



# Little Saint Nautilus (Tinsel and Tentacles 2.0)

**Author:** *Duckie Mack*

**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Cory's dream of being a professional surfer was cut short when he was injured from an accident. Despite losing his career, he can't stay away from the water, always searching for the face of the man who rescued him. Was he real or a figment of his imagination?

Nemo is a nautilus shifter who has lived his life at sea, keeping his distance from humans, until he couldn't resist helping one. He never forgot the man he saved, and he returns to the same beach each year, looking for him.

When Nemo finds Cory, he risks everything to be with him, even his shell. Without it, he can't return to the sea.

Cory can't believe his dream man is real. He's captivated by him, and is willing to do anything to keep him. Except, the thing Nemo needs most is the home he lost.

Nemo soon discovers the wonders on land he didn't know existed. But the greatest wonder is Cory, who shows him what home really means.

**Total Pages (Source):** 15

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:38 am*

The sun was just starting to rise. A kiss of light breaking through the darkness with a beautiful display of purples and oranges. It was my favorite time of day.

Quiet, cool, serene.

The only people here were the die-hards like me. No families or influencers or crowds. Surfers and scuba groups shared the beach with me. Wetsuits were the swimwear of choice at that hour, especially in December. But nothing beat the salty, cold bite of the ocean first thing in the morning; it was the best caffeine you could ask for.

I pulled the cord, tugging the zipper up my back, and sealing me into the neoprene. From the back of my truck, I unloaded the kayak and attached cart. The wheels allowed me to haul my kayak without needing help. Though the awkward motion of pulling it through the sand always made my knee twinge, it was my best option .

A hint of jealousy scratched beneath the surface when I saw the other surfers run into the water with their boards. It was so easy for them. Simply attach the safety strap to their ankles and they were set. Not so for me, not anymore.

There was no running into the waves with my kayak, as it was far too bulky for that. Though, I couldn't run much if I wanted to.

After getting the kayak as close to the water as possible, I unhooked it from the cart. I put on my life vest, because, yes, I wore one now. Part of it was to appease my grandpa after the accident, but it was for me, too. Along with the life vest was the daily check-in with Gramps to let him know when I would be on the water and

where, and when I was done.

As much as I loved the ocean and couldn't go a day without breathing the briny air, my injury had shaken me. Nothing like a near-death experience to fracture a cocky twenty-two-year-old's sense of immortality. That wasn't the only thing that had fractured that day. My knee had taken the brunt of the impact, shattering it, and leaving me with a series of surgeries to get it to the functionality I now had.

Eight years later, and I still walked with a limp, one that worsened with the weather changes or if I pushed myself too hard, but I walked. Even that was a miracle. Of course, I'd been lucky it had only been my knee, and that I only had a limp. It wasn't an exaggeration to say I might not be here today.

With the paddle sitting on the sit-on-top ocean kayak, I walked it into the water, holding it as I waded past the shallows. It wasn't as easy to swim out as it was on a board, but I pressed forward, gripping the sides as I passed through the breaking waves. Once I was waist deep, I hauled myself into the flat, stable boat. From here, I paddled out, pushing through the water and the smaller waves, loving the way it worked my arms and my chest as I glided over the water.

This...this almost felt the same. Though I wasn't simply using my hands to paddle, I liked knowing it was my own power that moved me. A swell was forming, and I lined myself up. Instincts guided me. They came from a lifetime of being on the water, learning to read the waves, to know when to catch one and when to let one go. Usually .

Turning to face the shore, I began paddling as the wave built behind me and gave just enough of a push to ride the crest. I held the paddle on my lap to let it carry me toward the shore in the same rush I used to get on a board.

The hardest part about my recovery from my injury was knowing I would no longer

be able to pop up and stand on a board. I just couldn't trust that my knee wouldn't give out. I bodysurfed for a time, but being in the water wasn't the same as being on top of it. My grandfather started taking me out kayaking in the bay as a way to build up my strength and get me out of my head, and I loved it. But the bay wasn't the beach. The smells, the sounds, but mostly the high of riding a wave, and submitting to the ocean's power.

So I brought my kayak to the beach. I was really self-conscious about it the first few times, especially trying it out in clear view of other surfers. But once I got the hang of it, I felt the rush that used to be such a big part of my life. The rush that made me forget my knee or the fact that I never made it to Worlds . In those seconds, I flew and everything else drifted away.

It helped, too, that some of the others had come over and cheered me on, making me feel like I was still a part of the community. Now, I'd done it every day for the past four years.

Repeating the motion, I paddled out once more, waiting for another swell. When it came, and I lifted my paddle from the water, I stared into the wave, as I often did. It was a habit, looking, in hopes of seeing a face beneath the surface. Creepy, I know. But there was a face that lived in my dreams, one I was almost certain I'd seen on the day of my accident.

Through all the flashbacks and nightmares I had of my crash—the crack, the pain, the blood, the terror, getting pummeled by the waves, and losing all sense of direction—he was there. Everyone told me I'd imagined it because when they rescued me from the rock I'd been slumped on, I'd been alone. When I thought of that day, so much was unclear. It happened so quickly, and it was all jumbled together, but the face that appeared before me and the brown eyes that stared into mine beneath the surface were still crystal clear in my mind.

It wasn't only the high of surfing that I chased regularly, but the beautiful man's face in the water.

Shaking my head to clear it, I brought my focus back to the present, enjoying the thrill and the workout that kayak-surfing provided. After an hour, I was attaching the wheeled cart and dragging the kayak back up the sandy shore. I loaded it onto my truck before showering in the public shower stalls and got dressed. I returned to the boardwalk, where my shop was located.

After my dreams of being a professional surfer had been crushed, I had to face the reality of working. My soul longed for the beach, though. It had its hooks deep in me, and I couldn't imagine having to work inside. I'd been lucky when one of the shop owners on the boardwalk I talked to regularly told me he was retiring and looking for someone to take over. So I did.

It was perfect. I got to spend my days at the beach I loved, surrounded by the soothing sounds and smells that calmed the stirring I felt within, and it paid the bills. Maybe it wasn't the same dream I'd had as a teen, but it was as good as I could hope for, and it allowed me time to hit the waves each morning before I opened .

My shop was simple, with pre-packaged snacks and drinks, some California and beach-themed souvenirs, and a few racks of clothing. It always amazed me the number of people who somehow lost their clothes at the beach or didn't anticipate the cooler evenings and needed a sweater, scarf, or jacket.

Seeing as how it was winter, I was wearing my traditional hoodie, jeans, and flip-flops. Another perk of the location—and being my own boss—was getting to wear sandals year-round. In the summer, I would even wear swim shorts and a tee shirt. The thought of going corporate and having to wear shoes and a tie made me want to shrivel up and die.

When it was slow, I would walk across the sidewalk, kick my sandals off, and dig my toes in the sand—couldn't do that in an office. It was easy enough to keep an eye on the shop and it always grounded me. When a customer walked or rolled up on skates, I could quickly slip my flip-flops back on and walk twenty feet back to the shop.

It wasn't like I was cooking anything or had any open food, and sand was bound to happen, anyway. It was all part of the natural aesthetic of a shop on the boardwalk. Nothing beat the view I had, getting to watch the water any time I wanted to. And the people-watching didn't hurt either.

Besides the die-hards, there weren't a lot of folks walking around in thongs or tiny shorts at the moment. We had a lot more skates and bikes on the boardwalk than towels on the sand this time of year, but it offered plenty of eye candy all the same.

Skateboarders in beanies caught my attention as much as men in tight pants on roller skates. And bike shorts. God bless bike shorts. Especially when they were worn by men who walked into my shop looking for refreshments. There was no hiding their assets in the skin-tight creations, and I was a fan. Never met a wetsuit I didn't like either.

Looking was always simply that, though. Looking. I was thirty, in decent shape, maybe a little pooch in the belly, but through the years of physical therapy and my daily ocean workout, I was fairly fit. My skin was tanned, and I had sun-bleached medium-length hair. I wore a trimmed beard, which was a slightly darker shade of blond than my hair.

I'd had a fair share of guys show interest, more so from the ones who knew my name from my competition days. There had even been a hookup or two in the unisex bathroom stalls at the beach, but nothing more serious. I could admit that my confidence had taken a hit, and my knee... well, it was an issue. Noncommittal handies and blow jobs were easier than being vulnerable and having to explain I

couldn't do certain positions. Hooking up might have scratched an itch, but there was a hollowness to it. Something was missing. Every time I tried to pin down what it was, I felt a tug to the sea .

Thinking about it now, I let my gaze drift to the water, watching. A longing ache pulled at my heart, one that I didn't understand. It wasn't simply the need to be on the water, it went deeper. Deep beneath the surface, it was as if my heart were an anchor, sinking to the sea floor and holding me in place.

I rubbed my hand over my chest as I stared at the waves crashing against the shore. Whenever this feeling came over me, that face I envisioned came to me again. No amount of bike shorts or thongs made me feel the way those eyes did when I pictured them.

A throat cleared, drawing my attention. I snapped my head back to see an older woman standing before me with a young child at her side. "Excuse me. Sorry to interrupt."

I blinked hard to clear my thoughts and focus on my customers. "Oh, no. No interruption at all. How can I help you?"

The woman held out a small snow globe that had sand and a surfboard in it. "My grandson would like to buy this."

"Sure thing. Let me grab some paper to wrap it up in."

"It's my first time seeing the ocean," the little boy squeaked out and offered a toothless grin. I saw it every day and had grown up only miles away. It was easy to forget that it wasn't a sight everyone had access to. The wonder on the boy's face was pure magic, and I understood it, I still felt that wonder .

The woman chuckled. “Henry didn’t believe me how cold the water was, but it didn’t stop him.”

“It never stops me either, kid.” I gave him a wink.

“I wanna come back and learn to surf.” He watched the globe as I wrapped it up.

“We have the best surfing in the world here, no better place to learn.”

The grandma added, “It takes a lot of time and practice, Henry.”

“I will. I’ll practice, I promise.”

She pursed her lips with amusement and patted the boy’s head. “All right. It might be a little tricky back home in Nebraska.”

I chuckled as I rang her up and handed her the bag. The boy waved as he led his grandmother out of the shop. I couldn’t help but watch with a smile, remembering when my grandpa used to bring me down to the beach as a little kid.

I spent more time with him than I did my own parents. They both worked a lot, and my grandpa lived close enough that I could skateboard to his house after school. He’d lived in the same house for fifty years. It was small, but only a short walk to the beach, which is what we did whenever I went to his house. There wasn’t a lot to do for a young boy to stay busy in his home, but he’d been as addicted to the water as I was now. Once it sunk its hooks into you, you could never leave .

At sundown, I tallied up my sales, and closed out my register, before sliding the metal rolling door down and locking it with a padlock. With one last look at the ocean, seeing the last of the sun’s lights twinkle over the surface, I headed to my truck.



My apartment, well, studio really, was a fifteen-minute drive from the beach. It, too, was small, but I didn't mind that. I was much like my grandpa in that regard and had probably learned it from him. The size of the space didn't matter, it was about the location. Being able to open my windows and smell the ocean air was all the space I needed.

I flicked on the light and scanned around the room, which functioned as a bedroom, living room, and dining room, all in one. My bed was against one wall with a dresser and a free-standing clothes rack with a shoe shelf beside it. A small loveseat was in front of the TV, and there was a bookshelf on another wall. My dining area consisted of a round table that comfortably sat two chairs. It was just enough for me, by myself. Though I could admit, I wouldn't mind having someone else share my space, small as it was. Maybe I would have to consider upgrading before inviting someone to share my life and my space. Not that it was anything urgent.

Here I was, spending another night alone, with no prospects. I flopped on the couch and opened a hookup app to see what was out there. At thirty, I wasn't old enough to be out of the game, but I was no longer able to do the acrobatics I could have before my injury, and it got in my head. After scrolling for a bit, I sighed and put on Netflix instead.

Hookups were meant to be hot, fast, and horny, and I hated the conversation of having to explain my limitations with someone who was just looking for a quick fuck. If I was going to go through all of that, I preferred for it to be someone who was going to stick around for a while. Taking that first step was the hardest part, though, and I got too in my head about it.

There was also the fact that none of the people on the app were the man I saw in my dreams. He was perfect, beautiful, and I subconsciously compared them all to him. So... I was fucked. Following a dream and stuck in my head.

When I went to bed that night, the brown hair flowing under the water and the rich brown eyes stayed present in my mind and I dreamt of him once more.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:38 am*

Pushing my body inward it caused the stored water in my inner chambers to expel out, propelling me through the water. I shot backward, not seeing where I was going, but it didn't matter. Not in this form. Nestled inside of my shell, I was able to sink into myself and rely on my nautilus's natural instincts.

