

“Rising Tide”

By Lauren Rivers

CHAPTER 2

While Ethan threw dirt over the last embers of the fire used to cook their morning meal, Rhodes straightened his vest before examining his appearance in the mirror. Unlike the others he seemed more concerned with presenting the appearance of a proper gentlestallion even if there was no one but his companions to see it. He nodded in approval before searching his belongings for a brush to keep his mane in proper order. While his hawk partner was a good hearted and generous soul, his avian nature kept him from wearing much more than a light vest to cover his upper body. As such it gave him a somewhat casual appearance.

Lydia also tended to dress lightly in her signature breezy dress which despite its delicate appearance always managed to appear in perfect order. How she managed to keep it that way considering the sorts of situations they tended to encounter he would never know. Her only adornment, the golden spiral which identified her as an Oracle, sparkled in the morning light. While Rhodes had never quite understood what had driven her to join their small traveling group he was nevertheless glad to have her as company. With Ethan often being amorously inclined towards Diana it was welcome to have someone else to talk to especially when the others disappeared off by themselves.

The hawk would never admit it, but when it came to Diana he seemed to lose all reason and think only of her. It was not that Rhodes didn't understand. After all, she was a rather attractive canine, and they had been through quite a lot together. However, Rhodes never quite comprehended how one lady could possess such a pull over a gentleman of sense. Of course he had been in love once or twice but he had never caught himself mooning over her presence or saying foolish things in the presence of the others. No, not him. Rhodes had far more sense than that.

As the others worked to pack up their camp he searched the area for signs of their fourth member. Diana had gone for a walk on the beach after their meal and had promised to return within the hour. It was almost the end of that hour and she had still not returned. Rhodes had no doubt she could take care of herself, she had proven that more than once. Nevertheless, it was not like Diana to be gone longer than intended. He turned his attention to the pack animal, giving it a few gentle touches on the muzzle.

"Hungry, girl?" he asked.

The beast nodded as if in response and pressed her muzzle against him. "Okay, okay, I'll get you something to eat too." He smiled and walked towards the back of the cart, pulling out a small fruit. He offered it to her but the beast at first pretended not to be interested, turning away as if bored. "You sure? It's delicious star fruit, your favorite." He made a show of waving it before the animal's eyes. "Very well, then, if you don't want it, I'll eat it." Just as he was about to pretend to take a bite, the pack animal turned and licked his face until he held it up to her allowing the beast to take a few gentle bites. "That's better."

Ethan and Lydia approached at the same time with both of them looking well rested and fully fed. "We're all packed up," the hawk remarked.

"Then all we need is your lady archer and we're ready to go," Rhodes replied.

Ethan looked around and shrugged. "I'm sure she'll be along shortly."

"I hope so. I've told the next marketplace to expect us either tomorrow or the day after." He whinnied towards his companions.

Ethan nodded. "We have plenty of time."

Rhodes turned as he saw Lydia become motionless. "Is everything all right?" he asked.

"Something's coming," she said.

Rhodes did not pretend to understand Lydia's talent for knowing things she shouldn't, but he knew enough to trust her instincts. When she spoke it was well worth listening, as Oracles rarely said things without reason. She turned towards the direction of the beach, from where Diana had gone for her morning walk. However, when a figure broke out of the distance it was not the Doberman archer but instead a pink furred lady red panda. It took Rhodes a moment to realize she was completely naked. Running away from the beach she looked almost in a panic, and she nearly barreled into the stallion in her efforts to create distance between her and whatever she was running from.

When she realized she had encountered something solid she looked up and opened her eyes. The red panda struggled to break free as Rhodes attempted to calm her down.

"Hey, hey, there! We're not going to hurt you, I promise. Slow down a moment, would you?" he asked.

The red panda panted heavily looking like she was going to bolt again when Lydia stepped into view. The new arrival locked eyes with her and then Ethan before she finally seemed to relax just the tiniest amount. The woman shifted her glance from one of them to the next until finally she simply wrapped her arms around Rhodes.

"There's something you don't see every day," Ethan said.

Lydia walked around the naked red panda and offered her most disarming smile, which she somehow managed to do with an impressive ease given her species natural predatory origins. She placed a hand on her chest. "My name is Lydia, this is Ethan and Rhodes. I promise, we're friends. What's your name?" she asked.

