

Hurricane Fish

Living by the ocean wasn't always easy, but it was worth it.

Sometimes it took weeks for messages to reach the village out in the islands. Sometimes the people had to meet in the town house and huddle together as the hurricane struck. Sometimes those houses that were unlucky enough would crack at their core as the wind and rains ripped them savagely apart, like wolves tearing into the flesh of a downed caribou. Sometimes impulsive and thick-skulled men would brave the water before the storm set in, declaring arrogantly that they would be the first to catch the monster that brought the hurricanes on its back. Everyone who tried this disappeared at sea, their boats washed up broken onto the shore if they returned at all. Everyone except the boy who healed.

His sister was never very healthy. Living by the ocean wasn't easy, especially when there was no doctor to help deliver a premature birth. His sister was the early girl, the baby that surprised everyone. So when she fell sick, she didn't surprise anyone. Not that time.

She was so sick. Skin burning to the touch, eyes glassy and clouded. The boy would sit at her bed, watching her struggle to breathe, to take one full breath. When she started vomiting up blood, he decided he would catch the hurricane fish and bring back its scales to heal his sister.

No one knew what the hurricane fish looked like. Some swore they saw its glimmering scales as it shoved current after current to greedily lap at the beaches, sending the stormy clouds to devour the land. Some said it was gigantic, bigger than their largest boat. Some said it had tentacles that unraveled and pulled shipmen down to their death. The boy hoped for nothing more than a good-sized fish with magical scales, scales that could heal his sister. For some said that when they were tossed about at sea, the fish saved them with a press of its scales to their wounds.

When his boat capsized in the hurricane ocean, he knew the hurricane fish had found him. But when he drifted underwater, he knew he had found something else. She floundered about in the water, tangled in the fishing net, the currents whipped up by her glimmering tail. A mermaid. The hurricane fish was a mermaid! Without a moment's hesitation he tore the net

away from her slender body, kicking his feet in a desperate attempt to free her. Even as he did so, his calf caught on the coral beneath them and he was in agony as the rough texture slashed into his leg. The boat churned above them as the mermaid grasped the boy's hands, trying to pull him loose from the pain...

The boy awoke on the shore, his boat in ragged pieces, his clothes torn and ripped. He could feel blood seeping into his pants and when he looked down, he became dizzy at the sight of the three gashes down his calf. The coral reefs hidden in the water weren't exactly friendly.

The boy suddenly realized what had woken him. His paddle was prodding his cheek, giving one final jab before it dropped next to his hand. He looked at who had let go of it.

The mermaid. She gave him a warm smile before pressing a loose scale to his calf, the blood running over it and turning it red. Following her movements with his gaze, he watched in awe as the pain subsided and the injuries shrank to nothing. She weakly ducked her head in response as three smaller red weals appeared down her tail.

He was right about one thing. The scales could heal.

The boy thanked the mermaid over and over for saving him and she laughed, saying it was only fair. In the same breath, he begged her to let him borrow the scale and her smile vanished, but when he explained it was for his sister, she thought for a moment and allowed him to take it. He knew he would absorb whatever sickness his sister had, but he also knew that as long as his sister survived, he would be fine.

The boy brought the scale home and that night, he pressed it to his sister's forehead. Almost immediately, she sat up in bed, sickness gone, eyes wide, and exclaimed, "Brother, your hair!" His hair had turned white.

The boy returned to the ocean the next day and the mermaid was there, waiting for him. She smiled sadly at his hair, knowing what had happened, then extended her hand for her scale. There was a moment of silence as the boy and mermaid locked eyes. "Let me keep it," he pleaded quietly.

"Why?" She searched his eyes one at a time, as though she'd find an answer there.

"There are so many people in the village in pain. So many disabled and hurt people. I could help them. I could save them," he revealed eagerly, dropping down to his knees to hold her hands in his, the scale still clutched tightly between his fingers.

Her gaze seemed to drill right through his retinas, into his very soul. "Do you know what you are doing?" she asked simply.

"Yes," he replied.

The saddest of nods, the shine of a retreating tail, and she was gone.

Word spread of the girl who was healed and the boy who healed her. People flocked to his doorstep, blind, deaf, crippled, wounded, all in search of the boy who could heal all wounds. And of course, one by one he pressed that precious scale to them and absorbed that pain. His skin became spotted, his eyes white, his eardrums and arms and legs, broken. He became the broken boy, the healing boy, the boy with the scale.

And yet he still healed more. He knew that as long as he alleviated the pain from others, he could manage his own. And no one complained, so why should he?

One day the mighty king heard of his deeds. He begged him to come to his castle to heal his daughter, who had fallen from a carriage and hadn't woken up for three days. He told the boy that if he healed the princess, he could marry her.

The boy would've come regardless.

What a sight the boy must have been, a sick, weakling of a boy in crutches, helped along by a young girl. The sister, once the sickly girl of the village, had never been more healthy as she guided her brother to the castle. They wasted no time in escorting him to the princess' chambers, where without hesitation, he pressed that scale to her chest and closed his unseeing eyes.

Legends cannot convey the disgust in the princess' eyes when she opened them and looked at her savior.

The king apologized profusely when the princess refused to marry the boy, but the boy did not mind. Led by his sister, they traveled back to the village, scale still fervently clutched in hand. The boy asked that she lead him to the ocean, for he wanted to feel the wind on his face once more. Obliging, the sister trekked across to the sandy beaches, watching him sink his broken, tired feet into the coarse sand. His face turned towards the ocean and the sister followed his sightless gaze, squinting her eyes against the glare of the sun on the pristine water.

A shimmer of scales and the mermaid appeared, washing up on shore to meet the boy. The sister's eyes widened in pure wonder as she took in the sight of the magnificent hurricane fish. He bent down as he felt the water lap at his feet, wishing he could see her as well. There was a moment of silence as the mermaid's eyes traveled across his body, sorrow emanating from every move she made. After a moment, he held out the hand that kept the scale and offered it slowly to her.

She bit her lip and took it, nodding in regretful understanding. The saddest of nods, the shine of a retreating tail, and she was gone.

And when the sister turned back from looking out into the ocean, so was he.

In his place, his crutches lay haphazardly on the ground, a pile of sand sitting atop them. As the sister examined the grains closer, she realized each one was shaped like a tiny star. She looked around her and saw her brother in each grain of star-shaped sand. She looked up and saw her brother in each star in the night sky. She turned back to the water and saw her brother in the single scale that had washed ashore.

After a moment, she retrieved the scale and headed for home.

Living by the ocean wasn't easy, but in the end, it gave just as much as it took.

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