My eyes were mere pinpoints in my shifted form, but in the depths of the ocean, where the sun's light didn't reach and water distorted, sight wasn't the most important sense. Smell, taste, touch, vibrations—they were all the vision I needed. My tentacles, or cirri, were constantly feeding me information about my surroundings, all while I stayed tucked into the safety of my shell.

Another push inside, expelling the water in a form of jet propulsion few other sea creatures could accomplish quite like my kind. We were some of the oldest beings in the sea. Well, not me personally, but nautili. Our ancestry goes back to when creatures first left the waters to explore the land. Some of our kind had as well, giving birth to those that could adapt and shift to live on two legs and walk the earth or live in shells with tentacles.

Not every nautilus had this ability; some were base animals who knew no other life. They were smaller, common types. There was only one species of nautilidae remaining that was tethered to the ones of the past who could shift. They once were over ten feet in circumference in their shelled forms, and giants when they took to land. As the world changed and humans began crossing the seas, their size was no longer a benefit, but a weakness. In the millennia since, our forms have decreased in size and comparatively in human form as well so that we no longer stood heads above them, but could blend in. They would never know we didn't belong if we didn't want them to.

I was young, younger than most of the higher nautilidae I knew. At twenty-nine years old, I was still considered a youngling. Unmated, untethered, simply floating my way through life. Those of my kind who had developed into sentient beings mated for life. One partner with a bond that linked them, so no matter how far they might drift from each other, they would always be able to find their way back to one another. As if they had been buried so deep inside of the other that they could never be separated again.

Sigh . I darted again, slicing through the water, following the pull I felt inside. It wasn't that I didn't want a mate. I did , more than anything. But there weren't a lot of my kind left, and even if there were, my inner compass always led me to the shore. There had been some that had taken to living on land among the humans, enjoying what it had to offer. It wasn't for me, though.

I liked the ocean; I liked the comfort and safety my shell provided, and I liked the peace that came with sinking within and letting my creature's instincts take over. It wasn't that I never went to the shore. I did, on occasion, visit small islands, preferring ones that weren't busy, which allowed me time to stretch and release my human body bound up inside. I wasn't always steady on two legs, but I did enjoy feeling the sun kiss every part of my skin or feeling the air whisper over my body.

There were also sensations I could only experience while in my human form. Things that were not merely for the purpose of living. Ecstasy and pleasure. When I first discovered my penis, and watched it extend, like my cirri, my tentacles, only much different, I nearly went blind for a moment at the lightning sparks of pleasure that rippled through me. With one simple action, I could almost understand the temptation to leave the sea behind.

In our nautilus forms, males had four tentacles that could join together to pump seed for reproduction. It was a function of life, one driven by instinct, not enjoyment. It might as well have been a handshake or a pat on the arm, a transaction. Not that I had

done it, I wasn't interested in fertilization for the sake of it. I wanted a mate, a partner, someone whose touch would light me from within.

Beyond pleasure, though, the earth was dangerous. It was loud, busy, and scary. Perhaps the stories I'd been told when I was younger about our kind being hunted for our shells had played a part, but I'd also seen the dangers for myself. The boats in the ocean that leaked poison. The sea turtles whose shells would never grow properly after being entangled in plastic or netting. If it was this bad in the ocean where people were few, how much worse would it be in populated areas where people were many?

Still, I was drawn to the shore, to the same beach, following that pull within. I migrated throughout the year, seeking cooler waters, always returning to the coast of California during their winter, when the temperatures dipped low enough for me to be comfortable. It was the most dangerous part of the journey I took. Every year I questioned myself, even as I trusted my internal system to guide me.

For over twenty years, I'd traveled and returned to this area at the southern end of California. I glided past a large island about thirty miles off the coast, and something within me started to buzz with anticipation as I drew nearer to the beach. I began climbing out of the depths that my mind relaxed into when I was in my full nautilus form. The human side of me was awakening with a need and longing that I couldn't quite understand, except for the one image that pierced through every layer of my being.

The human, the man, who, in a panic, I once revealed myself to in my half-shifted form. His fear and awe had vibrated out of him and imprinted itself on me. It had been brief, but something had passed between us then, or at least I thought it had. He had been the first human I'd encountered who, as far as I knew, didn't know about my kind. It was dangerous and foolish, so much could have gone wrong. But I'd felt this pulse through the water, an anguished, muffled cry, and I reacted without thought, bursting free from my shell and releasing my half-human, half-nautilus form,

where I grew bigger and had appendages...arms...that were solid enough to hold the injured man, lifting him to the surface.

I'd propped him against a rock and hid behind another, staying long enough and watching with my human vision to ensure he was safe. Soon, he was surrounded by people frantically treating him, and I could breathe a sigh of relief at last. I thought I saw him look past the group that was strapping his leg to a board and land on me. Afraid he'd seen me, I ducked under the water, swam down to my shell where it rested on the seafloor, and shifted to hide safely within.

As much as I tried to stay away from humans, I also hoped to get to see him again. But the likelihood of finding one particular human when I didn't leave the water, was like finding a single krill in all the ocean. Still, I usually stayed in the area for a lunar cycle before continuing my migration. Most of the time I would remain in deeper waters in my shell during the busier hours of the day and then would rise to the surface at night and pop my human head out of the water to look around. Sometimes, I would push out of my shell, swimming along the shore with my cirri—my tentacles—pushing my human top half through the water as I explored the coves and rocks.

Something thrummed within me at being here again. It was more than the air that now filled my human lungs after being in my shelled form and breathing through the water. As scary as it was to be near such a busy part of the world, something felt strangely right about it, too.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:38 am*

Two days before the Christmas Open Surfing Competition, I was restless and eager. If I placed well at the Open, I would move on to Worlds. With that came the big money from sponsors, and a chance to really make a name for myself. It was everything I wanted, everything I'd been working for since I first popped up on a board. I wanted it so badly, I could taste it.

I'd always found that the best place to work out my nerves was on the water. I checked the surf report, grabbed my board and wetsuit, and headed to 'The Wedge.' The Wedge was a small section of beach known for huge, shore-breaking waves. It was dangerous, a true test for skilled surfers, and known for wipeouts. I'd attempted it before when the waves were hitting the teens, but today there were supposed to be twenty-footers, and I was itching to conquer it.

By the time I stood in front of the water, the swells had risen to over twenty feet. It was daunting to look at, but hella exciting. I could do this. If I could conquer The Wedge at its worst, then the competition would be a piece of cake. Bolstering myself, I held my board and ran into the water. The waves broke right along the shore, pounding me and tossing me around before I was fully in the water.

Past the breaks, I duck-dived; dipping under the water with my board through an oncoming wave, and began paddling as soon as I broke through the surface on the other side. The water fought me every step of the way, a clue I should have listened to. I was breathing hard, and the muscles in my arms were angry by the time I made it to the back—the area of calm past the waves where I would be sitting in the lineup of surfers waiting for our turns at the competition. But today, it was just me.

Catching my breath, I began having some reservations as I watched the swells before

me build and grow. They were big . Bigger than I'd ever attempted before, but I'd gotten myself out here and the only way back was through. I sat on my board, legs floating in the water, and shook my hands, trying to rid myself of the nerves that crept in.

I could do this. I could do this. I could fucking do this! Hying myself up, I saw my opportunity; the swell was gathering power, and I began paddling to catch the crest. I caught the wave, and popped up. For a brief moment, I was higher than I'd ever been. It felt like flying, riding so far above the land that it looked miniscule from up here, and then it all went to shit.

Before I knew it, I was thrown from my board and driven into the water, the power of the wave, pushing me deep beneath despite being tethered to my board. And then CRACK ! My knee slammed into a rock, making me scream underwater, and my vision whited out in pain, all while being ragdolled, tossed around without any control. My scream meant I'd expelled any oxygen I had in my lungs, which now burned with the need for air.

Red floated around me; blood leaking from my shattered knee. When I saw movement in the water, I panicked, thinking it might be a shark. Instead, a face appeared before me. An angel. I could almost be certain there was a fin or something behind him, but all I could concentrate on was his face. How he stared at me with curiosity and uncertainty. Before I knew it, I was being brought up to the surface, where I spluttered and coughed, but was able to breathe again. The pain broke through once more, consuming my every thought until it was too much to bear, and I lost consciousness.

I woke up with a shout, sitting straight up, clutching my knee, the phantom pain from the past so vivid and clear. Beads of sweat trickled down my forehead as I huffed in shallow breaths, trying to recall where I was. Seeing my room, and that I was no longer caught underwater, I forced myself to relax. Purposefully inhaling deeply and



releasing it slowly. I was okay. The dream was from the past. It was over. My teeth ached from clenching my jaw, and a pang shot down my leg at the jerky movements from waking up.

It had been a while since I'd had the full dream, replaying every second of it. More often than not, it came in flashes or inserted itself into other dreams. Sometimes my injury was portrayed in different ways. I'd been shot, bitten, fell while walking, in a car accident—all kinds of fun scenarios my brain conjured up during sleep to explain the event.

"Fuck!" I mumbled, and climbed out of bed, wobbling when I first stood and put weight on my bad leg. After reliving the worst moment of my life, I knew it would be impossible to settle back down. I limped over to the bathroom, forcing my steps to normalize by the time I got there. After taking a piss and washing my hands, I splashed water on my face and scrubbed my hands over the scruff.

When I came back out, I looked at my phone to see the time. It was almost four in the morning, which meant my alarm would be going off soon, anyway. I might as well get an early start... and a large coffee. The ocean might be naturally invigorating, but it might need a little assistance today. It was going to be one of those days where I wished I could set up an IV and get a direct line of caffeine into my system. Before I could leave, though, I had one more thing I had to do and pulled out my phone.

Me: Good morning, Gramps. I'm heading to the beach .

I almost felt bad for messaging my grandfather so early, but he made me promise to let him know, no matter the time of day. That was one of the many mistakes I'd made on that fateful day eight years ago. I hadn't let anyone know where I was going to be or when. I was fortunate that someone had been on the beach that day, who'd called for a rescue when they didn't see me come back up. It was still muddled in my mind when I thought back to it. Of course, I'd blacked out, but I was told they'd found me

propped up on a rock. There was no way the tide would have carried me to it, and I was in too much pain—and unconscious—to get myself there. It was counted as a miracle, one I was beyond thankful for. Of course, I also thought of the face underwater.

He had to have been an angel because I had gotten so turned around, I wouldn't have been able to fight my way to the surface, and I had been out of breath when we broke through.

Gramps: A little early, isn't it?

Me: Yeah. Can't sleep. Gotta hit the water, my usual spot, between lifeguard towers five and six, straight out from the shop.

Gramps: Okay. Be safe and check in.

Me: Will do. Talk to you soon.

At that, I was on my way and parked before five. Despite the bite in the air and the deep black of the sky before the sun broke through, there were a few other cars in the lot. There was the unmanned security car that worked as well as a sticker on a house, and two other cars that belonged to scuba instructors who were drinking coffee between their cars, likely preparing themselves for the class that would be coming soon. We waved at each other when I got out of my truck.

The cold hit me as I unhooked my kayak. I had my wetsuit on already, but I wore a jacket over it, and I zipped it up, pulling the collar up to keep my neck warm. Any sane person would wait until the sun was up and the beach was a bit warmer, and yeah... I probably should do that. But whenever I had the dream about my accident, it left me feeling restless.

It wasn't just the reminder of the accident, but of everything that came after it. The months of rehab and physical therapy, the loss of my dream, the feeling of helplessness. It all buzzed beneath my skin, urging me to take action, to do something simply to remind myself that I could.

Wheeling my kayak down to the shore, I looked out over the calm, dark water. Small swells rolled; not great for surfing, but that was fine. I needed to be on the water and feel that rush, even if it wasn't to chase the waves.

I replaced my jacket with my zip-up life vest, unhooked the kayak from the cart, and dragged it into the water. The first flick of water against my toes had me jumping and tensing, but I pushed forward. A little cold water never stopped me. Not when I had my board, and especially not now with my kayak. I sat on the open surface of the kayak and paddled. Past the swells until I reached the back. The sun was just starting to break, and the scuba crew was making their way to the beach. For a moment, it felt like it was just me and the sea, sitting still and enveloped by the enormity of the ocean.

It was a fearful thing for most folks to be alone in the water, but I found serenity in it. Nothing calmed me more. Needing to feel more grounded, I hung one leg over the side of the kayak, letting it dangle in the water. My gaze was focused on the sky as I watched the black give way to purples and oranges. It was magical, a renewal. Whatever darkness came before washed away with the dawn.