The red panda breathed rapidly for a few more seconds before she managed to calm herself enough to reply. "Harumi."

"Harumi," Rhodes repeated. "That's a very pretty name. Where did you come from?"

"The sea," she said.

Lydia seemed to react to that, though for what reason Rhodes could not tell. "You mean the beach?"

"No, I came from the sea," she said. "I was swimming away from some surface vessels when I passed out on the beach. When I awoke, a lady Doberman had found me."

Ethan touched her arm in desperation. "You've seen Diana?" he asked.

"She was trying to help me when we got separated." Harumi clutched to Rhodes like she was never going to let him go. The stallion had to admit it had been some time since he had held a lady in this manner. The feel of her body against his filled him with warmth he had not experienced in far too long. He pressed her gently to his chest doing his best to be a gentlestallion.

"Where is she?" he asked. "Do you know where she went?"

"She went to my home," Harumi replied. "I must get back there, but I lack the ability to do so."

Ethan locked eyes with Rhodes. "Sounds like a familiar story," he said, no doubt referring to Diana, who was similarly stranded away from her home.

Rhodes looked at her. “Well, you don’t seem to be hurt, but let’s see if we can’t get you some clothes.”

“And something to eat,” Lydia added, following Rhodes towards the cart. The red panda allowed herself to be guided along the short distance to where their transportation waited. Rhodes positioned her beside the rear of the cart with a gentle smile.

“Wait here a moment.” It was at this moment he had managed to get his first good look at her since she had barreled into view. Her eyes were a deep pink that matched the shades of her fur. Long hair cascaded down her back to below her tail, and a small jewel seemed almost embedded in her forehead. She was well built and muscular with an athletic appearance and he could not help but admire her curves for a moment before he climbed into the rear of the cart and picked through their female clothing for something that would suit the young lady. He examined several selections before finding one he deemed appropriate and with a delicate hand removed it from the hanger. It was a simple white dress with a rope tied just under the breasts, and a metal piece with jewels on the upper chest that connected to strips of cloth leading behind the wearer to secure the garment.

The jewels and rope perfectly matched the shades of pink naturally present in her fur. One thing Rhodes had a talent for as a clothing and jewelry merchant was to know what would look good on a woman at a glance. It was a talent that had come in handy during their many adventures throughout Akaeria. Many of the women who purchased from them regularly often enjoyed letting Rhodes look at them and decide what they should buy. More often than not they were satisfied with his selections. A few of them even seemed to enjoy the surprise, or perhaps it was just the attention from a well dressed gentlestallion. Whatever the reason, it kept sales going in many a marketplace.

Emerging with the dress he held it up to Harumi. “I think this should fit you.” He held it against her body to confirm its size.

She accepted the garment with some curiosity looking at it with a little hesitation. Lydia emerged with some biscuits and a little metal container where they stored some pre made tea on their journeys. The crocodile smiled and nodded at the dress. “That’s lovely. Rhodes has such wonderful taste. I think you’ll enjoy that. Do you know how to put it on?”

Harumi looked at her feet paws for a moment and then shrugged. “I usually don’t wear things this long. I’ve seen them on land dwellers, but I have never ventured further than the beach.”

Lydia looked up at her suddenly. “I thought so,” she said.

“What is it?” Rhodes asked.

“Land dwellers?” Ethan added.

“It all makes sense now. I suspected she was more than she appeared but now I know for sure. She’s a mermaid.”

“A what?” Ethan replied with his eyes wide.

Rhodes shook his head. “Mermaids don’t exist. They went extinct a long time ago.”

“People have thought similar things about Aldris, but we know they once swam the oceans in impressive numbers. The Oracles have the most extensive records on just about any subject you can name and there are multiple records confirming the existence

of mermaids. In fairness most of those accounts are quite old. No one has seen one in the flesh for longer than I can recall.” Lydia looked from Ethan to Rhodes. “However, given some of the things we’ve encountered it does encourage one to keep an open mind.”

“Yes, but mermaids?” Rhodes asked in disbelief.

Ethan shrugged. “Don’t mermaids tend to have a fish tail?” he asked, gesturing at her rather attractive furred legs.

