Slapped (In the Face with a Wet Fish)

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Slapped (In the Face with a Wet Fish)

by jotc

Summary

Murderbot accompanies its humans to watch migrating aquatic fauna. It ends up in the water.

(Written for Murderbot Major & Minor Maladies. Prompt: slapped)

I didn’t see the appeal of watching aquatic fauna migrate but I’d come anyway because if my humans were going to take an all-too-small boat out in deep water, I wanted to be there. Just in case.

I was with Arada, Ratthi, Bharadwaj, and Pin-Lee. Arada came every year because she was emotionally attached to the fauna. Ratthi came most years because he liked sailing and also the fauna. Bharadwaj came because it was sunny, and Pin-Lee came because Bharadwaj brought food.

Arada and Ratthi sailed to the feed-marked spot in the map. No land was visible. It didn’t look any different from any other featureless spot on the water, but Arada said, “They’ll be here soon.”

For the next hour, I watched Sanctuary Moon while my humans chatted and ate. Arada marveled at length over the wonders of the fauna, who would swim by scent to various islands where they would spawn in the grasses offshore. Evidently each fish would seek out the island of its birth by smell.

OK, that was a little impressive, as all I could smell out here was salt and water with hints of decay. Normally fauna being too good at smelling things makes me anxious that they’re going to track the humans, but the fauna in question were only 80 to 90 centimeters long and lived underwater, so I wasn’t overly concerned.

“I’m curious why you’re not watching them spawn,” I said. (It’s gross but biologists always want to know how creatures reproduce. That and what they eat.) (I know, I’m making the whole field of biology sound like an excuse for human perversion, but Ratthi had told me once that biology is critical in helping humans understand ecosystems so they could avoid accidentally destroying them. So maybe even if it’s motivated by perversion, at least there’s a benefit?)

“We’ll see that tomorrow,” Arada said, her eyes sparkling with excitement. “But they die after spawning. Before seeing the end of their lives, I wanted to catch them at the height of their vigor. Seeing them leap out of the water is such a delight.”

Ugh, I shouldn’t have asked. I don’t know why the thought of all these fauna dying at once made me unhappy. It’s not like I was attached to them. And yet Arada, who had never shown hostility to even a stinging insect, was aglow with delight at the chance to watch.

I know, I know, if I asked she’d probably say something about the cycle of life and how beautiful it was. Whatever.

And then the first fauna leapt out of the water. Its iridescent scales flashed briefly before it submerged again. It was, I had to admit, pretty cool.

Soon many of the fauna were leaping and splashing back. The water itself churned with the force of so many rapidly swimming fauna. I flew a drone out over the water for a closer look.

I shouldn’t be slower than an aquatic fauna. I really shouldn’t. All I can say is the fauna outnumbered me dramatically and there were too many to keep track of. So when one of them leapt for my drone, I didn’t react in time.

It gulped the drone down like any flying insect. Except my drones were made of hard plastic and metal, and not designed to be safe for fauna consumption.

It was stupid to worry about a stupid aquatic fauna which was going to die soon anyway. But Arada loved them and was weirdly excited about watching them die the proper way. And even if I didn’t care about the stupid fauna, the plastic bits wouldn’t degrade for hundreds of years. I didn’t want to be the one to release that into Preservation’s ecosystem.

So I leapt in the water intent on grabbing the fauna. I had telemetry from the drone so it should be possible. My drone was still intact, so if the humans and I could just get the stupid fauna to stop thrashing around, I could use the drone’s motor to remove it. The drone would creep more than fly, but it might be possible.

As soon as I hit the water, I knew I hadn’t thought this through. A fauna slapped into my side. Another into my face. And another, and another. Each left a stinging sensation and I began to ooze blood and fluid. I closed off the veins and capillaries to most of my skin, but I can’t do that to my organic human face. The fauna’s fins had looked thin and delicate from the boat. I hadn’t realized they served as sharp little blades.

I quickly realized why the fauna weren’t hurting each other. The scales served as armor. It was stupidly unfair that the fauna had armor and I didn’t.