Enraptured by the beauty nature offered, I scarcely noticed a ripple in the near distance. I looked around and saw a few other surfers now taking to the water, though there was a comfortable cushion of space between us. Out of the corner of my eye, another ripple appeared, a little closer than before. I scanned the surface, but didn't see anything nearby.

Waves and nods were exchanged between myself and the other early morning surfers.

I was no longer alone in the vastness of the ocean. Still, I remained in place, enjoying the calm. A bubble broke through the water only feet away from me. I stared at the spot, waiting to see if something or someone would surface, but nothing did. I wasn't worried, necessarily, but it held my attention. I didn't fear the sea, even after my accident, but I respected it and the creatures who lived in it. This was their world, and I was merely a guest in it.

A rush of water rolled beneath my dangling foot as if something had pushed past me. I flinched and moved my leg back into the kayak.

"What the hell?" I peered over the side, looking into the dark water, trying to see if something was down there. A bubble popped right next to the edge of my kayak. My heart raced as I scanned the area around me. Respect for the ocean also meant listening to it and being smart. For once I was glad I was in my kayak and not on my old board since it provided a layer between me and the water, no limbs overhanging. I held my paddle on my lap, prepared to use it, but not wanting to hurt or disturb whatever was below me.

The water vibrated with another propelling movement. Something was down there. For some reason, the racing of my heart was mixed with a flutter in my belly. I wasn't scared, cautious perhaps, but I found myself intrigued more than anything. The dream that had woken me early in the night was still so close to the surface that a weird feeling of hope bubbled up in me.

A quick glance around told me no one else had noticed anything. None of the other surfers or the scuba team felt any sense of danger. I leaned over the side again. It was too dark, nothing was visible, but something about it tugged at me. Not sure what I hoped to accomplish, I stretched my hand down, wiggling my fingers in the water. It was foolish; it could have been anything. For some inexplicable reason, I didn't feel afraid of whatever it was.

A pulse surged beneath the water, and a flash of something light moved beneath me. Tendrils of some sort flicked around my fingers, making me yank my arm back in surprise. I stared at my hand. There were no marks or any indication that whatever touched me had any sort of barbs, teeth, or stingers, but a strange sensation remained. Something had touched me. There was a tactile memory that fought for a place in my mind, something I had felt before. Or someone .

Looking over the edge, I watched, waiting for any sign, any indication of what it was.

“Dude! You okay? Did you lose your paddle?” A surfer I recognized yelled from about a hundred yards away.

Just like that, the enchantment I was under was gone. Shaking my head to clear it, I held up my paddle. “No. I’m good, thanks, man.”

I took another glance around me, but I knew whatever—or whoever —had touched me was gone.

Letting out a heavy sigh, I carefully placed one of the blades of my paddle into the water and pushed, then tilted it so the blade on the other side dipped into the water, and so on until the small waves pushed me into the sand. I sat, beached, long enough to invite concerned inquiries as my mind was still trying to wrap itself around what had happened.

“Are you hurt? Do you need any help?”

“I’m fine. Honest. Thanks, though.” I waved off the runner in a full tracksuit and climbed out of my kayak, pulling it back to where I’d left the cart with my belongings.

Weird. Weird and... exciting . I might not have felt the same if it had been a jellyfish

that caressed me with stinging tentacles. I looked at my hand again. It wasn't a jelly. Sightings here weren't uncommon along the coast, depending on the season, but it wasn't that, I knew it. And a caress? Why was that the word that came to mind as I thought of the strange touch I'd felt?

Shit, maybe I just needed sleep. Or coffee. I'd have to open my shop soon, so I would have to suffice with the latter. Coffee. Lots of it.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:38 am*

Everything inside of me zinged, my senses humming with excitement. A pull, stronger than I'd felt in a long time, drew me toward the shallow waters. I watched from below as the small boat sat on the surface. I'd seen them before, not usually so close, but something about it drew my attention. When the man's foot touched the water, it was as if I'd been shocked by an electric eel.

I was compelled closer. I pulled out of my shell and shifted into my half-human form, letting my eyes and ears gather information along with my cirri—my tentacles—which used vibrations and touch to collect information. Needing to get closer, I propelled beneath him, zipping by, so tempted to touch him as I did, but not wanting to frighten him. His foot disappeared from the water and took with it the sensation that made me feel on fire within. The loss of it was almost as shocking as the first zap I'd felt.

Staying several feet beneath the surface, knowing the dawn's light wasn't bright enough to reach me, I circled, waiting to see what would happen. He didn't flee or cry out. Instincts told me I was too close to the shore, too close to humans, that it wasn't safe. But just as much was this deep need to see the one human I'd thought about for many, many seasons.

As I began to wonder if I would feel that sensation, or be this near to him again, I felt another pulse. I looked up to see his hand in the water. He wiggled his fingers, almost like he was calling me, inviting me, and I couldn't resist.

I wanted to reach up with my own human hands, to entwine my fingers around his, but I pulled back with uncertainty at the last moment. Instead, I let my cirri explore him. It was a light brush across his skin, but it ignited something in me. A

confirmation. Even having seen no more than fingers and toes, there was no doubt whatsoever that he was the very same human I'd rescued. The same one who stared at me through pain-filled wonder for a brief moment before he lost consciousness.

His hand disappeared from the water, and I knew the moment was over. I propelled myself deeper to retrieve the shell that had been cast off and glanced upward with a look of longing and regret as I saw his small boat glide away. I clasped my shell to my chest, holding it tight, as I surrendered to the rocking motion of the sea.

With a pain in my chest, I shifted my form, shrinking to fit within my shell once more, folding in half as I filled the empty cavern within. Perhaps the ache would ease if I let my mind sink, and let my base form take over. Except... I didn't want to ease it. Now that I'd found him, I didn't want to lose him.

In my nautilus form, I shot through the water, cutting diagonally toward the shore, drawing closer and further from the man with each propulsion. I needed to see him, but I couldn't abandon my shell to the sea, whose changing tides and activity might risk me losing it. I never ventured too far from it. Without my shell, I would be left vulnerable and couldn't shift into my full nautilus form. Not only that, but it was my home, my refuge.

I followed the shore until I reached the small cove I'd explored the night before. Shifting into my full human form, I floundered for a moment as my two legs fought to keep me upright, pushing me to the surface. In this form, I needed to breathe air, and I always forgot how urgently it happened.

Gasping and coughing, I looked around in a panic to see if anyone had seen me, but fortunately, the cove was empty. I needed somewhere safe to keep my shell until I could return for it. Several caves were carved out of the bottom of the cliff that overlooked the cove. One was fenced off with a lock, prohibiting access. The next one was open, with no fence. It had a low overhang, but if I crouched, I could enter it.



It wasn't a big space, but at least it felt a little more secure than leaving my shell beneath the water or somewhere out in the open.

I crawled to the back of the cave, about twenty steps, and tucked my shell against the rocky wall and packed sand around it, creating a small barrier in the hope it would protect it from the rising tide. I sat on my knees and stared at it with a mixture of emotions. Whenever I'd gone ashore in my human form before, it was always in areas that felt safe. I knew my shell would be right where I left it. But here?

The risk was big, huge. This area was too big, too populated. I'd never done anything like this before. The years I'd spent migrating and returning to this location pressed in on me. My inner compass pointing me here, the tug too strong to ignore. Knowing he was so close, how could I possibly leave? With one last look, I bolstered myself, and crawled back out, leaving a part of me behind.

I looked at the giant rocks and they seemed far too daunting to traverse. The only other option was to go back in the water and swim around, but I didn't dare with my shell now hidden away in the cave. There was a set of stairs that led to the top of the rocks. Stairs . We had no use for them underwater and I'd only had to use them a couple of times before, though those had only been two or three, nothing as steep or high as these.

The pull within was impossible to ignore. I didn't understand it. Why was the need to see this particular human woven into my every fiber? After crossing oceans, all that stood between us was a set of stairs and a wall of rocks. I placed my hand over my ribs and breathed in deep, feeling my chest expand with air. It was a strange sensation, but one I found calming in this form. Lifting one foot to place it on the first step, I gripped the railing and held tight.

"I can do this." My voice always sounded funny to me. I could go months without saying a word, and it always surprised me to hear myself or to realize that I

remembered how to create words and vocalize them. It was as instinctual as gliding through the water in my nautilus form. This side of me was as much who I was as my shelled side. It was easy to forget, though.

My legs were shaky, and my breathing came harder by the time I reached the top of the steep steps. I took a minute to appreciate the view that was offered from the top, revealing the length of beach that stretched out before me. It was quite big, but luckily not crowded. Only a few people could be seen. He was out there, I could feel him. If I was going to do this, I needed to act soon, before more humans arrived.

Thankfully, there was a path that led down on this side of the rocks. No more stairs. With my heart pounding so loud it thrummed in my ears, I began down the path. If I was seen by other humans, I looked the same as them. They would have no reason to suspect I was anything else...I hoped.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:38 am*

Sitting in my shop, my hands gripped the thermos of coffee I'd brought. I didn't have any hot drinks in the store unless I brought them in. On days like this, I was tempted to set up a coffee station, but it was a lot easier to deal with pre-packaged foods and drinks. So I sipped my coffee and let the heat of the thermos warm my hands.

It was early, but with nothing else to do, I rolled up the doors to my shop and put on some music. I scrolled through social media before switching to the surf reports, a habit that was hard to break. After looking at the waves at all the prime surfing spots, I pulled up a fish report. Skimming through it, I tried to see if there were any reports of anything unusual in the area. I didn't know what it was, but something about the touch on my hand niggled in my brain, and I couldn't let it go.

Website after website, including the local beach groups on social media, and nothing stood out. I let out a heavy sigh as my gaze drifted toward the water, longing to close the shop and go back out there. But for what? I couldn't simply paddle around all day looking for something under the water. I shook my head. Ridiculous.

As I looked at the sea, something caught my attention out of the corner of my eye. I blinked to focus and my jaw fell. There was a man walking across the sand. That in and of itself wasn't unusual, but the fact he was butt-ass naked was. I stood up and watched for a minute, looking around to see if anyone else was with him or if he would be intercepted. The lifeguard towers weren't open yet, and the few people on the beach were busy.

He seemed...lost. The beach attracted a lot of different people for different reasons, but something tugged at my heart. No matter the situation, I couldn't simply let the man wander around in the buff, especially when it was this cold out. I grabbed a

blanket off one of the shelves in my shop and jogged toward him. My knee twinged with pain, which was nothing new, but it made my limp more pronounced as I hurried toward him.

When I was about ten feet away, he looked up and our eyes locked. His eyes ! I'd seen them a million times. Air punched out of my chest, surprise freezing my feet in place. It couldn't be. It was impossible. I stared, trying to process. He stared, saying nothing. I blinked again to see if he was merely a mirage of some sort, but he remained there. Completely naked. My gaze dropped to take in all his fair skin on display. All of him. He looked to be in his twenties, had a small stature, at least a foot shorter than me, and a thin, lithe body, which was smooth, not a single hair on him besides the medium-length brown hair on his head.

When my eyes roamed upward and connected with his once more, he simply tilted his head, watching me as I ogled him like a creeper. His gaze shifted to the blanket I forgot I was holding.

“Shit! I'm so sorry. Here, you must be freezing. Let's get you warmed up.”

“I'm not cold.” His voice was high and light.

I chuckled awkwardly, not really sure what to do. “Nonetheless, you can't be out here...like this, so let's uh...” I threw the blanket over his shoulders, closing it in front of him to cover his junk. “...Yeah. There.”

He clutched the blanket, and a soft smile appeared, making him look even more radiant. “Thank you.”

“Sure. Do you need anything? Do you want me to call someone?”

“Call?”

I ran a hand through my hair and looked around to see if anyone was watching. This man who had been in more dreams than I could count stood before me, but not in a way I ever expected. I was tempted to scoop him up and have him cling to me, so overwhelmed by the fact he was here. But that would be weird...right? Especially since he was naked. And a fucked-up part of me wanted to pull the blanket back and enjoy the view. I needed to take a step back. "Yeah. Is there someone you want me to get a hold of for you? Is anyone looking for you? Are you hungry maybe?"

He tilted his head once more. "I am looking for someone. Can I touch you?"

"What? Uh...yes?" Being asked to be touched by a stranger who showed up on the beach without clothes and didn't appear to be cold, while I felt the chill of the air whisper against my neck... should send up warning signs, and I should keep my distance. I should definitely not be excited about being touched by him.

He stretched his hand out, and I couldn't help but lift mine to match. His fingers floated over the back of my hand and each of my fingers as if he were examining them. A spark jumped from my skin to his, the wind likely creating static electricity. Except there was something familiar about it. I looked at my hand, my skin still tingling, and my mind returned to when I was in my kayak, and the tendrils had caressed my skin.