Lydia sighed. “Well, yeah, but the information I read in my spare time was incomplete and extremely outdated. There may be something we’re missing.”

Rhodes looked towards Harumi and then at Lydia. “Would you lend her a hand?” he asked.

The female crocodile nodded. “Sure.” She ushered the naked red panda around the corner of the cart. “You boys stay right there. Don’t let me catch you sneaking another peek.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Ethan said, keeping his back turned to their direction. Rhodes knew the hawk had eyes only for his beloved Doberman archer, but as for Rhodes he was simply a gentlestallion. He kept his attention on a rather interesting tree until a moment later Lydia returned and announced their newest guest.

“Gentlemen, meet Harumi.” She smirked. “Again.”

Now fully dressed in the outfit Rhodes had selected for her he allowed himself a cursory inspection. She seemed even more beautiful in the elegant gown which ran to her knees and accentuated not only her form but the colors of her fur. The white fabric blended perfectly with her shades of pink and black. The Gypsy vanner horse could not help but whinny in approval as she stood shyly beside their resident Oracle. “It’s lovely. I mean, it’s quite pretty.” He swallowed nervously. “You look nice.”

“Yes she does,” Lydia agreed. “You have some fine taste in clothing, good sir,” she said, complimenting his fashion sense.

“It’s nothing,” he said.

The crocodile laughed softly. “I’d hardly call it nothing. It’s a fine talent, and one that serves you well. Now doesn’t she look just gorgeous, Ethan?”

Ethan’s neck feathers puffed up in embarrassment as he nodded. “Oh yes.”

“Boys. Put them in front of a pretty girl and they become babbling idiots.” She touched Harumi’s cheek. “Now then. It sounds like you’ve got quite a story.” Lydia looked to her partners and then the cart. “How about you tell it to us while we travel?” she asked. “We’re headed along the coast for a while longer. You’re welcome to join us and I wouldn’t recommend a lady such as yourself walking around without an escort or two.” She hooked her thumb over her shoulder. “I happen to know a couple of guys who are rather good with damsels in distress.”

Harumi looked around and cast a glance back towards the coastline, but with a solemn nod she climbed into the cart with Lydia right behind her. Ethan and Rhodes moved up towards the driver’s seat, and Rhodes noted that the crocodile closed the privacy curtain before he cracked the reins. Less than a moment later the cart was rolling along at a steady pace towards the city of Halvern. While he did not like the idea of leaving Diana behind any more than Ethan did, both knew that for now they could do nothing for her. The canine archer was more than capable of taking care of herself, and if

what the young woman claimed was true she was beyond their reach at least for the time being.

Rhodes shook his head at the idea of mermaids. It was the stuff of legends. Nonsense to be passed around in bars and on long sea voyages. Aldris was mythical but there was proof, pieces of the city left behind. The mermaids had never been seen by any living person that he knew of, and as far as he was concerned, he still hadn't. It was clear the girl in the back of their cart had her share of mystery but the notion that she came from a hidden underwater civilization seemed unlikely at best.

Deciding there was no further point in entertaining the idea, at least for now, he turned his attention to the road ahead. The path was well worn from countless carts and pack animals passing in both directions on their way to and from the major cities. It was a view he knew well. For a moment he allowed himself to forget everything that had happened to them since that day in the marketplace when Ethan had hidden a Doberman archer from the Red Guard and their lives had taken a shift towards the dramatic. It was not that he regretted the act of mercy, especially in retrospect, but he always wondered what might have happened had she gotten into a different cart.

Glancing over his shoulder at the curtain he thought of Harumi again. She was a rather pretty girl, even more so when she was dressed. Wherever she had actually come from she had clearly been well taken care of and carried a certain dignity about her. The stallion wondered for a moment if she might not have been some nobleman's daughter who either ran away or was kidnapped. If so there had to be someone that was looking for her.

Lydia seemed more than willing to accept her story at face value. While he could not tell whether Ethan believed her claims or not he knew that it would not be the first time the hawk had let a pretty face lead them into trouble. He would have to keep this red panda at arms length and watch her for any clues as to what she was hiding from them.

