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UNLIKELY FRIENDS

There was something vaguely sad about the rock. It was as old as it looked, standing weathered and lonely amidst the stretch of sand, and its thoughts were quiet as it listened to the waves.

The wide unconquerable sea touched the edges of the land like a curious animal in the way it rolled forward eagerly onto the shore. It left the land unwillingly, pulling as it went, grasping for what it could. The sand in the shallow water swirled.

The sea was no stranger to the rock on the beach. The sea came often to the rock, rushing up wetly against its warm grey, and always as it swept away it took an infinitesimal part of the rock with it. The rock had known the waves for a long time, and learned it was in its nature to erode.

One day, the sunlight on the rock was interrupted by a brief darkness in the blurred shape of a bird. The rock, interested, observed the bird winging its way uncertainly about the sky, then landing, presently, on the very rock that wondered about it.

"Where am I?" said the bird, largely to itself, as it gripped the surface of the dark grey rock with its feet and peered out at the sea.

"What are you?" countered the rock.

"I am a bird," said the bird in surprise.

"You are a rather rude sort of bird," the rock pointed out calmly. "I was enjoying the sun when you came and blocked some of it from me."

Birds exist for a very short while in comparison to rocks, and have less time to develop the exceptional serenity that rocks possess. The bird hopped from one foot to another, flapping its white wings in annoyance.

“You are a big, stupid rock!” the bird cried, its beak clicking irately. “Funny you should feel so important, when one of these days you will have been reduced by the sea to a tiny grain of sand!”

“Yes,” agreed the rock, surprising the bird yet again, “I shall feel rather sad when that day comes.”

“Wait, no – you are confusing me – we are in the middle of an argument!”

“I made a comment, and you responded rather explosively, after which I shared with you a private thought in concurrence with something you had said. That was not an argument at all.”

The bird paused mid-hop, disgruntled. “Well, you are a very well-spoken rock,” it conceded, “and not at all stupid; I’m sorry.”

The rock hummed peaceably in response and returned to its own thoughts. The bird, feeling wholly ignored, allowed itself to settle down on its newfound perch, and examined mentally the conversation that had just taken place.

Some time passed before the bird spoke again, hesitantly, as if now remembering its manners and unwilling to intrude upon the rock again.

“Rock, will you truly end up one day as nothing more than a grain of sand?”

“I expect so,” the rock rumbled. “The sea works at me constantly, you know.”

“Is that awfully sad?” asked the passionate bird, who, while given to tempers, was intrinsically kind hearted.

"Only to those who care," the rock admitted, "only to me."

The bird was deeply moved by this, by the loneliness of the rock and the seeming inevitability of its fate. The bird considered the situation, and felt it must do something to aid the rock. Although their acquaintance had gotten off to a bad start, the bird found it rather liked the warm, rough rock, and was unwilling to leave it alone to the hunger of the sea.

"I care," volunteered the bird, "I will do something to help you, rock, if you will let me."

"No," said the rock, laughing in a way that did not mock the bird. "Don't waste you time." But the bird had found a cause.

"I am your friend now, rock," it said, and the rock was touched.

"You are just a bird," the rock said, "and you will be able to do nothing."

The bird did not disagree. "I will try."

Over the next few days, the bird tried a variety of ways to get the rock out of harm's way. It started with simple pushing, which had proved futile, and progressed to increasingly creative ideas. On the eighth day, the bird had looped several lengths of seaweed around its friend, in the hopes of being able to pull it further up the shore.

The rock had never observed with much significance the passing of the days, and entire years blurred in its long memory, but this had been a week that would stand out forever. The frustration, the laughter, and the gratitude that the rock had experienced along with the bird would be preserved as colour images amidst a wash of sepia recollections.

The time had come, however, to begin to dissuade the bird of its altruistic notions, lest it exhaust itself with the efforts of the fruitless undertaking.

Bird was picking the rope of seaweed up in its mouth for the seventh time that day when the rock addressed it.

"I do thank you for your efforts," it began, "but I am beginning to feel that this was a hopeless enterprise. I know you have expended much energy over it, and it has not gone unappreciated, but perhaps we must stop here."

The bird dropped the end of the seaweed and made to protest, but the rock would not allow it.

"You have been a faithful friend, but it seems that here I am and here I will remain. The sea works slowly, and I have much time left yet. One day, I will be sand on the beach, but the idea does not bother me so much now."

The rock did not add that through getting to know the bird, it had realized exactly how much more ephemeral was the life of the bird, and begun to feel selfish for being unsatisfied with the idea of eventually ending up a small grain of sand.

"Let us abandon this pursuit, and instead look to happier things," the rock ended, hoping to mollify the bird. In truth, it was unsure that the bird, now robbed of his cause, would stick around for much longer, and the thought made it feel a shiver of unhappiness.

The bird, wordlessly, began the task of unwrapping the seaweed it had covered the rock in. There was resignation in its wingtips. When it had finished, it glanced at the rock with which it had spent eight sun-drenched days, then flapped slowly into the distant sky.

The rock watched it go.

The beach was blanketed by night when the rock once again felt the feet of the bird sharp against its surface.

"I am sticking around," the bird told the rock, "so you won't forget me, even when you are just a grain of sand."

The rock said nothing, but it was happy.

The years moved on, then, like they always had. The rock stayed in the same place even as the world changed around the little beach,

and the bird, going off frequently on expeditions to see the world, returned always to the rock it had met so long ago.

"Tell me a story," the rock asked once, attention to the bird as it landed lightly.

"But you are so old and wise, no story would interest you," teased the bird. It was older now, and it knew ever so much more about the world.

The rock chuckled, and the bird complied. "I will tell you about the strange things I saw the last time I flew past these cliffs..."

Sometimes, it was the bird that asked for the story.

"The earth was young once," the rock would begin, in a vivid story of the colours of the wind. And always, imperceptibly, the years moved on-like they always had.

One morning, a long, long time from the day the bird and rock had first met, the rock was abruptly aware of a different quality to the day. There was something in the air, maybe, or something about the sea, or the sand – the rock was uncertain, but something was different and wrong. The colours felt wrong, for instance, the sky felt green and the sand was turning white, and the sea when it touched the rock felt hot and cold and hot again.

"Bird-"

That was a strange thing for the rock to do, for it never spoke aloud when it was alone. But it called out anyway, tentatively, "Bird – Bird..."

The word was snatched away by the wing, but it seemed to echo in the dark beach. The rock was very still, and began to feel something it had never before felt: fear. It spread slowly and coldly like the pink sun rising softly over the horizon, and the rock found that it knew that its friend the bird had died.

"How and why," the rock murmured numbly to itself, to the sand, to the sea. "How and why and how and why and why. Goodbye, goodbye, oh, goodbye." So saying, it slipped gently asleep.

The bird never returned, just as the rock never again expected it to. The rock became silent once more, unused to conversation as it had once been. Its thoughts were numerous but never aired now, and frequently, it thought of its dearest friend, the bird.

As for the years, they moved on like they always had, and the world changed around the rock, just like the world was wont to.

Centuries passed, and there was something vaguely sad about the rock that was as old as it looked, standing weathered and lonely amidst the stretch of sand. And as it listened to the waves, it thought of the sun on its surface, and the bird-shaped shadow that fell just so across the warmth, warmer than the sun itself.