The man before me stepped closer and tilted his head back to meet my gaze. His beautiful brown eyes gleamed and a wide smile stretched across his face, reminding me so much of the face I'd seen under the water eight years ago.

"I found you," he whispered, with a sound of wonder in his airy voice.

"Me?"

"Yes. I've been looking for you for a long time."

I was speechless. Was he really the same one who rescued me? Why had he been looking for me? A million questions fought to be asked, but not here. Not standing on the beach with him naked.

“Will you...come with me?”

“Yes,” he said with a grin. Just as soon as it appeared, the grin fell again. He looked behind him, toward the rocks that led to Pirate’s Cove . When he faced me again, the glow in his eyes was gone, but he rolled his shoulders back with determination. “Yes. I will come with you.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want you to feel pressured or obligated.”

His head tilted back to look me in the eye, and he gave a nod. “I’m sure.”

“Okay. I have a shop close by. We can get you some clothes, and...talk?” I pointed across the sand.

The man slid his hand into mine, squeezing my fingers while he clutched the blanket with his other hand. The simple action made my heart leap. I liked the way his smaller hand felt in mine, and the way he seemed to want to touch me. It was all bizarre, and so far out of what I would normally do, but now that our fingers were entwined, I had this feeling that I never wanted them to leave .

We stayed quiet as I led him to my shop. I saw a few people watching us with curiosity. I knew most everyone here, from the fish and chips shack to the surf shop to the regulars and had not been with anyone in a long time. I certainly hadn’t walked around holding hands with a naked man.

I gave an awkward wave and ushered the man inside. Not wanting any more onlookers, I rolled the metal door down and slapped a “be back soon” sign on it.

Inside, I blew out a breath and placed my hands on my hips. What did I do now? I was alone with a naked man in my shop. Sure, I'd had plenty of fantasies of bringing a guy back here and fucking him against the counter, but this wasn't exactly how I pictured it. And as interested as I was, it wasn't the time for that kind of fantasy.

He watched me, waiting, and my eyes drifted down to see a noticeable bump in the blanket. I swallowed audibly.

The man noticed where my attention landed, and he shirked off the blanket. "It's okay. It occurs with stimulation."

His bluntness had me choking on a surprised cough. He was rock hard, and I practically salivated at the sight. A real fantasy right here in my shop. Not just the porn kind, but the literal man of my dreams. A man who seemed completely unbothered by the fact he was naked—and erect—in front of me.

I cleared my throat and picked up the blanket—trying not to look his cock in the eye—and handed it to him. "Yes, I'm aware of how dicks work. Let's get you some clothes, I think."

His lips fell into a frown as he wrapped himself back up. "Does it not appeal to you?"

Sweat beaded on my forehead, and I suddenly felt much warmer than I'd been earlier. I swiped it away with the back of my hand. My own dick was thickening in my jeans at the image of him. "It does, believe me, but that's not the problem. I think we should talk, and I'm not going to be able to concentrate with you naked."

He hummed and nodded, seemingly satisfied with that answer.

"I have a few things over here if you want to take a look." I walked toward the racks of clothes, more grateful than ever to have a variety of stock on hand. He followed

right behind me, so close his dick rubbed against my jeans and he let out a gasp as if the sensation surprised him as much as it did me, and now I was readjusting myself as my pants grew tighter.

“My apologies,” he whispered and took a small step back.

I almost pulled him back to me, to hear that sound release from him again, but I forced myself to concentrate on the racks of clothing. Holding out a jacket for him to inspect, he wrinkled his nose and shook his head, making me chuckle.

As he watched me slide the hangers around, he began to do the same, and when he pulled out a pair of white linen pants, his hand rubbed over the material. They were a light, summery fabric, but I kept them year-round for warmer winter days and people on vacation.

“Do you like those?”

He nodded. “Yes. It doesn't feel itchy or heavy.”

“All right then. They're yours.”

His answering smile made me feel like I was basking in the sun. I took them off the hanger and handed them to him. They were traditionally purchased by women, but I long ago stopped labeling items as men's or women's. Clothes were for anyone.

That was reinforced a while back with a couple who came by on roller skates, as people often did. The tattooed man bought a skirt for his boyfriend, and I'd never seen anyone so happy to twirl around in a skirt while skating. They were regulars now. Dash and Evan. The two were hot, but especially Evan, who often showed up in crop tops and skirts, and the level of affection Dash had for him was clear as day.



The petite man before me held the pants, trying to puzzle them out. I asked gently, “Do you need help putting them on?”

“I think so, yes.”

It was strange that he didn't seem to know what to do with elastic pants, but it wasn't as concerning as it should have been. The look on his face was beyond endearing and my heart melted a little at his trusting expectation.

“See here? The tag inside? That's the back. These pants don't have any zippers or buttons, so they are pretty simple. You just stick your legs in and pull them up until the top is around your waist.”

He bent over and put both of his feet into the holes, and then started to topple over when he tried to lift the material. I caught him before he could fall, stifling a chuckle. I supposed I needed to be a little more specific.

“All right, how about you hold on to my shoulder for balance? You put one foot in, and then the other.”

When he grabbed my shoulder, I felt another static charge pass between us. The man before me let out another gasp and the blanket fell away in time for me to see his cock twitch.

Fuck me ! I forced myself to look away, the heat of his touch searing through my jacket. This man was testing the limits of my control, especially as unabashed as he was with his nudity. He leaned against me, and a moment later, he was pulling his pants up, stuffing his cock inside, making me bite my lip at the sight.

“Better?” I asked through a thick voice.

“Hmm...I suppose. It helps to not feel the air whisper against my pe—my dick? It felt rather exciting. ”

I snorted. “Yeah, it can. All right, now that that’s sorted. How about a shirt?”

He pursed his lips in thought. “Is that necessary?”

“At the beach? Not really, I suppose. Though, typically it’s recommended if you go anywhere else that’s not private. But you’re not cold? It’s been really chilly today.”

He shook his head. “No, I am used to the cold. There often isn’t any sun where I come from.”

It was my turn to tilt my head, puzzled by his statement. “How about something light, then? I have some in a similar fabric to the pants if you like those.”

He rubbed his hands down his thighs and gave a nod. “Yes, I like this. It feels funny, but nice. Makes my skin happy.”

Holding in the smile that wanted to break free, I rifled through the other linen options. When my hand landed on a white crop top, the man stopped me and pointed.

“This one? You’re sure?”

“Yes. It looks less cumbersome.”

I took it off the hanger, ripped off the price tag, and instead of talking him through it, I simply had him lift his arms and I slid the shirt over him. He lowered his arms and felt his bare belly, playing with the edge of the shirt that rested a couple of inches below his nipples. He looked up at me and smiled wide, making my heart bounce around. Shit, he looked so fucking beautiful. I mean, naked, he was stunning, but I

was too shocked to appreciate it fully, but now, though, he was radiant.

“Are you happy?”

“I like the color. It reminds me of my home.”

“Good. I’m glad. Now how about we have a seat, and we can talk?”

“Yes. We should.”

I led him to the counter and pulled out the extra chair I kept in case anyone needed it. I sat across from him, grabbing my coffee thermos. “Are you thirsty? Or hungry?”

He watched me take a sip. “Thirsty, perhaps. I always forget that I need to intake fluids. Can I?” He pointed at my thermos.

Each thing he said was more cryptic than the last, but nonetheless, I happily handed over my coffee, with no hesitation about sharing it with the no-longer naked stranger. “Sure. It’s warm, but it shouldn’t be too hot.”

He held the thermos in front of his face and sniffed. His nose wrinkled in an incredibly adorable expression. He tilted the cup and took a cautious drink. I half-expected him to spit it out, but instead, he closed his eyes as if savoring the taste. I typically drank my coffee black with sugar to take the edge off the bitterness.

“Do you like it?” I asked cautiously.

“Hmm. It is a rich flavor, earthy... quite nice, actually. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Help yourself. ”

He took another drink and offered me a sweet smile.

“So...uh, I take it you don’t have a lot of experience with clothing.”

“No. Not really. I’ve seen it, of course.”

“Of course,” I replied, as if that was a completely natural and normal statement.

“I never fully understood it before, but I don’t hate it.” His hand brushed over the cropped shirt, drawing my attention and making me wish it was my hands trailing over him.

“I have so many questions.”

He smiled at me, his eyes raking over me in his own examination. “As do I.”

I held out my hand. “I’m Cory, by the way. Sorry, I should have said that earlier, but I was just a little...distracted.”

“By my dick? Di-ck. ”

I coughed and sputtered, feeling my face go red, especially at the way he emphasized the sound of the word, as if it was new to him. “That was part of it. But it’s not every day a man walks across the beach and tells you he found the one he’s been looking for.”

“I did, though. I found you.”

“So we have met then?” I knew his face, knew it with every fiber of my being, but it was still so hard to come to grips with.

He dipped his head. “We have. Though you were injured, so I would understand if you don’t remember.”

I reached across the counter and grabbed his hand. “I do. I remember everything. Until I passed out, at least. But I remember your face. So it was you? You’re the one who was there when I crashed?”

“It was me.” His fingers squeezed mine, and he peered into my eyes.

My entire world spun. I’d known it, but to hear confirmation was unreal. The number of people who told me I was imagining it, the times I tried to convince myself I must have, and the way his face had never left me. And he was here. Sitting across from me.

“How? How is it possible? Nobody saw anything that day. They couldn’t figure out how I’d gotten to safety. It was you, though. I knew it. I’ve known it this whole time.”

“I was near when I heard you shout.”

“Shout? You mean when my knee hit the rock? That was underwater.”

His expression turned down, sadness filling his eyes. “Yes. The sound... it was agonizing, and I couldn’t stay away. I had to help.”

“So, you were...underwater? Doing what? Scuba?” What were the odds? Except...The Wedge wasn’t safe for scuba divers. It was barely safe for surfers... clearly .

“Not scuba. I can breathe underwater without the help of an apparatus. ”

I leaned closer and lowered my voice as if someone might overhear me. “Are you a mermaid? Well...merman, I suppose?”

He let out a laugh that sounded twinkly, a sound I absolutely wanted to hear again. “No, Cory. I am not a merman.” Amusement lit his eyes.

I shook my head. “Right. Because mermen don’t exist, and I’m being ridiculous.” I grabbed the thermos from him and took a drink before handing it back.

“You’re not ridiculous. They do exist.” His statement came out as fact.

“Dude! Seriously? They’re real?”

He gave me a soft smile as he had a drink of coffee. Here we were, sharing the same cup, talking about mermen, as if it wasn’t the most world-shattering news I’d ever heard. “You might know one, actually. Calder is a prince of a mer-kingdom. He lives on land most of the time with his human mate, Denver. Do you know Denver?”

I shook my head in disbelief at the casual mention of a mer-prince. “No, I don’t think so. I don’t know every single person, and I think I would remember if someone I knew had a merman for a...mate. But that’s not what you are? You can breathe underwater, so...what does that make you, then?”

He watched me carefully, as if deciding what to say. “There are many types of beings who can change form, like mermen. ”

“And you are one of those beings?” He dipped his head in confirmation. I ran a hand through my hair as I took in the implication. “So you can change your form? Do you have a tail?”

Another burst of twinkly laughter came out of him. “You’re funny. I have no use for

a tail.”

I chuckled half-heartedly as if I were in on the joke, but I wasn't. I really wasn't. “Can I ask what you are?”

“I'm a nautilus.”

The matter-of-fact tone gave me pause as my brain tried to catch up. “A nautilus? Like a cephalopod?” My fascination with the ocean wasn't only about the waves. I loved going to aquariums and seeing the amazing creatures who lived beneath the surface, and my brain chose that moment to pull a scientific name out of thin air. Go brain! I think. Wait? A cephalopod? Was he actually telling me he was one?

“Yes. Precisely. No tail for me. I have cirri, a type of tentacles, but they are thinner and there are a lot more of them.” He sat straighter in his chair, looking proud of himself.

Why was the sound of that both intriguing and exciting? Was I losing it? Was this a real conversation? “Tentacles? Really?”

“Cirri. Yes.”

I stood up and put my hands on my head. If he was any other random naked person I'd found on the beach who told me they were a nautilus, I would laugh it all off. He wasn't, though. He was the very same person who had saved me in an impossible situation that likely would have ended in my death if he hadn't shown up. And I...I believed him. Which was a lot to swallow. “Holy shit!”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:38 am*

Cory stopped talking and looked as if he was trying to hold his head in place.

“Are you all right, Cory? Does your head hurt?”