For now, he would give her the benefit of the doubt. They would take her to Halvern and get her something to eat, and then he could investigate her origins and perhaps find out how she had ended up in the middle of nowhere without any clothes. The stallion cracked the reins to increase the pack animal's speed a small bit.

A short while later they approached the coastal city of Halvern. A beacon of trade and commerce much like Sadriel it was a truly awe inspiring sight. Spires rose up into the sky at all points throughout the city reminding Rhodes of an ornate candelabrum, the type his father seemed to favor on his tables. The closer they got the more they could see of the massive hub of civilization. Countless people of all professions made their home here from the honest to the criminal, but the thing the city was known for was its bustling port which saw ships from all around the region offering wonders from far and wide. The spice trade was more profitable than just about anything else in this part of the world, and some of the fine restaurants in the city were so popular it was almost impossible to sample their wares unless you happened to know someone.

If nothing else, this would give them the chance to resupply and perhaps sell some of their stock before moving on or returning to find what had become of Diana. In either case, places like this always offered one indispensable commodity. Information.

HALVERN

Dressed in the clothing of a land dweller Harumi blended in with her new companions. Until she was able to use one of the rings she would remain in this form and thus would be disguised as one of them. The trio seemed to be kind and accepting, though whether they believed her was uncertain. Regardless she knew she would need to find a way back to her underwater home and perhaps reunite with Diana, neither of which she was currently capable of doing. For the time being she had no options other than to remain with the people she had encountered, who had identified themselves as the Doberman archer's companions.

As they entered the city she struggled to remember her lessons about the people that lived above the surface of the water. The merpeople regularly sent scouts to the surface to keep their information reasonably current from time to time. This served two purposes. The first was to keep them prepared for any advances that might threaten their peaceful population. The second was to learn all they could about the region to allow their people to blend in as needed. It wouldn't do for one of their scouts to say or do something significantly out of date. As such, scouts were sent to different places at regular intervals. Land dweller clothing would be hidden at caches along the shore to allow their people to explore and interact per their mission requirements.

She, however, had no mission. Harumi had left to indulge her curiosity about the passing fleet of ships and now she was paying for it. Cut off from her home she had no way to tell them what had happened nor warn them of Diana's coming. She only hoped they would welcome her as a friend, but with her failure to return there was a possibility they would question her intentions especially given her ownership of the ring. Given enough time they might send someone after her, but for now she could only wonder.

The woman who had identified herself as an Oracle sat across from her with a gentle smile. The female crocodile was dressed in a light breezy gown which accentuated her curves and allowed some of her natural scale color to show through the gossamer fabric. She kept her distance but remained close making no effort to press her for information or otherwise engage her in conversation. For the moment, she appreciated the silence.

Pulling aside the forward curtain she looked out upon the city and her muzzle dropped open. Despite knowing about most of these things from books seeing them in person was quite different. She looked around at the massive buildings that rose into the sky and the fine clothing worn by the various residents of the city. Large animals the kind of which she had only ever seen in books moved about among the population as noise seemed to come in from all sides. People shouted various things to each other, most of which she could not make out, but it was clear to her this was a place where a significant amount of the surface dwellers chose to make their home.

Overwhelmed by the sights and sounds before her she ducked back into the cart and held her knees to her chest. The red panda whimpered slightly looking at the crocodile, which slid closer and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Are all your cities like this?"

"Some more so than others," Lydia replied. "This one is particularly busy." She smiled and squeezed gently. "Don't worry. It's a safe place as long as you don't wander around by yourself." She lowered her hand to the floor of the cart and raised her head as

she seemed to react to something. “We’re slowing down.” The crocodile pulled open the curtain and looked at the stallion and hawk. “Everything all right?” she asked.

Ethan glanced over his shoulder while Rhodes concentrated on guiding their pack animal through the crowds. “We’re approaching the marketplace. Rhodes and I already have a reservation for a space for a few days. Once we’re set up we can see about getting something to eat and determine what to do about our latest member.” He offered a cheerful smile before disappearing behind the privacy curtain once again.

Harumi continued to look sheepishly at her hands which rested on her lap. Perhaps it was simple habit but she had noticed she had sat with her legs together as if she still had her tail. It took her a moment to reconcile the thought that she was at least for the moment a land dweller with the subconscious memory of her mermaid form. If she closed her eyes she could almost feel the powerful appendage propelling her through the water with fluid grace and effortless motion. The sensation only lasted a moment before she shook her head and returned her attention to the current situation.

