

The Rider saw the boat while sailing on the wings of a gull, above a calm sea. It loved to fly, to feel the stretch and flex of muscles in its borrowed body as it rode the currents of the air, and to survey the expanse of the ocean stretching below it.

The shape of the tiny craft stood out against the gently undulating water, but it still took some time before the Rider was quite certain what it was seeing. It looped a few lazy circles, examining the boat and the two figures aboard, the larger cradling the smaller in its arms and trying to shade it from the beating sun.

The Rider let its curiosity take it down close, and it landed its gull-body on the edge of the boat, turning its head to get a better look at the occupants. A human woman lifted her head slowly from looking down at the child she held in her lap and stared at the Rider with mute incomprehension.

“Go away, bird,” she said finally, and her voice rasped past chapped lips. “We’re not dead yet.”

The woman put her head back down, exposing the back of her neck to the white-blue sky, but allowing her long hair to fall around the child’s face like a curtain. The child was sleeping, but the Rider could see the tear tracks down her face.

Loosing its hold on the gull, the Rider reached out to the woman, touching her mind as lightly as it could manage. Human emotions were usually complex, but the fear and despair in the woman’s mind threatened to overwhelm it in their intensity. The Rider took a slightly firmer grasp, just enough to feel the biting hunger and burning ache of the sun’s touch. It felt the woman stiffen, sensing its presence, but not knowing what it was she was feeling. The few humans the Rider had encountered in the past were less gracious about sharing with the Rider than its usual hosts, so it withdrew from her mind so as to not frighten her further.

The Rider swirled in tight circles of brief indecision. The gull that had been its body had flown away when released, and the Rider did not wish to chase after it. Still, it felt the need to do something for the woman and child; although they were resistant hosts, they were fascinating creatures, and it already felt some strange affection for these two, alone out here on the water.

Finally, the Rider sank down through the waves. It moved slowly without a body, miserably so, but it could sense minds in the ocean beneath, flirting about on the currents. Finding one, it latched on, reveling in the simple joy of rippling muscles and the feel of the water around it. Then it turned the fish’s body and headed for the surface.

The fish-body flashed silver in a perfect arc, and the Rider felt the exact moment when gravity grasped ahold and brought it back down into the boat. The fish struggled to breathe in the damp-bottomed craft, and the Rider released it. Dead bodies were frightening to it, the feeling of being trapped within still and silent flesh a terribly claustrophobic experience.

It cast a touch towards the woman’s mind, felt her shock at the strange provenance that lay before her in the boat. The child, disturbed by the commotion, began to stir in her arms, a weak cry emitting from her

lips. The woman smoothed back her daughter's hair and whispered to her, but was already reaching for the fish. The Rider began to drift away from the boat in search of another body, but not before it heard the woman speak aloud.

"Thank you."

The Rider returned several times over the next few days. It leapt into the boat as a fish, or dropped similar fare in the boat as a low-flying bird. The wind had picked back up, and the sun was losing some of its intensity, much to the Rider's relief; the woman and the child both had little to shield them from its rays, and it could sense the effects this was having.

On the fourth day, the Rider swam up to the boat in its borrowed dolphin-body and deposited its latest catch, and then circled the boat for a time, poking its head up to gaze at the humans with the dolphin's dark eyes. The child reached out a tiny hand towards it and smiled.

"Thank you," the woman said aloud. She said this whenever the Rider brought gifts, although it had noticed she never quite looked at it when she said the words. The Rider trilled and leapt through the air, eliciting a startled laugh from the woman, and a delighted grin from the child.

The Rider had developed a particular fondness for the little girl, and liked to play with her from time to time. Now, it blew a gust from the dolphin's spout, shooting water into the air and making it rain down on the child, who squealed in delight. The Rider reached out, keeping its hold on the dolphin, and brushed past the girl's consciousness, enjoying the warm feelings it sensed there. Pulling back, it swam around to the other side, where the child's mother watched it with cautious eyes. The Rider reached out again to the woman, but pulled away at the jumble of emotions there, too complex and tangled for it to make much from.

"I don't..." said the woman, as the Rider stared at her. "I don't know, why you have spared us, God, but I wish that you would send us towards land." The woman grabbed the child as her daughter reached out to touch the dolphin, leaning so far that she might have fallen. "I do not mean to be ungrateful, Lord, but fish and rainwater can only sustain a person for so long."

The Rider regarded them both for a moment, the woman pointedly trying not to look back at it, and the child staring in unabashed delight. Then it dove beneath the waves and went in search of a pair of wings.

The Rider had just found land when the storm struck.

It had been so wholly absorbed in its search that it had managed to ignore the buildup of pressure behind its eyes as the weather changed. It looked up from the island it had been studying to find the dark clouds already roiling in the direction of the boat.

Panic rushed through the Rider, making the bird's delicate heart flutter in its breast, and it sped back the way it had come, although it knew that it would not reach the woman and her child in time. It had taken it a day and a half to find the string of islands, and another half a day to find one that looked suitable for humans. But the Rider pushed its host body, battling the rising wind as it flew into the blackened sky.

In the end, the Rider was lucky. It found the body of a leviathan, its vast body calm beneath the crashing waves, and somehow managed to locate what remained of the boat. It pushed and pulled in turn, sometimes carrying, sometimes diving and rising, trying to keep the woman and child as near to the surface as it could. When they finally escaped the squalling of the wind and the rain, the Rider kept on, heading back to the islands.

It nearly beached the massive creature permanently, guiding the shattered planks that had once been a boat onto the beach. The whale, coming back to its own senses, managed to wriggle back out of the shallows as the Rider released it.

The humans were still, so still, and what it could sense was only barely perceptible. Had it been too late? Then, to its relief, the child began to stir and cry. The Rider reached out and touched her mind, briefly, felt a surge of joy in the knowledge that she had survived.

But the woman was still.

The Rider reached out to the woman, touched the place where her mind should have been and recoiled at the stiffness of an empty body.

It dithered over them, its panic returning. The child could not fend for itself on the island; without the woman, the Rider had doomed her to die as surely as if it had allowed her to drown with her mother. Already the child crawled to the still body, seeking comfort and reassurance, wet and miserable in the surf.

The Rider reached out again to the woman. It did not draw away this time, let itself sink into the vessel that had once held life. There was no resistance now, no struggle for dominance as there usually was with humans. As the flesh enclosed it, the Rider felt a wave of fear. What if this didn't work? What if the death of the body somehow trapped it? Would it die too, as the woman had?

But there was the child, scrabbling at her mother's side, trying to crawl beneath the stiff arm.

The Rider stretched out into the body. It knew what made bodies work in the general sense, but it had never had to think about the processes themselves; bodies did what they always do. Now, it reached and found the silent heart, the quiet lungs. It reached... and felt the heart stir.

The Rider sat up slowly in the body that had once been a woman, and took the child in its arms.

“Here, now. I’m here now. You are not alone.”