And, excited by the smell of blood, the fauna began attacking my face.

The humans, who couldn’t help their slow reflexes, started yelling in the feed to warn me about the things I’d already figured out.

SecUnit, never mind the drone! They’ll try to eat you! They’re stupid! They’re so, so stupid!

Arada’s message stood out over the rest of the chatter because I’d never heard Arada insult a fauna before. Also, she’d been the one I most wanted to please when I jumped in.

I’m after the fish, not the drone, I sent. (Unlike humans, I can send feed messages and deal with being buffeted by bladed aquatic fauna at the same time.)

You’re worth more than a drone! Or a fish!

It’s not like I planned on dying down here. But I had to admit, I hadn’t accounted for the sheer number of fauna. I didn’t want to hurt them which meant I couldn’t defend myself well as they slapped into me repeatedly. I was collecting an impressive number of slices in my skin.

Eventually I was going to need air. I could kick my way to the surface but if I moved forcefully enough to punch through the fauna swarm, I’d end up leaving dead fauna in my wake. I didn’t want to kill them just because I’d been stupid enough to let one eat a drone and

then doubly stupid enough to jump in the water. The whole thing would be embarrassing to explain.

On the other hand, if I ran out of air completely, I'd sink and drown. My organics would go first and the rest of me would shut down soon after. My humans wouldn't like that either.

The drone-eating fish in question swam past. I grabbed it. Yes, that probably represented mistaken priorities on my part.

Go down! Arada said. *Down and then half a kilometer west. They're thinner there.*

Yes! Ratthi voiced agreement and sent me a crude map from previous trips.

I went down. My captive thrashed but with my arm firmly around its armored waist, it couldn't slip free. Hopefully I wasn't squashing its insides excessively.

I only had to descend a few meters before the fauna thinned out dramatically. Without constant bites and nudges, the half kilo swim should have gone quickly.

Except the stupid fauna really, really wanted to get back to the herd. Or is it a flock? Whatever you call a bunch of aquatic fauna in one place.

It squirmed and thrashed persistently and like I said, I didn't want to squish it too hard. So it took me a bit of extra time to make that swim. And I'd lost some blood. Actually, I was still losing some blood.

And some of the other fauna chased me. I guess because of the blood. Thankfully most of them stayed with the flock.

I was definitely feeling the need for oxygen when I finally surfaced. Thankfully my humans had brought the boat to meet me.

"You have the fish?" Ratthi gaped at me.

Pin-Lee glared. "We said to leave it, asshole!"

Bharadwaj grabbed a couple of long thin human eating tools and attached a safety line. She jumped in. (Yes, she was wearing a flotation safety device. My humans all put them on as a matter of course. That's one reason I like them.)

Arada joined us in the water and helped hold the fauna in place. Bharadwaj held the fauna's mouth open and I worked the drone loose. The fauna swam off, appearing unharmed.

Back aboard the boat, the humans made much of my face.

"Don't you ever do that again, you scared me half to death!" Arada said. She was laughing, but not because it was a joke. It was because she'd been really scared and now she wasn't.

Bharadwaj chose sincerity. "SecUnit, you should assume at all times that your life is more important than drones, fauna, houses, ships, and well, anything that isn't a human or machine

intelligence life. Please? For our sake if not yours?”

I was struggling to know how to respond to that when Ratthi came out with, “Yeah Seccy, we hate seeing your face bleed. Well, it’s not our feelings that are important, it’s your face, I didn’t mean…” and I’ll cut the rest of his rambling attempts at clarity.

(Yes, I knew what he meant. I appreciated it. I also appreciated that he caused a distraction.)

Pin-Lee sidled up quietly and asked, “Are you really okay?”

I was. My face would heal and the rest of me was already repairing itself.

I was curious about one thing though.

“Arada, you called the fauna stupid. I never heard you insult a fauna before.”

Arada just smiled, her face lighting up again. “They are though. It’s not a bad thing. Its just how they are. They can’t tell a person from a fly. They’d eat their own eggs if they didn’t die first. They’re just big dumb strong beautiful fish. And I love to watch them fly.”

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