

“Rising Tide”

By Lauren Rivers

CHAPTER 6

Laid out on the table before the squirrel physician was the subject of his current research. Restrained and muzzled to prevent her resisting his efforts, the beautiful canine mermaid stared at her captors with determination in her eyes. Already she had attempted twice to free herself and almost succeeded despite the limitations to a mermaid on board a ship. The first time had been when they had attempted to remove her from the tank. She had attacked the sailor who dove into the tank to undo her restraints and launched herself onto the desk. Crawling faster than he would have thought possible she made it all the way onto the main deck before Captain DeMornay's men subdued her.

The second time came when they were securing her to the table. Once again the ship's crew underestimated her resolve and two of them suffered rather serious injuries from her powerful tail as she struggled to delay them. Now held down and unable to move he stood over her with clinical detachment, studying her carefully.

He had spent the last several days reading everything there was to know about mermaids. The information contained within the books his employer possessed had provided a significant wealth of knowledge for him to base his own investigation upon but there was no substitute for hands on experience with a live subject. Finding a cure for the African wild dog's terminal illness was a tall order, even after the mermaid had fallen into their grasp. Nevertheless he had been tasked with doing the impossible and found himself excited for the challenge.

Daniel Grey had never been interested in fame or wealth as many of his fellow beings appeared to be. Rather, his interest had always been in science and education. Learning more about the world around him was what drove him forward. He had always considered himself to be open minded but the appearance of a mermaid stood to change everything he had believed to be true, and he could not be more eager to find out what else lay hidden under the world he knew.

Despite going to the most advanced universities in the known world he had always suspected there was more to the world than what he had been told. Pieces of debris that had been found as well as various stories often suggested there was far more over the horizon than what their ships had reported. Lacking the advanced technology of races like the Aldrisians they were limited to what their ships could carry, but every year that barrier seemed closer and closer to disappearing completely. It was only a matter of time before they could reach the other side of the world and see what waited.

He examined the mermaid's tail with a fine magnification device, studying every scale on his way down to the fins. Each jewel seemed to be embedded into her flesh, imbued with its own natural glow that was likely representative of the power contained within each one. Perfectly smooth to the touch and polished to a fine shine they stood out against the natural flesh of her tail.

Each side of her tail possessed the same number of stones, and it was within these jewels that mermaids concentrated their life force and magic powers. Whether this was literal or metaphorical all of the books seemed to suggest that removing them would cause harm to the mermaid from which they were taken. Removing one or two would not cause serious adverse affects, it was indicated that mermaids could survive the loss of several, but removing all of them was likely to cause death. Doing so improperly also presented significant risk, which was why he had spent so long observing her while he conducted his research.

As a scientist, he understood the need for proper documentation and procedure. The ship's first officer, apparently, did not.

"Why don't you just cut them off of her?" he asked with his hand on his knife. The okapi had been pacing the ship ever since they had arrived at Sapphire Cove. "Isn't that what we came here for?"

Placing a hand between him and the mermaid the squirrel shook his head. "Stand down, commander." When the okapi relaxed, he continued. "Removing these stones is a complex and delicate procedure. Attempting to do so without proper understanding of their function could result in them being rendered useless, or worse. Simply prying them off with a knife is not an option."

"We're running out of time," Commander Williams said.

"I am well aware of Mister Werner's current condition and I assure you I am working as efficiently as possible, but if this is to have any chance of doing what it is supposed to it must be done properly. Now if you have nothing useful to add, please stand aside and let me do my work."

The okapi stepped back without further comment while the doctor returned his attention to his research subject. Restrained at her neck, wrists, and several points on her tail she was held to the table by thick leather cuffs and straps which held her tightly against its surface. He leaned closer to her face and touched the side of her cheek. "You're going to do amazing things for science, my dear."

"You touch me again and I'll kill you myself," she said through gritted teeth.

With a raised eyebrow he tilted his head slightly. "You can speak. I was beginning to wonder if you were capable of communication. Did you learn our language by listening to sailors?" He smirked. "If that's the case I should hope you didn't pick up some of our more colorful expressions."

