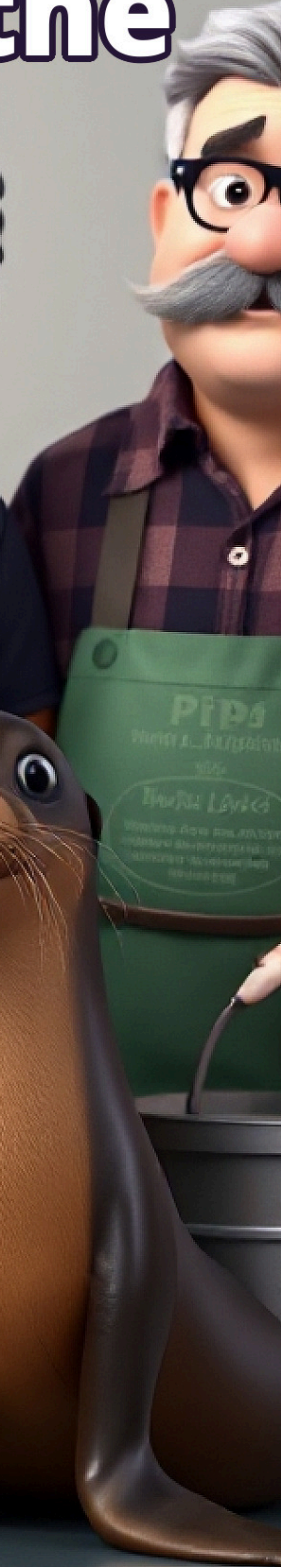


The Girl and the Sea Lion



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Mia pulled up her yellow hood as the ocean wind tugged at her rain jacket. She stood before the Sea Lion Rescue Center, a small blue building with a sign shaped like a sea lion. Her sketchbook bounced on its string around her neck. Today, she would learn how to help animals. She took a deep breath and pushed open the door.



Inside, a tall woman with silver glasses and a navy polo shirt hurried over. 'Welcome, Mia! I'm Dr. Lena,' she said, smiling warmly. Her ID badge swung from a lanyard, and a whistle hung around her neck. 'I hear you want to learn about our sea lions.' Mia nodded, her gap-toothed smile wide. 'I want to help them,' she said.



Dr. Lena led Mia to a big pool where a young sea lion glided through the water. 'This is Pip,' she said. 'He hurt his flipper and needs our help.' Pip had sleek dark brown fur, big round eyes, and a blue band on one flipper. The other flipper was wrapped in a soft bandage. He peeked at Mia, then ducked under the water.



Mia watched as Mr. Hayes, a jolly volunteer with a bushy gray mustache, arrived with a bucket of fish. 'Time for breakfast, Pip!' he called. Mr. Hayes wore a green apron over his plaid shirt. He tossed a fish to Pip, who caught it with a happy bark. 'Sea lions need lots of fish to heal,' Mr. Hayes explained. 'But we must be careful not to overfeed them.'



Dr. Lena showed Mia how they check Pip's flipper each day. 'We clean the wound and change the bandage,' she said. 'Pip is very brave.' Mia watched as Dr. Lena gently held Pip's flipper. The sea lion snorted softly but stayed still. 'He trusts you,' Mia whispered. 'It takes time,' Dr. Lena said. 'We must always be patient and gentle.'



Next, Mia helped Mr. Hayes prepare fish for the other sea lions. He showed her how to hide pills inside the fish. 'Some sea lions need medicine to get better,' he said. Mia carefully stuffed a pill into a fish's belly. 'Like a surprise snack!' she giggled. Mr. Hayes laughed. 'Exactly! And they never even notice.'



One day, Dr. Lena let Mia watch Pip practice swimming. 'We need to make sure his flipper is strong before we release him,' she said. Pip swam in circles, diving and splashing. Mia cheered. But when Pip swam close to the edge, Mia reached out to touch him. 'Wait!' Dr. Lena said gently. 'Wild sea lions should never be touched. We must give them space.'



Mia pulled back her hand. 'Why?' she asked. Dr. Lena explained, 'If sea lions get used to people, they might swim too close to boats or beg for food. That can be dangerous for them and for us.' Mia nodded slowly. 'So we help them heal, but we don't make them pets.' 'That's right,' Dr. Lena said. 'Respect is the most important part of helping.'



Mia thought about what she had learned. She wanted to share it with other kids. 'I could make a booklet!' she said. Dr. Lena smiled. 'That's a wonderful idea. You can draw pictures and write what you learned.' Mia pulled out her sketchbook and started sketching Pip with his blue band. She drew Dr. Lena and Mr. Hayes, too.



At home, Mia worked on her booklet every evening. She drew sea lions swimming in the ocean, and a big red X over a person feeding a wild sea lion. She wrote simple rules: 'Never approach a wild sea lion. Never feed them. If you see an injured sea lion, tell an adult.' She colored the pages with bright markers.



When the booklet was finished, Mia brought it to the rescue center. Dr. Lena and Mr. Hayes gathered around. 'This is fantastic!' Mr. Hayes boomed. Dr. Lena flipped through the pages. 'You've explained everything perfectly,' she said. 'You're a real teacher, Mia.' Mia beamed. 'Can we give copies to visitors?' she asked. 'Absolutely,' Dr. Lena said.



On the day of Pip's release, Mia stood on the beach with Dr. Lena and Mr. Hayes. Pip's bandage was off, and his flipper was strong. They carried him in a special stretcher to the water's edge. 'Goodbye, Pip,' Mia whispered. 'Stay safe.' Pip barked and waddled into the waves. He swam out, then leaped high in the air, as if saying thank you.



Mia watched until Pip disappeared into the blue. 'He's home,' she said softly. Dr. Lena put a hand on her shoulder. 'Thanks to you and your booklet, more people will know how to help sea lions.' Mia smiled. She was proud of Pip and proud of her booklet. 'I want to be a marine veterinarian when I grow up,' she said.



Back at school, Mia shared her booklet with her class. She told them about Pip and the rescue center. 'Sea lions are wild animals,' she said. 'We can help them by giving them space and never feeding them.' Her classmates asked lots of questions. Mia answered each one, feeling happy and important.



That afternoon, Mia sat on the beach with her sketchbook. She drew Pip swimming free in the ocean. She wrote at the bottom: 'Helping animals takes knowledge and respect.' A wave rolled in and washed over her toes. Mia smiled. She knew she would always remember the girl and the sea lion.



Mia's booklet was displayed at the rescue center for everyone to see. Visitors read it and learned how to respect sea lions. Dr. Lena told Mia, 'You've made a real difference.' Mia looked at her drawings and felt warm inside. She had helped animals, and she had taught others, too. And that was the best feeling of all.