“My head? Oh, uh...no.” He lowered his hands. “My mind is blown, but no, it doesn’t hurt.”

I tilted my head to see if anything was leaking out of him, but he seemed okay.

“Blown? Is that a bad thing?”

“No. It's not bad, not necessarily. It just means I'm processing new information that changes the way I see the world.”

“Hmm. I understand. My mind, too, has been blown.” I didn't know what to expect when I stepped onto the sand, but I trusted my instincts and followed the magnetic pull within. Cory must have felt the same pull when he ran out to greet me. When he offered me the blanket, my insides lit up at my mate, giving me a gift .

Cory was that—my mate. I'd wondered for so long, but that pull had led me right to him. Touching him in this form, when every sensation was heightened, it sparked inside of me. I didn't know how or why, but he was my mate. We had a bond. So when he asked me to come with him, I knew I had to, despite the risk of leaving my shell for even longer. I'd looked back and sent it a silent promise to return soon before letting Cory lead me away.

“So, I take it you don't do this a lot, then?” Cory asked.



“Do?”

He waved his hand around the shop and between us. “I don't know. This? All of it? Any of it?”

“Visit a shop on the beach and drink coffee with a human?” I asked.

He snorted and smirked. “Yeah, sure, that.”

“No. I have never done this before. I do, sometimes, change to my human form and come on land, but never somewhere as busy as this. There are a few small islands where those of my kind like to walk on two legs. They are isolated, less inhabited, and the people who live there have an understanding of beings that come from the sea as I do. But here? No. I always stay in the water in my nautilus form.”

“And you have tentacles, uh...cirri.” His blue eyes watched me.

While it wasn't posed as a question but a statement, I answered anyway. “Yes. I do. Would you like to see them? ”

Cory seemed interested for a moment before taking another drink of coffee. He stared at the cup and quirked his lips to his side. “I think I need something stronger.”

“What do you need? I'm strong, I can help,” I offered.

“I know you are. You were able to get me out of the water. That's actually a pretty impressive feat, but that's not what I meant.” Cory met my gaze with his ocean-blue eyes, a color that felt familiar and comforting. He wore a crooked smile on his glistening lips that I found myself staring at. He had short, light hair that surrounded his lips and covered his cheeks and chin. I'd seen humans with hair on their faces and I found it fascinating, but never more so than now. I longed to touch Cory, to learn

what it felt like. What kind of sensations would I feel if I used my cirri to explore him? The idea alone had my dick hardening again. At this rate, I would have to do something to alleviate the tension soon.

He broke our connection, casting his attention to the shop's closed door, before returning it to me. "Do you want to get out of here? I don't think I could concentrate on work today, and I definitely could use a stronger drink."

"I..." I wanted to go anywhere he went, but I'd already ventured further into the human world than I ever had. I wasn't sure I could handle more. And there was my shell. Tucked away in a cave. What if something happened to it? The thought sent panic through me. I shuddered involuntarily.

Suddenly, Cory stood before me, lifting my chin with two fingers. "It's okay, little one. We don't have to do anything or go anywhere if you don't want to."

His touch, his closeness, they overwhelmed my senses. My mate. I would go anywhere, do anything, simply to have him touch me and look at me like this. "I want to. I do. But..."

"But what?" Cory stepped back, putting his hands in his pockets. I nearly lunged forward to grab his hands and bring them back to my face, but I managed to keep myself in place.

"The human world. The city. It is new to me, and truthfully, it is terrifying. The noise, the people, the carelessness, the violence. It's a lot."

He nodded thoughtfully, not dismissing my foolishness. "It can be, but there's good, too. If it's too much, we can come back, but I promise I'll keep you safe."

I let out a happy sigh. He wanted to protect me, just as I always hoped my mate

would. How could I possibly leave his side now? I could come back later for my shell. I wanted to mention it to him. Perhaps I could bring it with me, but as much as I trusted him, letting him see my shell felt more vulnerable than I was ready for. It would be safe, as he would keep me safe. His promise made me feel much better.

With a nod, I let out a soft, “Okay. ”

“Okay, great. Let me just shut my register down and lock up.”

He first got me what he called flip-flops and helped me put them on, explaining that we had to protect our feet when we walked outside. The plastic between my toes felt strange, but I liked the sound they made when I walked, slapping the ground with each step. Cory chuckled as he watched me try them out.

Once I was more sure-footed in them, he had me follow him out the back door, and checked to make sure everything was secure. I had to admire him and his dedication to fortifying his shop.

Cory turned toward me. “Are you ready, little one? Wait...shit, I don't even know your name. I guess I got sidetracked by the whole nautilus thing. I’m sorry, I should have asked sooner.”

“My name?”

“Yes, what should I call you?” he asked.

“Hmm.” I had never given it any thought, but then I never imagined I would be having a conversation with a human that might require names. Not just any human, but my mate. “I don't have one. Not a human one, at least. I’ve only ever communicated with other sea folk. The ocean has its own language, you see. Sound works differently underwater.”

“Can you tell me your... ocean name?”

His desire to know me, even this part of me, made my heart flutter. I canted my name, a quick sequence of whistles and clicks. Canting was a musical way of speaking that traveled through the water much easier than trying to verbalize words.

Cory watched me with a look of wonder in his eyes. “Oh! Was that your name?”

“Yes.”

“That was lovely.” I grinned widely at the compliment, thrilled to know he liked hearing my name. It wasn't something I shared in my human form.

His lips pursed, and his eyes turned downward. “I’m not sure I can do it right, though.”

I patted his arm to comfort him. “It’s all right, Cory. I didn't expect you would. Humans don't have the same ear or vocalizations as beings from the sea.”

“I’d like to have something to call you besides ‘ little one .’”

“I don't mind that; it sounds nice when you say it.”

Cory met me with a sweet smile. “Good, I'll keep that in mind. I still would like to have a name for you. What if I were to introduce you to someone? What would I say?”

I shrugged, even while I had a mixture of panic and excitement at the thought of him wanting to introduce me to others. I didn't want to meet more people, but I liked how he pictured sharing me with people he knew. “Can you pick one for me?”

Cory's eyes widened. "Really? You'd really want me to pick a name for you? That's a big decision."

I slid my hand down his arm and twined our fingers together. "I trust you, Cory." I did. Completely.

"Phew. Okay. I'm going to think about it. It needs to be a good name. Come on, let's get outta here."

My hand stayed in his as he led me further away from the water. I squeezed tight to him, letting him be my anchor in a stormy sea, afraid I would get tossed about in this new world. Cory guided me to his vehicle, a truck he'd said, and opened the door. I stared at it, not sure what to do.

"It's all right. You can climb up and sit on the seat, then I'm going to go around to the other side and sit next to you. Does that sound okay?" His tone was gentle and patient, not exasperated at having to explain something he did daily.

I drew in a deep breath, bolstering myself. Being far from the sea was one thing, but getting into a machine was entirely different. I heard them in the water, felt the rumbles from their mechanics, and smelled the fumes and waste left behind. It wasn't something I was particularly keen to do, but I had come this far, and I wanted to be with Cory.

"Yes. As long as you are beside me." I stepped up and got in, finding the seat more comfortable than I expected. The way its curves seemed to fit the shape of this body was soothing in a way. Though, I'd always found constriction comforting. Much like my shell. When I was confined within its walls, it made me feel secure.

Cory closed my door, sealing me in, and blocking out the outside world. Once he was sitting beside me, he reached over, pulled a strap across me, and clicked it into a

receptacle. “This is a seat belt. I’ll drive as safely as I can, but this is an added protection, just in case.”

I turned my face toward him, appreciating all his care and kindness. “Thank you, Cory.”

“You’re welcome. I know this is all new to you, so instead of going somewhere crowded, would it be okay if I take you to my home?”

My head bobbed. “Yes! I would like that very much.”

He smiled widely before turning his attention to the truck. Soon, we were leaving, driving away from the beach, away from my shell, away from everything I’d ever known. It was frightening, but Cory rested his hand on my leg, and my fear drifted away; the warmth of his touch, bleeding through the light material of my pants, held my focus. I placed my hand over his, craving his touch already.

“It’s not too far from here. We’ll be there soon,” Cory said.

I was too busy staring out the window, watching people, cars, houses, buildings zip past us to answer right away. The more I sat with Cory’s hand on me, reminding me of his presence, the more I was able to take it all in. It was a marvel. I could propel myself quickly through the water, especially in my half-shifted form, but never anything like this. “We’re going so fast.”

Cory laughed. “Yes, I suppose so. Though, it’s a much lower speed limit here than in some places. Maybe later, if you’re up for it, I’ll take you on the freeway where we can go a lot faster, depending on the time of day.”

“Oh? Does it work like a tide, with highs and lows?”

“In a way, yes. But on the roads, it’s called traffic. There are busier times of the day, mostly when people are going to or from work.”

“Hmm. I see. No, I don’t know if I’m ready for that yet.”

“That’s okay. I don’t want to push you to do anything you’re not comfortable with.”

I squeezed his fingers. “You are very thoughtful.”

Cory squeezed in response, a simple gesture that skittered through me excitedly. “I’m trying. It’s a little...strange to have someone who is so unfamiliar with things I don’t even have to think about.”

“Strange for both of us.”

“Then at least we’re navigating it together.” Cory patted my leg, and I smiled, loving the way ‘together’ sounded. I continued watching through the windows, unable to observe every little detail at the speed we were going. We didn’t speak for a little while, but it was nice. Cory’s breathing and tapping on the steering wheel were comfortable reminders of his nearness, but allowed me the chance to take everything in. I noticed along the way that several buildings had trees with colorful bubbles on them. Some were inside of houses, and others were on signs or paintings.

“Are trees sacred here?” From the brief glimpses I’d caught, they certainly seemed to be idolized.

Cory glanced over before returning his gaze forward. “Well, I suppose they are to some groups. Why do you ask?”

“There are many trees in places I wouldn’t expect. Inside . They are decorated and some even glow.”

He chuckled. “Oh! Those are Christmas trees! It’s something some people do at this time of year to celebrate the Christmas season.”

“Christmas?” I’d heard the term somewhere, but couldn’t seem to pick out a reference from memory.

“Oh, boy. Well, Christmas means a lot of things to a lot of different people. For some, it’s a centerpiece of their beliefs, but for many others, it’s a time to come together with loved ones, share meals together, and exchange gifts as a way to show gratitude and love. Not everyone celebrates Christmas. There are other holidays around this time of year, like Hanukkah and Kwanzaa, that each have their own special significance.”

I turned to face him. “Do you celebrate any of them, Cory?”

“I do. I usually celebrate Christmas with my family. ”

Hope sparked within at the idea of possibly being included in his family. Would I get to share meals with him or exchange gifts? He’d already given me so much. A blanket, clothes, flip-flops. What could I give him to show my gratitude and love? My mind started wandering at that. I didn’t have any material things. I didn’t have anything aside from what I wore and my shell.

Cory turned the truck and stopped under a cover. Several other vehicles were lined up in a row beneath the cover. “We’re here. This is where I live.”

I looked around and then back at him. “Do you live with many other people?”

“No. This is an apartment building. It’s divided into several individual homes. I live by myself.” Relief washed over me. I really didn’t want to be introduced to anyone else so soon, and without a name. He ran a hand over his hair and quirked his lips to



the side. “It’s not big, and it might be a little messy.”

He seemed nervous now as if he was worried about showing me his home. I offered him my best smile and said, “If it is yours, I know I will like it.”

His blue eyes brightened at that. “All right. Let’s go in.”

Cory showed me how to undo the straps across my chest and waist, and I climbed out, staying close to him. He led me to a door beneath a set of stairs, and I breathed a sigh of relief not to have to tackle those once more. When he opened it, I was hit with the intensity of his scent infused into the place. It was briny, like the sea, but with his own unique woody musk. The intoxicating scent made my dick perk up again. I wanted to roll around in it, to envelop myself in his aroma.

“It’s not much. But it’s mine,” Cory said with a shrug.

“It’s fantastic,” I said in a whisper. It wasn’t big and overwhelming, like I feared it might be. It was small enough that it gave me the same sense of security I’d felt in his truck, more so with his scent in my nose.

Cory showed me around, pointing out the couch, the kitchen, and the bathroom. His cheeks flushed a pretty color when he pointed out his bed. “Yeah, so that’s everything.”

I looked around, taking it all in, when I realized as nice as it felt, something was missing. “You don’t have a Christmas tree?”

“No. It’s just me here, so I haven’t really bothered with it.”

“You like them, though, correct?”

Cory stood beside me, looking over his space as I did. “Yes. I have a lot of great memories with them. We did one every year at home, and I would go to my grandfather’s house to help him decorate his as well.”