"I'm not what you think I am," she said.

Doctor Grey met Commander Williams's glance from across the table. "Really? Then what exactly are you?"

"I'm not a mermaid," the canine mermaid replied. "I was transformed into this. I was trying to find help when you caught me."

"I must admit of all the things I expected to say that certainly was not a possibility I considered." He walked back along the table. "It's complete nonsense of course. Transformation is not possible."

She turned away from him. "It's true, I swear it."

The squirrel looked down and ran his fingertips along the edge of the examination table. "I tend to doubt that. Even if that were the case, it does not alter the fact that you have what we need. Your tail jewels represent the only path to survival for my employer and we do not have time to secure another specimen. Now I intend to remove them as soon as I understand how unless you can offer me an alternative."

The canine mermaid closed her eyes. "I can't."

"I didn't think so," he replied. The doctor walked closer to her face. "If it's any consolation, your sacrifice may represent the solution to any number of problems."

"You'll forgive me if I don't find that comforting," she replied.

Doctor Grey offered a conciliatory gesture. "I'll do everything I can to make the procedure as painless as possible."

"Please don't do this."

“Unfortunately that is not an option.” He reached over towards one of the bottles and poured some of the liquid into a cloth before placing it over her muzzle. She fought, pulling against her restraints and screaming into the fabric as the sedative did its work. Her resistance soon weakened as her movements became less and less frantic until finally her body gave out, her eyes closing as her form became motionless.

Commander Williams scoffed. “I don’t know why you didn’t do that in the first place.”

“Curiosity, I suppose. You can only learn so much from an unconscious specimen. She represents a heretofore unknown species. The existence of mermaids confirms the development of a completely independent civilization of which we know almost nothing.” The squirrel picked up the small marble statue of a mermaid that sat on the table along with several other research materials and held it for a moment. “While I am a physician first and foremost I have always considered myself a man of science. To learn of such unexpected possibilities is the opportunity people like me dream of every night. I only wish I would have had more time to learn from her.”

The okapi scoffed. “What is there to learn from a bunch of fish people under the sea?”

“Clearly nothing that would catch your interest. Have you no sense of wonder?” he asked.

“I don’t wonder. The only things a man can count on in this world are what he can hold in his own two hands.” Folding his arms, the okapi leaned backwards against the nearest wall.

“I suppose you would simply raid her world for all you could carry and burn the rest,” the squirrel said.

“It’s efficient,” he replied.

“It’s wasteful,” the squirrel shot back. “Had I the time I would be more cautious, but given the rate at which Silas is deteriorating I suspect I may have just enough.”

“Just see that it’s done,” Commander Williams said.

“You need not worry about that. I know my responsibilities on board this ship.” He set the statue back in place and returned his attention to his medical notes.

“Be certain that you do,” the okapi replied.

The physician turned towards the first officer. “Don’t you have duties to attend to?”

The okapi lowered his muzzle and cast a glance towards the door. “I’ll be back in a few hours to check on your progress.”

“I shall endeavor to contain my excitement.” Doctor Grey waited until he heard the sound of the door to allow his irritation to soothe. Neither the captain nor the first officer understood the true value of their prize. All they could comprehend was what was in front of them. Taking the mermaid book in his paws he stood over her motionless form and continued to read. The potential she represented was practically limitless, yet to save his employers life he would need to put that aside and do what needed to be done. He placed his hand on her tail, feeling along the scales to the edge of the jewels and ran his fingers along the smooth surface. For just a moment he felt as if he could feel the power radiating from them, and as quickly as it came, it vanished.

THE SILVERFISH

The moon shone brightly in the night sky illuminating the surface of the water. Harumi leaned on the side of the ship staring out over the open ocean watching the horizon bounce gently in the distance. So focused was her attention on the waves below that she did not notice the approach of her mentor Hisoka. With a silent step she would not have thought possible with his land dwelling form he stood beside her with a wordless gaze.

