

Sometimes a Boat - Jess Quinlan

The day the girl came to him was like any other for Sole. It had begun with breakfast—kelp as always, slippery, and dependably salty in his throat—and transitioned to the sort of aimless swimming he built most of his days on. The sea felt particularly pleasant that day, currents skimming lazily over his body, a temperature that reminded him of the taste of fruit. He drank it; breathed it.

Sunlight filtered through the surface of the water and portioned the ocean around him into degrees of aquamarine, but looking directly up, the surface-sky seemed a gelatinous thickness of color: of green and sharpest blue, shaking around a yellow-bright outline. Sole always watched the sun from underwater like this, always felt soft and touched by the alien light.

He trailed one finger absently down his abdomen, understanding the gentle curves of skin and muscle, tracing over the blank, flat place where no umbilical cord had ever fed. He stopped there at the hipbone; it was uncomfortable for him to reach lower, to touch his scales. Some fish used theirs as armor, bashing against each other with reckless, aquatic disregard, but to Sole, his scales were delicacies. A thin slippery coating ran down the length of his tail to protect them, to keep them from the infections and scrapes that could occur. He didn't think of himself as particularly slimy.

He thought that he must look strange, though, being nothing like the other things that swam down among the scorching vibrancy of the coral reef. He was not particularly colorful. He did not have hair, eyelashes, or fingernails like a real human, nor did he have more than half a body's worth of scales, which seemed to exclude him from categorization as a true fish. He was odd in a lot of ways, actually. He had lived in his body for a long time, and by now was fairly sure he didn't have any sexual organs, which was just as well, he supposed. Sometimes he felt very young. Maybe he was an adolescent. Maybe he would grow them.

Some days, he was so lonely.

Occasionally, boats would pass over his home, dragging eclipsing shadows with them. A bottle would drop, or a weight, or a long line with some gory tidbit of butchered fish hooked to the end. Sole supposed these might be some kind of offering made to the sea. Once, he spent a day imagining they were offerings to *him*, and he laughed himself bubbly.

Today, there had been a boat.

Sole had some vague awareness that at one point there had been others of his kind; there were carvings on many of the rocks near where he lived. It appeared the species had undergone a great exodus, some sort of altruistic ministry to the humans. Whether or not whatever mission they had undertaken had succeeded, he didn't know, and perhaps never would. He supposed if they had, though, his people might have returned for him, but it didn't really hurt his feelings too badly if they had simply forgotten all about him. He was a particularly forgettable sort of fish person.

Whatever the history, Sole did not have anyone now, except for a very contrary little octopus who shared his rocky cave home. Even this friend would have very cheerfully squeezed him to death, except for the sheer impossibility of the feat due to their comparative size. He didn't much mind. He was more than willing to share his cave. It was a lonely little world. Except, of course, now. Except, of course, for her.

Sole had just been lying there on his back, and she had appeared, falling so casually into his world. She moved the way he moved, simply letting the water drift her weight along. She sank from the dark shadow of a boat while he had been sun-gazing. It had taken a long time for him to overcome his shyness and swim toward her, more curious now than afraid. He moved forward, his tail swishing slowly and uncertainly in the current.

Her pallor struck him. She was vast in her whiteness, without scale or pattern. It seemed almost an ill-omen, a stark warning of toxicity. She glowed with it. Long, curling darkness moved around her; Sole eventually realized it was hair. It seemed to have a mind of its own, whirling and flowing seemingly independent of her body, like tentacles.

She could not possibly be anything good to touch.

However, curves did not occur naturally underwater, and hers eventually drew him in closer with fascination. They were so mammalian, so utterly different from the sharp angles and precise details of aquatic creatures. She existed so vaguely, her movements being mere suggestions when compared to the hot bursts of action in fish.

One of her hands drifted out with the water's pull, and it seemed to Sole almost like an imploring gesture. On a reckless, wondering impulse, he took it.

