

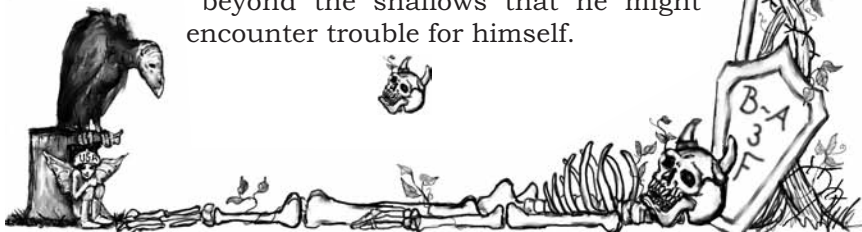
# THE PRICE OF FRIENDSHIP

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**T**HE NIX WINCED WHEN THE CLEAR WATER OF THE river's mouth gave way to the salt sting and metallic tang of the ocean shallows. Breathing would be hard for a time, but he'd been in the shallows before, and knew that its water left no lasting ills. He had elected to retain part of his human shape, only turning to a fish from beneath his shoulders on down; he needed hands for what he was doing. A tightly woven net filled with writhing, fully stuffed lampreys dangled from his neck on a lanyard. A pack, fitted to his back, held a large rack of fresh beef ribs, soaked in blood and wrapped tightly in an oiled skin to keep the water from it. Another, smaller package was also in the pack.

Small fish darted hither and yon, abruptly bobbing with the action of the waves. Smaller fry were swept even higher and lower with the water's motion. The small fish attempted and sometimes succeeded in sucking the smaller fry into their mouths; suck enough and the fish had a dinner. When the small fish bobbed too close to the surface, swooping pelicans scooped them up for their own meals.

It wouldn't be until the Nix reached the depths beyond the shallows that he might encounter trouble for himself.



*He had almost been killed. His wife had almost been killed.  
His children had almost been killed.*



The Nix swam farther from the river's mouth, gliding less than a body's length above the bottom. The sand rippled below him, studded with rounded boulders that were all that marred the sandy seabed this close to shore. The boulders had rolled down from distant mountains, were smoothed in their journey by the action of the water and the abrading of the gravel and coarse sand that made up the river's bed.

As the water deepened, the turmoil of the surface lessened down close to the rippled sand. The small fish bobbed up and down less than they had near the shore, and larger fish, the length of the Nix's forearm, swam among them with a deceptive languidity. Deceptive because there was purpose to their movements—they were ever-so-casually herding the small fish into a bait ball. When the bait ball was sufficiently dense with small fish, the fish the length of the Nix's arm would suddenly flash into the ball, slashing with gaping mouths and rending teeth, feeding on them. The Nix knew that's what the larger fish were doing because he'd seen them do it the previous time he'd been in the ocean.



*The Nix, his wife, and his children, swimming in the shapes of fish the size of people, had been snared in the end of a long drag net that had been broken from a trawler in a storm, and found its way into the sheltered intercoastal waterway they'd been traveling from their river to another, to visit his wife's natal family.*



The water continued to deepen. Fans sprouted on the sea floor. He glimpsed the strange, rod-like animals that lived in holes on the bottom and stood up straight from the holes to snag passing fry. Corals grew. A kaleidoscope of colorful fishes, small and medium-sized, swam among the turrets and crenulations of the coral, in and out of secret hiding places. Skates skimmed the sand at the base of the corals, gobbling anything that fell from its sides. Arm-thick eels with slicing teeth peeked out of crevasses in the coral, waiting to lunge at and devour unwary passers-by.