would make a mistake other than to shake it off and continue trying, much to the amusement of the guards. Though they were ordered not to engage her, from time to time they would make comments about how abysmal a swimmer she was to which she simply turned away from them and continued.

She was on what must have been her hundredth loop around the room when the guards stiffened and she heard the sound of the field dropping to admit Hisoka once more. The merhorse swam closer and straightened up to address her, floating in the water a few feet away.

"Have you had time to consider your situation?" he asked.

"I've thought of nothing else," Diana replied. "Sir, I know you have no reason to trust me but I promise you I have nothing to do with Harumi's disappearance. I want to find her as much as you do. No offense but I don't intend to spend the rest of my life like this and I'm sure she'd like very much to come home."

Hisoka regarded her for an extended pause before he responded. "Then tell me where she is."

"I don't know," Diana said with a growl.

"Yes, you do," Hisoka replied. "I know Harumi would never surrender her ring voluntarily. I believe you found her and took it from her. You probably thought you could use this ring to plunder our home and take what you wanted for the rest of your kind. I imagine you or the people who work for you are holding her somewhere until you return, but they'll have a hard time coming after you as long as you are in our custody. We're over a mile deep down here. There's no way they can get to us."

Diana shook her head. "I'm not working with anyone. I don't know how much clearer I can be but you are wasting time. Harumi needs our help and the longer you keep me here asking me questions I can't answer the more danger she's likely to be in. Now I don't know how to convince you but I can't tell you what I don't know. I can show you where I last saw her but I need you to trust me."

Hisoka held up a hand. "And allow you the chance to escape? I don't think so."

Unable to control her emotions she let a growl escape her throat. "This is pointless."

“I agree. Perhaps some more aggressive methods are needed here.” He turned away from her. “You should know that Harumi means a great deal to me and I will stop at nothing to ensure her safe return.”

Waiting for her opportunity, she positioned herself carefully in wait as he signaled to the guards to drop the field. Once the energy faded and the path was clear, she beat her tail against the water shooting forward past him into the hallway. It took her a moment’s hesitation to accept the fact that she was outside. The shouts from the guards and the appearance of Hisoka stirred her from her momentary pause and drove her back to thoughts of escape. Since it was not likely she would find the help she needed in the time she had the only option was to try to find some way to get to the surface.

Diana searched her memory for the path she had taken to get to this point and began to retrace her path to the entrance. The shouts of the guards increased as her pursuers swam after her through the wide cavern. The sight of a mermaid being chased by other mermaids must have taken the majority of the residents by surprise as no one seemed to be able to manage more than a shocked expression as she bolted past. Her tail pushed her faster and faster around the curves and before she knew it she had reached the entrance once more.

Not wanting to risk a backwards glance she swam towards the water’s surface at full speed. She knew if she could get some distance from them she would stand a better chance of evading her pursuers.

Before she could reach the world above Diana felt a pair of arms wrap around her from behind. Instinctively she kicked her nonexistent legs resulting in a rather ineffective motion of her tail. The two mermaids thrashed together in the water as she struggled to free herself. Without her legs she was limited in her defensive capabilities, and no one had taught her how to fight without her feet paws to aid her. Diana thrust her elbow into the chest of her captor and broke out of his grasp.

She wasted no time gaining distance between them as she made her way closer to the surface hoping they would not follow. The canine mermaid swam forward when her way was suddenly blocked by a massive net. Stunned and confused she turned around but the net soon wrapped around her on the other side as well. Trapped, she found herself in a small enclosed pocket of water. Staring through the gaps in the net she locked eyes with Hisoka as the merhorse came close enough to realize what had happened. His expression was one of shock and sadness, almost as if he knew what would become of her.

Diana reached out towards him with her paw. The merhorse came close enough to touch her and offer her an apology just as the net began to lift up from underneath the waves pulling her out of the ocean and into the air. Helpless, she clung to the sides of the net as the thick ropes pulled her up to the same level as the deck of the ship. Torches held up by the crew made it clear they had seen her. Diana knew it was pointless to struggle.

Remaining perfectly still she locked eyes with the first man to approach her, a male squirrel with a dark black doctor’s outfit and a coldly scientific look in his eyes. To him she was not a living creature but a specimen or something to be studied. For what reason she could not even begin to guess but it was clear she was little more than a curiosity to the squirrel. He stepped up to the net and reached out to touch her.

Baring her teeth she let out a growl, daring him to try to touch her. The Doberman mermaid glared at the squirrel attempting to appear as threatening as possible but as long as she was suspended in this net she was at their mercy. At the moment she was at a dual disadvantage. Not only was she alone and unarmed but she was not even adequately prepared, lacking familiarity with the sort of defense any other mermaid might put into play at a time like this. Perhaps it was her own inexperience that had led to her being caught in the first place.

Frustrated at her own helplessness she turned away from the doctor while he held up some sort of magnifying device to examine her.

“Fascinating,” he said. “Truly remarkable.”

The German shepherd behind him folded his arms and tilted his head. “Is this sufficient for your research, doctor?” he asked.

The brown furred squirrel lowered his magnifier and turned his head but not enough to look directly at the canine who addressed him. “It’s impossible for me to know that without a thorough examination, but for the moment I believe this will suffice.” He gestured to the dog with the back of his hand. “Please see to it she is delivered to the captain’s cabin. Instruct your men they are not to damage the specimen in any way. I cannot do my work with a flawed sample.” He touched his paws together as the men approached the net to a growl from Diana.

“She may attempt to resist,” the canine said.

“Oh, I’m certain she will. However, let me make this perfectly clear. My research and the cure for Silas Werner’s condition will depend on me successfully studying this specimen for whatever curative properties she may possess. Until such time as I have had a chance to properly examine her I need this creature unharmed. Now it is not my concern what you have to do in order to get her into the tank but you will do it without corrupting my sample. Find a way, captain.”

The German shepherd muttered a profanity at the squirrel as he walked away leaving Diana alone with the rest of the crew. At least that told her one thing, they intended to keep her alive. How long that would last would depend on what the doctor needed from her. His research would take time and she would have to find some way to secure her freedom before then. She only hoped it would be long enough to determine a plan and put it into action. She watched the crew as they moved the net over the deck looking forlornly at the water which was for the time being her natural habitat. Underneath the waves she was capable of traveling at incredible speeds, but on land or on this boat she was limited to how fast she could crawl.

As she watched the water and her only avenue of escape disappear further away from her she closed her eyes as one of the men released the net dropping her onto the deck. Stunned by the sudden impact she felt arms grabbing her as half a dozen men picked her up and carried her towards the large double doors that led to the captain’s cabin.

Diana struggled but their grip on her was simply too strong. Before she knew it she was once again in the water, but it did not take her long to realize she was just as trapped as ever. One of the crewmen dove into the water, securing her wrists with heavy shackles designed to keep her tethered to the bottom of the tank. Once he had finished he emerged from the top where a heavy lid soon slid into place. From the outside, the

doctor watched her test her bonds. She glared at him, daring him to touch her. If he was going to try to take something from her he would have his work cut out for him.