His eyes twinkled as he spoke, his adoration for the tradition clear. “Are there a limited number of trees?”

One side of Cory’s mouth tipped up, making me wish I could trace his lips to feel every minute movement of them. “ Well, yes and no. Real trees are cut and harvested each year. Seedlings are planted to replace them, but they take time to grow. Some people prefer the feel and smell of a real tree, but others have chosen to use artificial trees which can be used over and over again.”

I nodded, absorbing the information. “I think I would much prefer the second.”

“I do, as well.”

“Then you should have one. Is it not allowed to do something simply because it brings you joy?”

Cory gave me a sweet smile and threw an arm over my shoulder, squeezing me to his side. The warmth of him and the way I fit against him made my mind go blank and my body ignite. I’d heard a mate’s touch was different, but I couldn’t have prepared myself for how overwhelming it would be. Although I’d never been this close to anyone in this form with all my senses heightened.

“You know what? No, there’s nothing to stop someone from doing what they enjoy as long as it doesn’t hurt anyone else. And I like the sound of it. Maybe later you could...”

He shut his mouth tight, stopping whatever he was about to say from spilling out. My

curiosity about this man had me asking. “I could what, Cory?”

His hand went through his hair, an action I was beginning to recognize came with uncertainty. “It’s silly. You just got here. I know nothing about you, or how any of this is possible, or if you have any kind of schedule or plans. I don’t want to make assumptions. Let’s just forget about it.”

Lifting my face to see his, I said, “My memory is very good. I don’t forget easily.”

Cory laughed, a sound I felt rumble through him, exciting all my senses, which thrived on vibrations.

“You are something else,” he said with a smirk.

“I am, Cory. I’m a nautilus. But I’m human, too.”

Another wonderful laugh and then he pulled away from me. “Come on, let’s have something to eat.”

“And you need your stronger drink?” I offered.

“No, actually. I think I’m good.” He led me to a round table and pulled a chair out for me to sit in. So thoughtful, my mate. He gave my shoulder a light squeeze, sending sparks through my skin, before leaving me to open a white door that revealed a storage space within. Cory looked over the door at me. “Uh, are you a meat-eater, vegetarian, something else? I’m sorry, I don’t remember very much about nautiluses... nautili ? Although, you aren’t a typical nautilus, anyway and I know absolutely nothing about, well, sea shifters. Shit, any shifters. I always thought they were myths.”

“Myths often come from reality. Like me. Here I am.”

Cory met my gaze once more, an awed expression on his face. We stared at each other until his cheeks warmed and his eyes shifted away. “To answer your question, in my shelled form, I am a scavenger, but in this body, I haven’t tried too many different things. Fruits, mostly. Oh, and something called a coconut. Have you ever had one? I quite enjoyed them. As for anything else, I have a strong stomach and I’m open to trying new things.”

Cory coughed and laughed at the same time. “Good to know. Maybe we’ll start simple with eggs and toast.”

“Okay.” I watched as he pulled things out of what he said was a fridge. A feeling of happiness filled me at the idea of him wanting to provide food for me. Even in a short time, Cory already wanted to protect and provide for me. The thought made me hum.

Cory sat across from me and put a dish in front of me. Steam rose from it, and I found it new and fascinating. Sniffing, I took in the aroma of cooked eggs. I’d never had anything cooked before. The scent made my stomach grumble with a hunger I wasn’t used to experiencing. Cory snickered at my reaction. “Go ahead, eat.”

I watched as he picked up a pronged utensil and pushed it into the fluffy, yellow food, and I copied his motions. I held the bite in my mouth for a moment, focusing on its taste and texture. The eggs were savory and mellow, soft and silky, with a hint of saltiness. It was a new experience in every way. Cory seemed to be eagerly awaiting my reaction. When I swallowed at last, it left a pleasant taste behind, and a groan of appreciation left me. Cory grinned and stared at me with fascination .

“Dude, that's wild. It really is new to you, isn't it? I'm still trying to wrap my head around it all. You can actually change forms? Shell and everything?”

I was grateful he was taking to the idea so well. From what I'd heard about humans, they didn't often respond well to the unfamiliar, but my mate already accepted me and

was curious to know more. The thought made me happy, except... the mention of my shell made that light feeling fall.

He must have noticed a change in my expression and rushed to speak. "Ah, fuck, I'm sorry. Am I being too pushy? I don't mean to be. This is all just so...well, it's a lot. If you're not comfortable talking about anything, you just have to tell me, okay?"

I reached across the table, sliding my fingers over his. I didn't mean to make him feel bad. It was simply ingrained into us that revealing our secrets and our vulnerabilities to humans was dangerous. It was different with him, though. An instinct deep within told me I could trust him. I did, I had. He was my mate, but I didn't want to disappoint him, either.

"No, Cory. I appreciate you asking. I like that you want to know me more. The answer is difficult, not the question. Yes, I do change. I have three different forms I can take. My human form, as you see me now. My hybrid form, as I was when I helped you after your fall. It allows me to be my full size, but I can also utilize some of the advantages my kind have: breathing underwater, propelling quickly through the ocean, and being able to sense my surroundings more clearly. I am also stronger in that form."

He listened and nodded, seemingly unbothered by what I told him. "And your third form?"

I drew a deep breath and expelled it. "It is as I said. I am a nautilus. A full nautilus. My size decreases, my body morphs, and I retreat into my...shell."

I paused for a moment, trying to embolden myself to share something I'd never shared. "You wouldn't be able to tell me apart from other nautili except for my size. My kind aren't as big as our ancestors were, but far bigger than simple creatures."

"I doubt that," Cory interjected.

"What do you mean?"

His fingers squeezed mine. "I think I would be able to tell, size difference or not. There's something about you. I might not know any of your kind, but I think I would know you. Maybe it's because of what happened in the past. I don't know, I can feel it." He gave me a sweet smile, making me warm all over. Could he feel the connection between us, too? Did humans sense their mates as we did?

"I think you're special too, Cory. Not that I know other humans." It wouldn't matter if I did, though.

"So how big is it? Your shell." Cory asked.

I pursed my lips, trying to think of how to describe it, but I decided the easiest way was visually. Pulling my hand away from his, I held them chest-width apart. I was much smaller than Cory, my frame more lean and petite. It probably would have been about half the breadth of Cory's broad chest.

His eyes rounded. "And you can fit inside of that?"

I nodded once. "Yes, it's quite comfortable. I enjoy the tight space because it makes me feel safe."

"So how does that work, exactly? Is your shell a part of you? Does it generate somehow when you want it to?"

"Hmm. It's a part of me in the way your boat..."

"Kayak," Cory corrected. "Sorry, continue."

“Yes, kayak. The way it is a part of you when you move through the water. As one, though not fused together. My shell doesn’t grow from me. It has always been what it is, a shell. It doesn’t change with me.”

Cory’s brows pinched together, looking sweetly puzzled. “So...where does it go when you’re in your hybrid or human forms, because...you definitely didn’t have it with you on the beach?”

I bit my lip and shifted my eyes. “I try to put it somewhere safe so I can return to it. I don’t normally stray this far from it.”

Cory’s arched brows fell. “Oh. I didn’t know.”

“Of course. There's no way you could know.”

“Is it somewhere safe now? Do we need to get you back to the beach? ”

A part of me wanted to scream, ‘Yes! Immediately.’ but a bigger part knew I couldn't leave yet, couldn't leave him. It was worrisome to be so far from it, but Cory lit me up in the way I'd always dreamed, and we had hardly touched. I couldn't give that up so soon. Determination had me shaking my head.

“No. I'm not ready to leave yet if that's all right?”

Cory squeezed my hand. “Yeah, yes, of course. I’m not ready for you to leave either, but I want to respect your needs.”

“Thank you, Cory. You have been. You've been very kind.” I rubbed my thumb across the back of his hand, enjoying the rough texture. What would his hands feel like on my body? I wanted nothing more than to know the answer to that.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:38 am*

We chatted over our breakfast. The man across from me, who you would never be able to guess was anything but human, told me about his shelled form . It was so hard to fathom, but I would love to see it, to see him, with my own eyes. Him . Fuck, I needed something to call him, and he was trusting me to pick out a name. It was a huge responsibility and names were so personal. I racked my brain, trying to think of something for him.

He was too unique, too incredible to be a Gary, Dylan, Bob, or Steve. He was beautiful. His brown hair was such a lovely contrast to his fair skin. What would he look like in his hybrid form? I had a faint recollection of his touch underwater, but all I could see was his face and the brown hair flowing around him with the motion of the ocean. No, certainly not a Michael or John, either .

“I migrate at different times of the year. With the cooler waters along the coast in the winter, this area has been a part of my annual migration for a long time now, but particularly in the last eight years.” He lifted his face to look at me with those big, beautiful brown eyes and wore a soft smile.

Eight years . Since my accident. He said he’d been searching for someone and he found him. Found me. With all the places he could go, the oceans he could explore, he chose to come back here every winter... looking for me. It was a bit of a mind-fuck, to be honest, but a good one.

What would it be like, though? To get to see places most people never would? Sure, there were submarines and equipment that could be used to observe and learn more about the depths below, but this person across from me had seen it, lived it, without any tools, just as himself. He was an utter marvel.



My eyes went wide as a story came to mind. I slammed my hand on the table, making him jump. “I’ve got it!”

The beauty across from me leaned forward slightly, though I could see the surprise still etched in his face. “You got what?”

“A name! I think I found a name for you.”

His eyes twinkled with excitement. “Oh? And what will you call me, Cory?”

I sucked on my teeth, second-guessing myself. “I don’t know. This might seem silly.”

He scooted his chair closer to mine and looked up at me. “I don’t think it could be silly if you picked it.”

God, he was so trusting of me, and I wanted so badly to be worthy of the way he looked at me. “Well, there’s this story, a book. It’s old—like almost two hundred years old. It was about a man with a submarine, you know, a ship that can dive deep into the water?”

“Yes, I’ve seen them.” He tilted his head as he listened.

“Well, his ship was called The Nautilus! Nautilus, like you! See? And this was a famous ship because it was written long before we had the technology for it, so it’s always had this sort of mysterious and exciting feel to it. Anyway, the captain of the ship was named Captain Nemo. Nautilus, Nemo, see?”

“Ne-mo?” He said the name carefully, and I felt foolish all over again. It should have been something I kept to myself, except now that I’d said it, I couldn’t think of any other name; they all simply fell out of my head, gone. What are names? Still, I didn’t

want him to feel stuck with something he didn't like.

"You don't have to use it if you don't like it. I can keep trying to think of something else."

He slid closer to me and turned in his chair until his knee brushed against my thigh. A playful grin stretched his lips. "Do you think I am mysterious and exciting, Cory? "

My gaze locked onto those lips, wishing I could taste them, to feel them against my own. I swallowed hard before lifting my eyes to meet his. "Yes. Very much so."

"I like it. Nemo. Ne-mo." He repeated the name a few times.

"Are you sure? We can change it."

He shook his head. "No. I don't want to change it. You gave it to me. It's a special gift, one that I am happy to receive. Thank you. Say it. Call me by my name."

"Thank you for trusting me, Nemo."

He made a soft hum in the back of his throat and he looked thoroughly pleased. It was his name. Now that it was out there, I couldn't think of anything else that would fit. It was small and cute, just like him.

Unable to hold back from touching him any longer, I reached out and cupped his cheek. His eyes closed, and he leaned his head into my hand. Fuck, he looked so damn beautiful in that relaxed pose that I simply couldn't resist.

I leaned toward him and brushed my lips across his. Nemo drew in a soft gasp and his eyes flew open. I moved back to put distance between us. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

Nemo shook his head frantically. “No. Don’t be sorry. You surprised me, but I would very much like to do that again.”

“Oh? Are you sure? ”

He leaned closer to me and tilted his head back, inviting me with those luscious lips. An invite I couldn’t refuse. I bent over him and lightly kissed him, waiting to see how he would respond. Nemo made that light humming sound again, making my body heat and my cock swell. I pressed deeper, moving my mouth over his, and he began to copy the motion, pushing against me in the same way. His light hum turned into a loud moan that was sexy as hell. I teased his lips with my tongue until he opened his mouth, and I explored it. He tasted like the ocean in a way that was nostalgic and new all at once.

When my tongue swept over his, the sensation had us both moaning. He opened his mouth wider, as if he wanted to swallow me, and I dove in, needing to get deeper, to crawl inside of him. My hands went around his waist, lifting him and pulling him to my lap. He came easily, letting me move his slight form. My arms folded around his back, and he felt so fucking perfect in my grip.

