



# A Symbiotic Tale

Once upon a time, a sea creature named Annie lived at the bottom of the ocean. She was beautiful. She had long, purple tentacles that swayed gently in the undertow. And when the sun hit them just right, their green tips gave off a spectacular glow.

But Annie was lonely. There was no one around to appreciate her beauty. And she was always hungry. Before she could make friends with any other sea creatures, she ate them.

You see, Annie was a sea anemone. And sea anemones eat other fish. They sting them with their long, slender tentacles, and then eat them to stay alive.

Day after day she sat, swaying and glowing in the sunlight streaming through the water, and dreamed of having a friend.

And listened to her stomach growl.

By the time another fish DID swim by, she was so ravenous she'd reach out, zap him with one of her long arms and gulp him down without so much as a hello.

This made for a very lonely, very cranky Annie.

Then one sunny day, a very bright fish approached her neck of the ocean. Annie had just eaten a particularly tasty little shrimp. She sat, sunning herself contentedly in the rays shining through the water.

As the fish approached, she noticed he didn't look at all like the fish she was used to. This fish was a bright, loud color Annie had never seen before. His scales were kind of orangey, like the sun, and he had little yellow fins and white bands that circled his body: one at his neck, and the other around his neck. Why, he reminded her of a clown!

And he didn't seem afraid of her at all. In fact, he looked rather friendly. He looked right at her with big dark eyes as he swam closer. She noticed the corners of his mouth curved up in a silly little grin.

"Hi," he said cheerfully. "You from around here?"

Annie didn't know what to say. She wasn't used to talking to her lunch. "Yeah," she said warily, doubting that this fish was anything but trouble.

"Well, my name is Caton," the fish said proudly. "It means 'smart.' He began to circle around her, admiring her long, glowing tentacles. "You're real pretty," he said. "What are you, anyway? I've never seen anything like you before."

Now, Annie knew she could easily reach out and sting him. And she thought about it. As Caton swam behind her, she poised one of her back ten-



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tacles to strike. “I’m a sea anemone,” she answered in an eerily quiet tone, as she waited for him to come close enough to strike.

“Really?” Caton asked excitedly as he sprang to her side. Annie’s back tentacle whipped out and just missed him. “I’m a clown fish.”

“Imagine my surprise,” Annie said sarcastically. This fish was going to be trouble, she could tell. Still, it was nice to have someone to talk to for a change.

“Yeah,” Caton sighed sadly, “but I’m far from home. My family travels a lot. You know, entertaining other fish with the sea circus. We’ve appeared before millions of schools from here to the Pacific,” he said proudly.

“So why are you here?” Annie asked.

“Well, we were performing just south of the Gulf Stream not too long ago,” he explained. “An elephant fish wandered off while we were rehearsing the new crab trap-eze act. While I was out chasing the elephant fish, a couple of dogfish went after the crabs. They ate them up. It was a big mess,” he said sadly. He sighed. “I got fired and had to leave the show.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that,” Annie said. She had actually started to like the strange little fish more and more as he told her his sad story.

“Yeah,” Caton said. “So now I have to find some new digs.”

Annie thought for a moment. Perhaps this was the friend she had longed for. He was nice. He was funny. And his name meant “smart.” Perhaps they could work something out that would be good for both of them.

“Well,” she began, “I’ve always liked it here. The sun hits just the right spots here, so it’s always warm and sunny ... pretty, really. Perhaps you’d like to stay here?”

“Well, where would I sleep?” asked Caton. “I’m used to a nice, soft bed with cozy surroundings.” He looked at the sea floor. “This floor looks hard,” he said distastefully. “And sandy.”

Annie had to stop and think. This fish was high-maintenance. Here he was criticizing her neck of the ocean. At this point, she was ready to eat him and be done with it. But – she was really starting to like him. She looked for a way to make this work. First, she wanted to see what he had to offer in this relationship. She looked at him for a moment and then asked. “How do you get along with other fish?”

“Well, I was a clown fish,” Caton answered. “Everybody likes a clown.”

“I’ll make you a deal, Caton,” Annie said. “I’ll let you sleep in my tentacles if you help me with the other fish. You see, it’s hard for me to live here



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all alone. For one thing, I eat fish. That's what anemones do. I sting them with my tentacles, and then I eat them. But I have trouble getting them close enough to catch them. Perhaps you could help me?"

Caton looked horrified.

"But I don't eat all of them," Annie quickly explained. "There are other fish—like the angel fish—who'd like to eat me." She looked at Caton hopefully. "Perhaps you could protect me?"

"What would I eat?" Caton asked. (His name didn't mean "smart" for nothing.)

"Well, I'd share of course," Annie answered.

The two sea creatures looked at each other, considering their options. Neither one wanted to be alone anymore. And it seemed like this arrangement would be good for both of them.

"Okay," Caton finally said. "Let's give it a try."

"Okay," Annie smiled.

And so they lived their days – sunning themselves, dining together and chasing away predators. And they discovered that life is a lot easier when you have someone to share things with. But they also learned that the key to keeping that person around is to cooperate. Caton cooperated through his sparkling personality. He attracted fish so they could get close enough to Annie to catch them. And Annie, well, she provided food and shelter. They had each other's backs—plain and simple—protecting each other from those who would harm them. That's called symbiosis.

Symbiosis means "I help you, and you help me. And together, we're better off than we'd be if we were each alone." It's what makes the world go 'round.