Harumi had known this conversation was inevitable though she had hoped she could delay it for a while longer. When it was clear she would not initiate the discussion the stallion exhaled and placed his hands on the railing. "I thought I might find you out here."

"The ocean is rather beautiful at night," she said.

"That it is," he agreed. "Though I do not think I shall ever get used to seeing it from above. No matter how many times I take on this shape I do not ever feel quite like myself until I return to the water."

Harumi nodded, looking down at her feet paws. Though she had taken a land dwelling form before, it had always felt slightly alien to her as well. The appendages they used to move about lacked the fluidity and grace of a proper tail. Underwater movement had a flow that surface inhabitants could only match when they themselves came into the ocean to swim about. Of course even the best of them could not duplicate the efficiency and speed of the merfolk, but it was the closest they could get to replicating their form of locomotion.

All mermaids as a part of their training were taught to assume a bipedal form for both their own protection as well as preparing those who were chosen to keep an eye on the surface. To protect their secret merfolk needed to blend in among the coastal communities and seafaring ships. This required volunteers who would be willing to walk among the surface people for months at a time without arousing suspicion. In order to accomplish this they would be trained by someone who had experience living among them. While Harumi had only had the basic training, it was enough to allow her to move about on land as she desired without too much difficulty. Nevertheless, she missed her beautiful tail with its ruby jewels and smooth silky scales.

"I know what you mean," she replied. "Though I have worn this form for some time now I must admit I do not feel whole without my ring."

Hisoka reached into his pocket and dropped a small object into her palm. "You mean this one?"

Her eyes widened as she hugged him with a sudden lunge. "MY RING!" She looked at it before slipping it back onto her finger. "You found it!"

"We took it from Diana before she escaped from our custody. I had kept it with me in case I found you, though at the time we did not realize she was telling the truth." He touched his chest to catch his breath as his student released him.

"Thank you so much for returning it to me," she said, admiring it on her finger in the moonlit night.

Hisoka touched her back gently. "Just try not to lose it this time, okay?" he asked with a smile.

The red panda nodded and hugged him again, this time far more gently before stepping back once more. "I won't."

“See that you don’t,” he said, with a teacher’s love in his voice. “I should hate to have to retrieve it from another unexpected mermaid.”

“It wasn’t my fault, okay? I was unconscious when she put it on,” Harumi insisted.

Hisoka smiled. “Nevertheless, we must be careful above the surface. These people may be your friends but you must remember this is not our world.” His smile faded as he returned his gaze to the ocean. “We do not belong on the surface any more than they belong under the sea.”

From a young age all merfolk were taught the surface world was dangerous. Their history was filled with ancient stories of mermaids being hunted for their jewels to the point of several clans becoming nearly extinct. Some even lost their jewels entirely as a result of generations of only those without them reaching maturity. The pursuit of their people resulted in merfolk being generally untrusting of land dwellers and the eventual decision to seek protection deep in the ocean waters where those who lived on the surface could not follow.

For generations afterward they stayed beneath the waves, free from the harvesting of their precious tail jewels, and able to rebuild their populations to sustainable levels once more. From then on mermaids avoided the surface, only returning in their land dweller forms when they needed information. It was through this they kept aware of ship movements and other relevant events going on above the water that stood to affect their people below. For the most part they observed but now and then intervention would be necessary. When this was the case it would be done with as little of a footprint as possible, and then when anyone went looking for the people involved they would be gone, back beneath the sea.

The two worlds were kept separate for their own protection, she knew. Even so she found herself hesitating at the thought of leaving Rhodes. Though they had only known each other for a short time she had become accustomed to his presence. No one else in her life had ever treated her as he had, and it was something she did not know how to explain but was finding it more and more difficult to be without.

“But surely our worlds were not meant to be separate forever,” she said.

Hisoka turned to face her with some obvious concern in his voice. “As long as we are hunted by those on land our worlds cannot be joined,” he replied.

Harumi shook her head. “Why not?”