She considered her companions, who thus far had proven to be friendly and compassionate. While Harumi’s experience with land dwellers was limited she sensed no ill intentions from them. They seemed quite concerned for their missing companion and at least for now seemed like they would do anything to return her to their company. Gazing once more at her feet paws she wondered how much she should share with the group. It was true they had already intuited her true nature as a mermaid but whether or not anyone besides the crocodile believed it was still under debate. Protocol advised her to remain as silent as possible on the subject of the world beneath the waves, but she needed them to trust her if she was going to return home anytime soon. For the time being they seemed willing to give her the benefit of the doubt, but the time might come when they would require more from her.

At present they seemed content to go about their business so at least for a little while longer the question could wait. She needed a plan. While she was not blind to the world above neither was she an expert, and if she ran into trouble she did not know who if anyone would come to her rescue. She was trained in underwater evasion techniques and some fighting skills but they were useless without her tail.

Knowing she needed to find some way to either get her hands on another ring or contact someone from home she was left with few options other than to stay with her current companions and hope a course of action presented itself. As she locked eyes with her crocodile companion she blushed and turned away just as quickly. Harumi let out a deep breath, considering things could be a lot worse.

Lydia leaned forward a bit. “You can trust us, you know. I know you’re still trying to feel us out but I promise you we won’t do anything to harm you. We only want to help you and get our friend back.”

Harumi offered a sheepish nod but said nothing. The crocodile looked in her direction for a few moments more before she moved to busy herself with checking the supplies. The red panda curled up and wrapped her arms around her legs, resting her head on her knees as she waited for the cart to reach its current destination.

The voices of the hawk and stallion up front exchanged words with another voice she did not recognize, and a moment later they were moving again. The cart headed down a road until finally they made a right turn and came to a halt. The hawk jumped off first and pulled open the curtains in the back. “We’re here, ladies.”

“Thank you, Ethan,” Lydia replied.

The hawk extended a hand to the crocodile, who graciously took his hand in her own as she descended to the ground. He did the same for Harumi, who hesitated for a moment, extending her hand and then pulling it back suddenly as if she feared he might pull on her arm. After a moment, he held up both hands towards her. “I promise, we’ll look after you.”

Harumi looked at the crocodile and then her avian companion before finally nodding and climbing down. When her feet paws touched the ground she paused in thought. Beneath her was not sand and dirt but stone forming paths through the city. She searched her lessons for the word and a moment later it came to her. Roads. These were roads. The surface was cool and smooth to the touch. Exploring the new sensation she took a few steps and turned around before realizing the pair was watching her with some amusement. “Have I done something wrong?” she asked.

Lydia rushed to reassure her. “Oh, no, not at all. The way you were looking around simply seemed,” she touched her hands together as she searched for the word, “particular.”

The red panda blushed like she had been caught doing something she wasn’t supposed to, which she supposed she had. Harumi was trying to keep the impression at least to the world at large that she was a land dweller. She had already allowed the crocodile to intuit who she truly was but the others at least for now seemed hesitant to accept that idea and she needed to keep it that way. She could afford no more mistakes in her efforts to return home. As far as the others were concerned she was one of them. Harumi tried to cover it up by citing her inexperience. “I’ve never been in a place like this,” she said.

Technically it had the virtue of being true and explaining her behavior at the same time. The crocodile did not press and simply put a hand on her arm before turning to Ethan. “Why don’t you boys get set up here and I’ll fetch us some lunch?” she asked.

Ethan smiled. “That would be lovely. We’ll need to resupply but for now would you bring me some soup and some fresh tea?”

Lydia nodded. “I can do that. Rhodes, what would you like for lunch?” she asked.

The stallion, which had been tending to their pack animal, turned so she could hear him. “You know what I like, use your own judgment,” he said.

“Are you sure?” she asked. “This city has a lot of choices.”

“If it means leaving my fate in your hands, I feel better about it than with almost anyone else. I await your decision.” He bowed to the Oracle and then returned to taking care of the pack animal while Ethan moved to begin the process of setting up their wares.