I hadn’t meant to get this carried away. A simple kiss was all I’d done at first. But he was intoxicating, and so very eager. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I recognized I should slow things down for him. If everything in the human world was new to him, was this too? My dick throbbed in my pants, loving the weight of him on me. My two heads were in battle, and luckily, the smarter one was just loud enough to give me pause. I ended the kiss and rested my forehead on his .

We both were breathing hard, and all I could think of was the fact that his ass was on my cock, and his own hard dick was pressed between our bellies. “Fuck! I’m sorry, Nemo. I got carried away. I didn’t mean for it to go so far.”

He answered by kissing me and when his own tongue pushed into my mouth, I couldn't stop the loud groan that came out of me. I wasn't certain if it was his first kiss, but damn, he was a quick learner. When I sucked on his tongue, imagining it was his cock, he gasped into my mouth and thrust his body against mine. I was going to fucking come in my pants like a teenager if we didn't stop.

I squeezed his arm lightly, and he pulled back. Nemo's eyes were hazy, and he grinned, looking blitzed out, and so incredibly hot like that. What would he look like if I fucked him into oblivion?

He threw his arms around my neck and stared up at me. "I'm not sorry, Cory. That was...I don't know. I've thought about it for so long, but have never experienced that in this form, and it felt incredible."

I bobbed my head. "It was incredible for me, too. Shit, you tasted amazing. It was hard to stop."

"We don't have to stop." He grinned playfully. He squirmed on my lap, rubbing against my cock. "You are so hard, Cory. You must be very stimulated."

I snorted and grabbed his hips to hold him still. "Nemo, please, you have to stop that."

He stuck his hand between us and grabbed his own cock through his white linen pants. "It's okay, I'm very stimulated, too. You make my body feel like it's on fire."

I watched as he rubbed himself, wishing it was my hand on him, and breathed in deeply, trying to keep control. "We should wait. We barely know each other."

"I may not know everything about you, but I know your heart. And you named me. A name is important, yes?"

I smiled and brushed my knuckles against his cheek. “Yes. It’s important. You do like it, though, right?”

He took my hand and kissed it. “Yes. I like it very much. Humans love celebrations, do they not? So, shouldn’t we mark this occasion? The day I became Nemo?”

I sighed, knowing I was helpless to resist him. It was so new and so fast and already he had sunk his hooks into me. Nemo. My Nemo. Dammit, I was so screwed.

He rubbed himself again. “Besides, it feels overwhelming, like I might combust if I don’t release the tension. If you don’t wish to help me, then I’ll do it myself.”

The slight whine in his voice was my undoing. As much as I would have enjoyed watching him, I wanted to be the one to do it.

“Fucking hell, Nemo.” I stood up, lifting him with me. “Come with me.”

His expression fell for a minute before I took my jacket and shirt off over my head and walked toward my bed. I felt his eyes on me as I unzipped my pants and let them fall down my legs. Nemo was frozen in place as he stared at the rigid outline in my boxer briefs and licked his lips. A move that made my cock pulse, imagining his soft lips around it.

When he didn’t move, I returned to him and kissed him once. “If we get our clothes out of the way, we can enjoy ourselves and not have to worry about them. How does that sound?”

Nemo’s eyes sparkled. “Oh, yes. I rather like that idea.”

This was too easy, not that I was complaining. In fact, the opposite. I didn’t wake up this morning thinking I would be taking a tiny little twink to bed, but neither did I

wake up thinking I would find the man whose face had lived in my dreams.

After helping him remove his shirt, Nemo leaned on me for balance and he stepped out of his pants. He was as naked as I'd found him earlier, only now I had permission to look without feeling pervy about it. He was stunning. Short, slim, and smooth all over, his cock hard and saluting. Absolute perfection.

“Wow, you are truly beautiful.”

He beamed. “Thank you. I think you are beautiful, Cory, but I would like to see your dick, too.”

I let out a laugh. He was so direct. Probably because he hadn't been raised in the human world where people tended to dance around the things they wanted. Nemo knew what he wanted and didn't have any problem saying so. It was refreshing, and perhaps a little amusing.

Happily obliging, I hooked my fingers into the waistband of my boxer briefs, pulling them down to let my cock free, and slid them down my legs, stepping out of them. The way he looked at me made me feel like a god, and damn, if that didn't turn me the fuck on.

His hand stretched out, nearly touching me, but I grabbed it and led him to the bed. “Let's lie down, little one. If we're going to do this, I want to do it right.”

Nemo looked up at me. “Oh? Is there a right way?”

I shook my head. “No. The only right way is that everyone involved is consenting and enjoying themselves, but I want to show you there is more to it than simply relieving the tension.”

I laid down on my side and patted the bed. Nemo climbed into the bed and lay beside me. I pushed him until he was flat on his back, and I hooked my bad knee over his to hold him in place. It was also an easier angle that didn't put pressure on it. I brushed his hair aside and leaned over him.

"If there's anything you don't like, you can tell me to stop and I will, understood?"

Nemo bobbed his head, eyes bright with eagerness. "I don't think there's anything you could do that I wouldn't like."

I leaned over and kissed his nose. "Still, you tell me, okay? "

"I will." His voice came out in a whisper as his attention was locked onto me, hovering above his face.

Those perfect, soft lips of his called to me, and I kissed him. Lightly at first, but then Nemo's hand went to the back of my head and pulled me closer, as he opened his mouth for me. Our tongues collided, just as intoxicating as it had been at the table. With our mouths locked together and the wonderful sounds coming from him, I let my hand trail down his neck, over his collarbone, down his arm. With each brush of my fingers, it added to the moans and gasps that came from him. I loved how responsive he was.

I pulled back, but didn't stop touching his skin. "Have you ever been touched in this form, Nemo?"

A quick shake of his head. "No. It feels incredible. Every sense is heightened like this and I want more. Don't stop, please."

He begged as if he'd been tortured, and I'd barely touched him yet. I couldn't wait to see how he would react to...further exploration. I continued kissing him and letting

my hand learn the landscape of his body, as I traced up his arm again and moved to his chest. When I circled his nipple, he gasped, making a smile stretch across my lips. I caught his cock twitching out of the corner of my eye, and as much as I was ready to take him in hand, I wanted to take my time.

“See...getting off isn’t always just about the deed itself. Sometimes, it’s about the build-up, too. About spending time together and learning what your partner likes. There is so much more to it than simply relieving the tension.”

“Yes. More. Can I touch you, too, Cory, please?”

“Yes. You can touch me anywhere you want.”

Our mouths met again, and I felt his hand slide over my hip. His touch was electric, hesitant at first, but then he gripped my side, and I hummed into him. We were all hands and tongues, and it felt amazing. He felt amazing. My cock ached, but I ignored it for now, wanting to savor his pleasure.

My fingers brushed beneath his belly button, and I felt his cock jump, his head brushing against my hand, leaving a streak of wetness behind. He let out a squeak in surprise, one that I swallowed.

Where there would normally be a nest of curls, he was smooth and soft, and it was strangely exciting. I traced around the base of his cock, making him moan in desperation as his hips thrust, trying to get my attention.

I lifted my head up to look at him, loving how glazed over his brown eyes seemed. “Do you want me to continue?”

“I think if you don’t, I might die.”



I snorted and kissed his nose again. “I can’t have that.”

Wrapping my hand around his cock, Nemo grabbed my shoulder tight, and his body went tense. “Oh! Oh my! That feels much different from my own hand. ”

My lips quirked to the side in amusement. “Good different or bad different?”

“Good, so good. I feel like I’m going to rip apart.” His airy words came in a panicked tone.

“Hang in there, just a little longer.” I kissed him again and slowly stroked up his shaft. He drew in a deep breath and clung to me as if I was the only thing keeping him afloat. Again, I pumped up and down. Nemo was so hard, I knew he was riding the edge and about to tip over it. His reaction and feeling him in my hand was pushing me right along with him. I rolled my hips toward him until my cock rubbed against his hip.

I no longer kissed him and simply watched his face contort with pleasure, loving all the sounds that huffed from him. Another couple strokes, and he erupted in my hand, coating us both in his release.

Nemo’s body was stiff, and his mouth hung open in an O as his chest heaved, trying to catch his breath.

“Shh. It’s okay. Just breathe. You’re okay.” I pumped my hand slowly once more before releasing my grip on him. I was nearly there myself, but right now I was too enraptured by the beauty at my side, looking so completely and beautifully mind-blown and blitzed out. His mouth relaxed, and I pressed a soft kiss on it.

Sliding my leg off his, I laid down beside him, taking in the view. Absolutely breathtaking. Nemo let out a long sigh before turning to face me and sliding his body

closer to mine. He wore a half-smile on his face and his eyelids looked heavy, bliss taking him over.

“Are you glad we prolonged it?”

“Mmm.” He nuzzled his head closer, tucking it beneath my chin. “Yes. It was far better than when I do it myself. I didn’t know it could be like that.”

“Yes. There’s a lot more to try, too. But not now. Now you can just rest.”

I tucked an arm under his neck and held him to me. “I want to make you feel like that, too, Cory.”

“Don’t worry about me. Bringing you pleasure was very enjoyable. Happy Name Day, Nemo.” I kissed the top of his head.

“Thank you for naming me.” He let out a yawn. When he spoke again, his words came out in a hushed tone, and I could practically feel his smile against my throat. “I’m so lucky to have such a caring mate.”

I felt his body relax against mine and his breathing slow. We were both sticky, but I didn’t care. We could clean up later. Right now, I couldn’t imagine anything greater in the world than holding him in my arms and how perfect he felt. Now that I had him, I never wanted to let go.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:38 am*

The times I had played with this body had left me satisfied for a while, but waking in Cory's arms, smelling him, smelling me, it had my body aching anew all over again. I pushed myself against him, rutting my hard length into his side. The need to be close to him was as overwhelming as it was thrilling. I needed him. Needed . My life depended on it.

Cory stretched and squeezed me to him as a sleepy laugh sounded. "I guess you're awake, then, huh?"

"Yes. Everything is awake. You make every cell in my body spark to life."

He faced me and the most beautiful smile stretched on his lips. Seeing his scruffy blond hair on his face, my hand went to my own cheek, which had been rubbed raw by him before we slept. The scratching sensation was exhilarating. Nearly as much as his tongue in my mouth or his hand on my dick. Deciding I needed to feel it again, I pushed up on my elbows and leaned over him. His lips parted with anticipation, but instead of kissing them, I rubbed my cheek against his, loving the sound and feel of it.

He chuckled. "What are you doing?"

I did it again. "Your facial hair is exciting. I like it scratching my skin."

"You know...it might feel good on other areas of your body, too."

I wasn't sure specifically what areas he meant, but I was very open to discovering them. Not this time, though. As much as I needed to get off— as Cory had called it

— I wanted to know what he would look and sound like if I brought him to completion.

“Not right now. I’d like to explore you this time.” I kissed his nose as he did to me earlier. I’d found it a rather sweet action, less intense than kissing on the mouth, but it made me happy all the same.

“I don’t expect you to, Nemo. I don’t want you to feel obligated.”

I shook my head. “Oh, no, Cory. There is no obligation. I have been wanting to touch you since you first let me feel your hand on the beach. This is not something I feel I have to do, but have been hungry to do so.”

“Then who am I to stop you from satisfying your hunger?” Cory shrugged and folded his arms behind his head, giving me access to his entire body. A body that intrigued me. He had hair on his chest, and enticing bushels under his arms, revealed like little treasures hidden in the reef. I liked his hair, it was so different from my own body. It excited my senses, and I longed to feel it with my cirri. Would he like that? He’d been wonderful about everything so far, but would he really be accepting of that part of me?

I braced myself above him. “Can I...try something?”

“Sure, little one. Whatever you want.”

“I’d like to feel you with my tentacles.”

His eyes rounded for a moment and a splash of pink colored his tan skin. He cleared his throat and nodded once. “With your cirri, you mean?”

“Yes, my cirri. I thought tentacles might be a more familiar term for you in this

situation.”

He snorted with amusement. “Nothing about this situation and tentacles are familiar, but I’d like to know you in whatever way you want to share with me, cirri and all.”

An excited thrum rushed through me, and I bent over him and kissed his lips. While the kiss deepened, I called to the part of me that was hidden away, releasing a few of my cirri, but holding back from letting them all out. I didn’t want to overwhelm him. My cirri did as they always do, flicking and switching around, sensing my environment, sending messages through the vibrations and surfaces that they encountered .

I didn’t have control over every movement from them, but with how intent I was to learn Cory’s body, they seemed to be on the same page. A few thin cirri slid over his chest, the hairs exciting the nerves. It was strange feeling him with my hands, and having a cirrus–drawn map in my mind of the geography of his body, like getting a tactile and visual description all at once.