“You know full well why not.” He snorted and stomped a hoof. “We are not safe on land. This mission we are on proves that.”

“It also proves we are working alongside land dwellers that know who and what we are and do not care. They are seeking our help to find their friend. If they can learn to live peacefully with us, then others can as well.” Harumi met his glance and suddenly felt a great discomfort as he examined her face in detail. Under the scrutiny of her friend and mentor she lowered her muzzle and flattened her ears.

Hisoka frowned. “You would not be the first to think so. Unfortunately experience has taught us such people are the exceptions rather than the rule.” The stallion let out a deep breath. “I shall be glad when this is all over and we can return to the ocean and leave all this behind.”

Harumi kept her eyes on the deck, not responding right away. Her mentor did not miss her lack of response and guided her chin upwards until he could look into her eyes. "I..."

"Somehow I suspect that is not what you desire." He searched her face carefully. "Which one of them is it?" he asked. "The stallion?" When she did not reply he lowered his hand. "You know such liaisons are forbidden."

"I have not lain with him nor given him my ring." She turned away from the taller stallion. "We have done nothing wrong in the eyes of either land or sea."

"But you've thought about it," Hisoka replied.

"Yes. No. I don't know." She faced him once again. "I know when I am with him I feel these things I can't explain. I don't want to be apart from him but I know I can't stay. The thought of being in this form for the rest of my life, never feeling the water on my tail again, I can't stand it. But at the same time I do not want to leave him behind."

Hisoka sighed. "You know you can't hope to have any sort of a life together. You're a mermaid. He's a surface dweller."

"I know that. I don't want to give up my tail but anytime I am not with him I feel like I can't breathe." Tears welled up at the corners of her eyes, and a moment later she felt Hisoka's arms wrap around her in a gentle embrace.

"Hush, now." He looked at her and wiped the tears from her face. "We'll figure this out."

"How?" she asked.

"I don't know, but whatever happens, I will not let anything happen to you." He held her in his arms and squeezed one more time before releasing her. "Whatever we do we must ensure that this never reaches the Aqua Regalia." He stared at her with a firm intensity. "I don't want you to end up like Scarlet."

Scarlet was a cautionary tale among mermaids. Everyone had heard the story about the mermaid who fell in love with a surface dweller and tried to give him her ring to seal their love. She was betrayed by the man she trusted and was exiled to the surface, never again to take a mermaid form or feel the ocean on her fins. No one knew what had become of her or where she was now assuming she even still lived, but the lesson was clear. Love with surface dwellers was prohibited under threat of exile. To risk it was to risk never being a mermaid again.

Yet Harumi could not bear to be without either Rhodes or her underwater life, but at the moment she saw no way to keep them both. The red panda looked at the ring on her finger and then looked up as Rhodes approached from the rear of the ship. She covered the ring with her other paw and smiled. "Rhodes."

Hisoka nodded respectfully. "Mister Lawson," he said.

Rhodes returned the gesture and touched Harumi on the shoulder, an act that did not go unnoticed by the other stallion. Harumi felt the weight of his glare though thankfully Rhodes remained ignorant of it. "We're about to put together a plan. I thought you two would like to join us."

"Of course," Hisoka said. "Lead the way."

Harumi said nothing as she followed behind the stallion to a room at the rear of the ship which she assumed to be the captain's cabin. It was a small vessel so the room was not overly spacious, but it was just large enough for a bed, a table, a desk, and the six

occupants that currently stood around the oceanic maps laid out before them. At the head of the table the ship's captain waited for the rest of the group to get settled. Though he had come willingly Harumi knew his participation in this adventure was not without hesitation. More than once he had pointed out the danger of confronting an enemy so vastly superior to their own capabilities. Nevertheless neither he nor any of the others had wavered in their resolve for even a moment.