Lydia gestured with her arm down one of the stone paths and nodded in the opposite direction. “There are some good restaurants around here. What are you in the mood for?”

“I don’t know.” Harumi had no experience with land dweller food or eating habits. She hoped the crocodile would provide an example to keep her from doing anything particularly mermaid-like during her meal. Even with the preparation of her lessons about the surface there were so many things she had not been prepared for and it didn’t show any signs of stopping.

A few moments later they approached a building with large glass windows on both sides and a dark wooden door. A sign above the entrance depicting what Harumi assumed was land dweller food declared this place as an eating establishment. Keeping her paws together in front of her she followed Lydia inside. The main room consisted of a bunch of small tables with chairs all around them along with a counter where a German shepherd dispensed drinks with a wide smile. Harumi looked around and noticed most of the people here were dressed differently than the two women. Unlike their own clothes the locals appeared to wear much more utilitarian outfits. Appearing simple and functional they lacked the grace of mermaid garments and even the lightness of the dresses they now wore.

Harumi observed the residents of Halvern on their way to Lydia's chosen table. She selected a small square table large enough for two and sat in one of the chairs. Doing likewise, Harumi looked around some more with obvious curiosity. "This place is very different from the places I'm used to."

"I would imagine so, for someone so far from home," Lydia replied. "Though in my experience, the people here are generally friendly. I don't know what you like to eat but they have a lot of different things here."

Harumi glanced at some of the plates around her though she had never seen most of the foods nor did she know what any of them tasted like. Eating underwater was a rather different ordeal than this place. Mermaids tended to enjoy various forms of oceanic plant life as well as smaller fish and other sea creatures. She noticed a crab on someone's plate and pointed. "One of those."

Lydia flagged down a server and placed their order. While they waited, the Oracle leaned back in her chair and smiled. "So I know you're still trying to figure us out, but we do want to help you. I can wait, though, until you're ready. For now, let us be your guide."

"I know you want to get your friend back, and I can help you, but our experience has taught us contact with others can be risky. I probably shouldn't have told you what I did, but this place is so different." Harumi had been so beside herself when she'd first met her new companions that she had forgotten her lessons, and insofar as Lydia went she knew the damage was likely done. However, for one reason or another, Lydia at least for now seemed to be willing to pretend like she did not know her true origin. Somehow, for reasons she did not understand, this made Harumi feel better.

As the server returned with their meal Harumi picked up the crab and took a large bite to crack the shell before pulling it apart to get at the meat. When she had taken her first bite she looked up to see Lydia staring at her.

"You're supposed to use these utensils," she explained. Harumi looked at the metal implements curiously and then picked one up. After staring at it, Lydia smiled and picked up the crab. "Here, like this."

The crocodile showed her how to retrieve the meat from the rest of it, and as Harumi considered the strange ways of the land dwellers, she looked out the nearest window and was struck by the sight of one of the few things she recognized above the surface. As she stared up at the building in the distance she recalled the emblem on the fleet of ships. The red star. As it had on the ship it stood as a stark reminder of the power of those who traveled under its symbol. Harumi turned back to her meal and looked down.

“Is everything all right?” Lydia asked.
“It’s nothing,” Harumi said. “Just something I saw.”

NOVA BLADE – CAPTAIN’S CABIN

Blood stained his handkerchief as the African wild dog covered his muzzle during his latest coughing fit. His face contorted in a mask of pain, it occurred to the physician that he was one of the few people to see Silas Werner in such a vulnerable state. When his symptoms became severe he would order everyone out except for the squirrel and allow no one in to see him until he was once again the stone faced man who commanded this fleet. The doctor poured a glass of water and took the stained cloth from the wild dog before providing him with a fresh one. “They’re getting worse,” Daniel said.

“You have a knack for stating the obvious, doctor,” the wild dog replied. He held his chest for a moment until he was strong enough to speak. “We are running out of time.”

“Now who’s stating the obvious?” the squirrel asked.

The wild dog ignored him. “I need more of my medicine,” he said as if the doctor had not spoken.