It was cold, yes, and hard like a burst of coral, but still fitting perfectly in his hand. His fingers curled against her straight ones, and then straightened, finding the matching joints and tips.

He realized her eyes were open, and to him, they looked like the insides of a scallop; brilliantly white. Sole knew in that moment he loved her.

He loved her. Nothing else on the ocean floor moved with such perfect, gentle grace, or was so lovely, and different, and *like him*. He felt suddenly bright-alive with feelings and took her other hand. She drifted toward the pull.

Little speeches sprang into his mind about how he might impress her, or communicate how unusual and lovely he thought she was. He had never spoken to, or ever even seen a human, for that matter, and who knew how they liked to be talked to? Octopi spoke by touching—well, namely by squeezing or slapping, and they always seemed to only have angry things to say in Sole's experience—but he was fairly sure humans had a more complicated system of communication, and she hadn't responded much to his touch.

He might have opened with *you are the best swimmer I've seen, except you ought to learn to tread water better*—for she kept slowly sinking, though it was not really a problem. He was more than willing to hold her up. *Do humans usually swim so well? I've never seen one*

down here. Did you come to look for me? No, that was probably wishful thinking on his part.

If she sensed his mental composing, she did not indicate it. Her eyes were blank and misty. Sole felt rather giddy and lost.

It was easy to slip down to his cave with her—she was so inclined to sink—and wave away his octopus to find a place for her among the rocks. He set her down against a big smooth one, and hurried to find something to show her, something to prove his worth as a host.

Well, he had some nicely-colored shells, and a few spindly little purple urchins he was keeping as half-hearted pets—they kept escaping and scattering themselves around his little alcove. He hastily scrambled for them, all the while earnestly thinking to her *like me, really, I'm very interesting, I'm sure there's so much I have to show you...*

Her head was tilting back at a peculiar angle. Sort of strange and flopping. Worried, he swished back to her side, titling his head inquiringly. *What is it?*

He only then noticed the large gash across the back of her skull: white and raw-looking in the half-filtered light.

The ocean lay quiet and apathetic around him. The fish moved as they always did, rolling, oblivious beads of silver on a line. He did not know what to do. He hovered; lost.

The concept of justice never before occurred to him. The reef around him had breathed in and out with the easy violence of predators and prey; it was not something to grieve or interfere with, it was neither good nor bad. But this, oh, this seemed so different. Want and loss filtered over his usual sense of calm acceptance, pulsing a fresh beat into his veins.

Some hard, sharp emotion spiraled up in him, prickling up somewhere around the tips of his tailfins and moving to cluster in his belly. It smoldered motion, and in that instant, he knew what had to be done. The gaping loss left him hunting a fault, a reason. And the boat! -it had to be the boat.

He surged up, suddenly feeling all of the muscles in his tail. Fish did not have weapons or claws, only force, and the heavy, shocking power of a first strike. Sole attacked, beating himself wildly against the wood of the little boat, awash with the reckless masochism of salmon.

Blind with feeling, he smashed himself into the bottom of the boat again and again, numb to the splinter and bruise of his own body. He now tasted passion, raw and uncaring, and embraced it. At some point in the repeating tumble of angles—his body, the boat, the blue, blue water—his eyes caught on her body below, spread upon his rock: a dead thing.

A dead thing.

Sole sank down slowly, the steep forever of the water below him swallowing up his hope. The water seemed very distinct and cool on the angry, bruised skin of his shoulders. Violence could not restore her any more than his attachment could hold her. The water took him down. He felt sure he would drift to the cold sand of the bottom and die there, to match her. But it was no use. If Sole knew one thing, it was that he could not keep her.

He did not swim easily, holding her dead weight. The body that had sailed smoothly when supported by the flow of the water now flopped and dragged at unflattering angles, fluttering like a wounded fish, as if her limbs were flailing, trying to cling to the illusion. Slowly, but determinedly, Sole clutched her tighter, and headed for the chaos and waves of shore.