To his right were Ethan and Lydia, who both remained focused on the map as they considered the difficult scenario they would need to face. Ethan was Diana's mate and the one most determined to retrieve her at any cost. Harumi knew that nothing would prevent Ethan from going headfirst into the shark's maw if he believed there was a chance to rescue his beloved. For her part the crocodile appeared to be placing the models that currently represented the Crimson Sun fleet into their approximate positions. It was clear at a glance that their path would be far from easy. The information they had received from Libertalia would be helpful but even with that they would be facing a difficult battle.

On the other side of the otter captain stood Rhodes, who made eye contact with Hisoka as they entered. No doubt each already knew the exact nature of the relationship between him and Harumi even if nothing more than feelings had passed between them. Even so Hisoka made it a point to insert himself between them. Harumi said nothing, for the moment allowing her mentor to do what in his eyes was protecting her. While there would be a discussion between the three of them at some point, now was not the time.

Once he spotted the two mermaids Nolan cleared his throat and rapped his knuckles on the surface of the table. "All right, since we're all here I thought we should discuss our plan of attack." When there were no comments, he continued. "The further we proceed the more likely it is we'll run into a Crimson Sun patrol. If you were considering turning back, now's your last chance."

"I'm not turning back," Ethan said with conviction.

Nolan nodded. "I didn't think so, but you may reconsider after what I'm about to tell you."

"Proceed, captain," Lydia said.

The otter let out a deep breath and placed a small model of the ship on the map a few feet away from their target island. "This is our current position. So far we've been lucky. I haven't seen any vessels other than ourselves for the past several hours but we're in relatively open waters. The closer we get to Sapphire Cove the greater the concentration of hostile ships. Now based on the current position of their patrols we estimate it'll take another six to eight hours for us to get close enough to mount any sort of attack."

"Can't we shave that down a little?" Ethan asked.

"Not if you want to make it in one piece," the otter replied. "Our only advantage lies in the fact that they don't know we're coming. If they spot us they're going to close their defenses and we won't stand a chance at getting your friend back. As it is the odds aren't good." He gestured towards the map with a flourish of his hand. "Assuming we manage to arrive without tripping any alerts we're going to be on the defensive from the moment they spot us." He moved the ship to the mouth of the crescent shaped island. "If you were considering a frontal assault you'd best think again right now. Even if we had a

full crew this ship won't last long against a commercial fleet." He shook his head. "Our best bet lies in convincing them we're not a threat."

Hisoka raised an eyebrow. "I would have thought otherwise."

"These are fairly dangerous people. If they perceive any sort of danger they'll open fire before we have a chance to even throw up a white flag." The otter tapped one of the small model ships. "Crimson Sun may present themselves as a merchant fleet but make no mistake, their ships are war vessels. There's a reason they don't get attacked by pirates or other parties interested in their cargo. Anyone who's foolish enough to try usually doesn't live long enough to regret the mistake." He shrugged. "There are rumors Crimson Sun has a secret prison somewhere for those they capture or simply want to disappear."

"Only rumors?" Ethan asked.

"It's possible it's simply misinformation, but based on what I know about them it's not a theory I'd care to test." He returned his attention to the briefing. "Sapphire Cove has been a Crimson Sun outpost for years. From what I've heard it used to be owned by various pirate groups until Silas Werner and his people took it from them. They've been using it as a base of operations ever since. The island is a fortress, with tall mountains encompassing most of the cove. They're too tall to scale and the only opening large enough for a ship our size is the break in the crescent."

"So the only way in is the front door," Rhodes said.

Nolan nodded. "Unfortunately, yes." He placed the model of their ship at the mouth of the crescent. "If we time our arrival carefully we can approach the island at night and minimize our chances of being spotted, but once we reach this point we'll have no choice but to go in."

"Is that a good idea?" Ethan asked. "Once we get in there we're not going to have a lot of room to maneuver. Not to mention the fact that should they open fire on us I don't fancy having to swim all the way back to shore."

The otter slid the model of the *Silverfish* all the way inside the cove. "If we leave the ship outside there's no way to ensure she'll still be there when we get back. To carry this rescue mission off we're going to need everyone we've got and I don't fancy leaving my ship where I can't keep an eye on her."