The physician picked up one of the glass bottles from the cabinet against the wall. Contained within were countless herbs, remedies, and assorted items designed to treat all manner of ailments from the minor to the life threatening. There was no finer collection of medicines anywhere within a hundred miles, yet all of them had proven useless against his employer’s condition. Nevertheless he had tried nearly everything within the case to buy him another week, a day, or even an hour. He held the container in his paw staring at the red liquid within and wondering how much longer his employer expected him to do the impossible. “It’s losing its effectiveness.” He walked back over to the bed. “We’ve been using it too much lately.”

The wild dog fixed him with a cold stare. “But it has not lost its effectiveness entirely, has it?”

“No,” the squirrel admitted.

“Then prepare a dose or I shall do it myself,” he said.

The squirrel wrinkled his nose and shook his head. “That won’t be necessary.” He pulled out one of his measuring tools and metered out a standard dose.

“More than that,” the wild dog ordered.

Doctor Grey turned towards him. “We’ve given you too much already,” he said.

“Do as I say, doctor,” he said more harshly.

The squirrel scowled. “Fine, but I don’t know why you keep me here if you’re not going to listen to my counsel. I have done everything I can for you but conventional medicine can only do so much,” he said.

The wild dog smirked. “Then perhaps it’s time we considered something a little unconventional.”

The doctor raised his head. “Your mermaid?” he asked.

Silas nodded. “Legends say they carry within them immensely powerful healing abilities. Some believe they can cure any ailment or disease with their powers.”

Daniel scoffed. “Legends, only.” He gave the wild dog his medication and watched him down it in a single swallow. “I’m still not convinced your men saw what you think they saw.”

“Yes, but what if they did?” he asked. “Every legend has a kernel of truth at its center. If even half of what they say is true it could save my life.”

The black haired squirrel folded his arms. “It’s also equally possible you could squander what remains of your strength chasing after a fairy tale.” He took a step closer. “I know you’ve spent a considerable amount of your fortune in the pursuit of a cure but no one has seen a mermaid in hundreds of years assuming they even saw them in the first place. It’s just as likely they saw a seal or some other creature sunning itself upon a rock. I consider it far more likely than a beautiful woman with a fish tail. Such foolishness is not worth pursuing.”

Silas held up a paw. “On the contrary, doctor. You yourself have said there is little you can do for me at this point. I fail to see what benefit it would be to ignore this possibility, however remote.”

“As you wish,” he replied. “I am, of course, at your disposal. However, I consider it my responsibility as your physician to offer you my best recommendation as to your treatment.”

The wild dog smirked. “And when you have a treatment to recommend I shall heed your counsel, but until then I think we can indulge my curiosity for a while longer.” He gestured towards the alcove in his cabin where the books were stored. “Fetch me the brown book with the golden letters, on the second shelf.”

Intrigued, the doctor turned around and did as he was requested. Upon the second shelf against the wall he found the indicated book and removed it, taking a moment to examine its cover. On the front was a beautiful illustration of a mermaid, with the upper body of a beautiful vixen and a lower half of a fish. The title read ‘Mermaids : An Analysis’. He cast a glance at the wild dog before returning his gaze to the cover. As he walked back over to the bed he flipped through some of the pages. Rather than a child’s fairy tale as he expected he found detailed illustrations, notes, and anatomical diagrams of a dissected specimen indicating everything believed to be known about these creatures on a biological level.

Almost in disbelief he scanned the meticulous notes before the wild dog reached out to take the book and place it on his lap. “Is this real?” he asked.

“Quite so, my good doctor,” he replied, before offering a tilt of his head. “At least, so the author believed. I came across this book in my travels many years ago and thought it at first to be something of a novelty, but when I fell ill I was driven to consider all the possibilities, and upon reading this book I found such detail I consider it unlikely it was fabricated simply for the purpose of a fairy tale.”

The squirrel considered the book and noted it made little sense for someone to invent this level of detail for something that was merely the subject of stories and myth. The author had mapped every single muscle and organ even down to detailed information on the jewels adorning their tails. Whoever had written this had extensive knowledge they only could have obtained from direct experience with the mysterious creatures. “If you wish me to treat you using anything your men recover, I will need time to study it.”

The wild dog gestured to the book. “Take all the time you need, Doctor Grey. I’m not going anywhere.”

The squirrel held the book in his paws feeling his heart race as he opened the first page.