"Then what do you propose?" Lydia asked.

He looked around the room at each of them. "We know if we come in guns blazing they'll open fire on us and sink our ship before we have time to even clear the rocks. However, if they think the ship's abandoned they'll send a party out to meet it." He gestured to the hull. "With luck they'll assume the ship is just a careless cargo vessel seeking a safe port that drifted into their territory."

Ethan folded his arms. "How do you know they won't just sink us anyway?"

"I don't, but if you have a better idea I'm open to hear it." Once he was certain Ethan was not going to reply, he continued. "We go in with no lights and no one above deck. Once we get close I'll angle the ship as best I can to sail right through the opening in the cove. When we're close enough the Crimson Sun ships will send a boarding party onto the *Silverfish* to investigate. When they do, that's when we spring our trap." The otter straightened up and placed his webbed paws on his hips. "With luck, we can keep them distracted long enough for you to find your friend and rescue her."

“Two teams, then,” Ethan said. “One to find Diana and the other to keep Crimson Sun busy for as long as possible.”

“That’s not going to be easy. Provided we’re fortunate enough to reach them undetected, even in the best case scenario they outnumber us by a significant margin. Having the element of surprise will buy us an initial advantage, but it’ll dissipate quickly,” Rhodes said.

Nolan nodded, indicating the models representing the enemy fleet. “Based on the information we received at Libertalia we know there are at least five capital ships. That doesn’t include the possibility there may already be several ships waiting for them in Sapphire Cove.”

Lydia stared down at the map, her eyes settling on the model of their own ship. “I think we can bet on them having at least seven fully crewed vessels.”

“And we have no idea which one of them Diana could be on,” Rhodes said.

Ethan shook his head. “Yeah, we do. They’ll keep Diana on board the flagship.” He met everyone’s glances in turn. “Think about it. She represents a significant prize. They’re not going to trust her to any other place besides the lead ship. We identify their flagship, we find Diana.”

“How do you suggest we do that?” Nolan asked.

Harumi raised a paw. “We can do it. Hisoka and I can slip in unnoticed and examine the ships from beneath the surface. The largest vessel will be the flagship.” The red panda held up her paw showing the others the ring. “We can observe their forces and report back before your ship arrives at the island.”

“If you can pull it off that significantly increases our chances of making through this alive.” Nolan straightened up and looked at Ethan. “This is your show, who’s on what team?”

Ethan did not hesitate in his response. “Rhodes and Harumi, you’re with me. We’re going to board the ship and retrieve Diana. Lydia, you and the others will keep the enemy off balance for as long as you can.” He took a deep breath and exhaled. “With luck we’ll be back before you know it.”

“They’re going to need weapons. Do either of you know how to use a sword?” Lydia asked, referring to the two merfolk.

Hisoka nodded. “I have been trained in a few techniques.” He paused. “Harumi has not had weapons training but she does know hand to hand techniques.”

Harumi shook her head. “Only the basics.”

The hawk tilted his head. “That’ll have to do. As it is we’re going to need all the help we can get. Rhodes and I will do the heavy lifting. We just need you to back us up.”

Harumi offered a bow. “I’ll do my best.”

Hisoka stepped forward to address the group. “Regardless of how this plan unfolds we cannot allow one of our own to fall into dangerous hands. This mission ends one of two ways. Either we retrieve your friend, or we don’t come back at all.”

Ethan stared down at the model of their ship. “On that, we are all in agreement.” He moved the models and rolled up the map. “We only have a few hours before we’re within range. Get some rest. You’re going to need it.”

Harumi cast one final glance at Rhodes before being ushered out of the room by Hisoka. To reach the island and return in time they would have to leave immediately.

She stepped towards the edge of the ship and removed her land dweller clothes feeling the wind against her naked body before she leapt into the sea, allowing the magic of the ring to transform her once again into a mermaid. Her legs fused becoming a long powerful tail, and moments after hitting the water she and Hisoka were swimming at top speed towards their destination.