Cory flinched when one first crossed his nipple. I stopped kissing to lean back and watch his face. “Is it okay?”

“Uh, yeah. Tickles a little. I want to see.”

I was elated it hadn’t frightened him, even more so that he wanted to see this part of me. I moved off him and he sat up, leaning against the wall. Sitting on my knees beside him, I touched his chest with my hand and waited to be sure he was ready. He inhaled deeply and indicated with his head for me to continue.

With my hand in place, I released a few of my cirri. He gasped at the sight of the thin tendrils that snaked out of my skin. Cory grabbed my hand and squeezed it, trying to keep from panicking as the cirri flicked over his skin.

“Holy shit! Those are real. This is really happening.”

“This is real, but I can stop if you don’t like it.” I didn’t want to, but I wanted him to have the same offer he’d given me, and for him to feel safe with me.

“I’m okay. Don’t stop. It’s just...shit, it’s real. ”

Despite his words, I saw his erect dick buck, making me smile. Clearly, it didn’t bother him, perhaps even excited him. My cirri were spurred on by the thought, and a couple of them played over his nipple. When he gasped and his hips lifted from the bed, they seemed to respond to that as well.

I could produce a type of secretion in several of my cirri which allowed me to grip things in the water. Loving how he reacted to his nipple being touched, I encouraged the production of the tacky substance, and when one of the cirri latched onto his nipple, holding tight to it, he moaned loudly.

“Oh, fuck!” He watched in fascination as it worked along the peaked point, sucking and gripping it. At the same time, I noticed a pearl of liquid at the tip of his cock head. My cirri were enjoying all the rumbling sensations, but I was itching to touch the rest of him with my human hands.

As another cirrus worked his other nipple, I reached down and gripped around his cock. My fingers were much smaller than his, the fingertips barely touching around his girth. The velvety skin was so different from his hairy body, but it felt incredible. I squeezed and stroked my hand up.

“Okay?” I asked before I got lost in the action.

“Yes, shit! Keep going!”

The pleasure my cirri wrung from his nipples hummed in my mind, making my own cock ache as if it were happening to me. I continued to stroke him, watching as he surrendered to my cirri and my hand. To both parts of me. It was vulnerable to be exposed in this way; however Cory not only enjoying it but accepting all of me made my heart bounce as much as my dick. I kept going, stroking him, teasing him, loving the way he grunted and groaned, and an occasional curse would sneak out of him.

When he had done it to me, it had been all kissing and slow, showing me every careful touch, treasuring me in a way that made me feel precious and beautiful. Seeing him like this was so astounding. I had a lot to learn about human intimacy, but right at that moment, I felt like I had something to share, too. I was desperate to kiss him, to swallow his sounds as he had mine, but I couldn't tear my eyes away from him. Watching my cirri on his skin and my hand slide along his cock were the most amazing things I'd ever beheld.

“Oh, God. I'm so close, Nemo.” Cory squeezed my knee and arched his back.

My cirri tightened their grip on his nipples and I pumped faster until I could feel the tension in him burst and warm streams shot out of him. It was a magnificent sight, one that made me feel stronger than I ever had, to cause such a reaction in a man twice my size.

The scent of him hit my nose, and practically had me salivating, wishing I could taste him. Instead, my cirri released from his nipples, which were red and swollen, and they slid through his release, giving me a subtle preview of what it would taste like on my tongue.

“Holy fuck!” Cory's head fell back against the wall with a thud.

His exclamation made me even more proud. I leaned forward and kissed him. “Was that okay?”

Cory brushed his knuckles against my cheek. “That was more than okay. It was surprising and hot as hell, unlike anything I’ve experienced before. Your cirri...shit, Nemo, I didn’t expect that. How...uh, how many of them do you have?”

His curious tone made me laugh. “I have ninety.”

“Dude! Seriously?”

A grin stretched across my face. “Yes. We have a lot more than any other cephalopod. They are thinner and have grooves and ridges instead of suckers like octopi or squid. Different cirri do different things. In my shelled form, some are for eating and some are for procreation, but most work together as feelers, sending messages to my brain when my vision is low underwater.”

“That’s...a lot.” I dipped my head in confirmation. “So you can control what each one is doing?”

“Not entirely. They function based on instinct, but can be guided by my thoughts. I can call them out whenever I want, but what they do when they are out isn’t always controlled.”

“Incredible,” he said with awe.

“So you liked them?”

“Yes, Nemo, I did.”

I leaned in close and echoed what he’d said earlier, “You know, they might feel good in other areas, too.”

“Fucking hell,” Cory hissed, and his hand went over his nipple. His blue eyes



darkened, making me think the idea excited him. “We should probably clean up. As amazing as this was, I really hadn't intended to end up in bed right away. If we don't get up now, I'm not going to want to, and I don't want it to seem like this is just about sex.”

“It's about the build-up, too, right?” I supplied, remembering what he'd said earlier about it being more than relieving tension.

He chuckled. “I suppose that's one way to look at it.”

Cory got out of bed and motioned for me to follow. He led me to a small room and explained the functions of the sink, toilet, and bathtub, which also doubled as a shower. When he turned the shower on, I watched the personal rainstorm with fascination. I'd heard about indoor water, but seeing it for the first time was remarkable. Humans were responsible for great destruction and pollution, but perhaps some of their technology wasn't all bad.

I reached out, putting my hand under the water, but when I felt it, I yanked my hand back in surprise.

“What's wrong?” Cory asked.

“It's hot. ”

He pursed his lips, and his eyes twinkled with amusement. “Yes. It can be hot or cold or anywhere in between. Is it too hot?”

Knowing what to expect this time, I slowly put my hand under the stream again. “I'm not sure. I'm used to cold water—the colder the better—but that's usually in my hybrid or shelled forms, not like this.”

Cory stepped into the tub and the water flowed over his skin. “We can turn it down if you need to, but you’re welcome to join me and see if you like it.”

He looked beautiful wet, his blond hair slicked back, the hair on his chest matted down—lovely. I followed the rivulets of water as they slid down his body, looking delicious. My eyes lingered on his cock, which thickened under my attention.

“I thought we weren’t going to have sex again.”

“We’re not. Not yet, but I can’t help the reaction I have with you staring at me like that.”

“Hmm. I like knowing that I excite you, Cory.” With a simple look, I was able to get him hard again. It was a powerful feeling.

“You definitely do.” He met my gaze, and we shared a smile. Cory held out a hand to me and I took it, stepping carefully into the tub with him. I flinched when the water first hit my chest, prepared to hate it, but I didn’t. In my human form, with different senses, it felt rather nice, actually .

I stepped closer until I was chest-to-chest with Cory. He leaned down and gave me a quick kiss before turning us, so I was more fully under the water. A sigh released from me when it covered my head, making me feel warm all over. It was strange but surprisingly relaxing.

Cory grabbed a bottle off a shelf and poured some of its contents into his hand. “Can I wash your hair?”

“Yes.” The answer was automatic, even though it wasn’t something I’d ever done. I didn’t know what to expect or what was needed, but I would let Cory do anything he wanted to me. Washing wasn’t something I’d had to worry about; I simply shifted

into my nautilus form and the ocean took care of the rest.

Cory turned me again, so my back was to him, but he pulled me out of the water enough so it wasn't splashing in my face. He took some of the liquid in his hands and began smoothing it through my hair. He worked his fingers in the strands and rubbed until the liquid turned to foam, massaging my scalp, and it felt... absolutely wonderful. I leaned back against his chest and closed my eyes, lost in his touch. It wasn't erotic. It didn't make me feel needy or like I was about to explode as his touching had earlier. Instead, it made me feel cared for. My mate took such sweet care of me. It was a feeling I'd been seeking my entire life. I sighed softly.

"Feel nice?"

"Mmm." It was all I could say as I felt my body melt against his.

"Can I wash the rest of you, too?" Cory whispered in my ear.

"That sounds nice," I replied dreamily.

Before I knew it, Cory's hands roamed over my entire body. Yes, my dick was hard, but it wasn't my focus, surprisingly. It was the soapy touch, the way it made me feel valued. After he was done, Cory helped me rinse the shampoo out of my hair and I watched as the bubbles slid off my body and down the drain. When he was done, I leaned against his chest and wrapped my arms around his waist.

"I think I like showers."

Cory huffed a light laugh and kissed the top of my wet head. "I do, too. Especially with you. You are so beautiful, Nemo."

I smiled against his chest, feeling happier than I ever imagined. Knowing how good it

felt, I wanted to do the same for Cory. “Can I wash you now?”

“Sure thing, little one. But first...” He tilted my chin up and caught my lips in a kiss. It wasn’t hungry or devouring as some of our kisses had been. It was light and sweet, just as the rest of this moment had been.

I tried to do everything he’d done, though Cory was much taller than me, so he had to lean down so I could wash his hair. I wasn’t as smooth at washing the rest of him, but he didn’t seem to mind, looking truly content and happy as my soapy hands roamed over him. When I got to his knee, I noticed several white ragged marks on it and traced them with my finger.

“Those are scars from my accident and the surgeries that followed.”

I stared up at him. “Oh? From when I found you?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

I stood before him and my lips turned down. “I’m sorry I couldn’t keep you from getting hurt.”

Cory brushed his knuckles against my cheek. “Don’t be. Don’t ever be sorry for that. It’s my own fault I got hurt. I was being reckless. But if you hadn’t shown up when you did, I don’t think I’d be here today. You saved me, Nemo. You’re a saint, an angel. I owe you so much.”

“You don’t owe me anything. Being here is gift enough. I’ve thought of you every day since then, and now we’re finally together.”

“Damn, I feel so lucky. I’ve thought of you since then, too. People tried to tell me you weren’t real, that I’d imagined the whole thing, but I knew you had to be.”

I stepped closer to him. “I’m real, Cory.”

His arms went around me, and he kissed me again, harder this time. I was loving all the different kisses. So many ways for our mouths to express feelings without words .

When he pulled away, my mind returned to the scars on his knee. I’d noticed his gait was sometimes stilted. “Does it hurt still?”

Cory nodded. He turned the water off and stepped out of the tub, careful with how he placed his foot, ensuring it would hold him. It was a small movement, one I recognized from my own unsteady feet. He grabbed a fluffy fabric and wrapped it around me, drying off the water.

“Yes. At times more than others. There are some things I simply can’t do anymore, like surfing, which is why I use the kayak now. I don’t think it will ever not bother me, but it’s a hundred times better than it used to be. For a while after the accident, I wasn’t sure I would be able to walk on it again. So the pain is a nuisance, but it’s also a reminder that I lived.”

“I’m very glad you did. Though, I am sorry to know that it bothers you. If there’s any way I can help, let me know.”

He brushed my hair away from my face and kissed me once more. “You’re doing it already.”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:38 am*

I was such a goner. It had only been a few hours, and already Nemo had carved a place into my heart. Though a part of him had always been there, his face had lived in my dreams. It was ridiculous, this whole thing was ridiculous, but his complete and utter trust in me stirred this caregiver side of myself I didn't realize was there.

I didn't know if it was his size, his directness, or that he'd been there for me when I needed it most years ago, but I had this deep need to do whatever I could to protect him. Love at first sight? Before my accident, I would have laughed it off, but I couldn't deny the connection I felt with him. Perhaps it was a bit of hero worship, or it could be those big brown eyes that looked at me with such awe, making me feel as if I was the one being worshipped. I didn't know, but I was addicted already .

Grabbing another towel from under the counter, I scuffed it through my hair before drying off the rest of my body. I glanced up to see Nemo watching me, making my body feel warmer than it had under the hot water. We needed clothes. Fast. He was too open, too free, which was fantastic, but I needed to keep the blood flowing to the right head, so I could think clearly.

I was half-tempted to give Nemo something of mine to wear just to see it hang big on his slight form, but he seemed to be texture-sensitive, and I knew he liked the clothes he'd gotten from my shop, so those would have to do for now. Not that I really minded, since he looked fucking hot in the crop top and linen pants. Crop tops were my kryptonite. I wore them plenty in my surfer days, loving the way they caught the eye of others on the beach. But I'd grown out of my twink phase. I wasn't quite in my dad-bod era, but the time in rehab had changed the contours of my body. Of course, growing older and hitting thirty might have played a role, too. I knew I could still sport a crop top if I wanted to, but I found looking at them much more appealing now

than wearing them.

I gathered Nemo's clothes and brought them to him. He smiled his gratitude and dressed on his own. As I was about to find some jeans for myself to wear, a knock sounded on the door. A very impatient knock. Nemo's eyes widened, and he looked frightened. We'd been so caught up in each other that it was easy to forget the world outside, and that so much of it was new to him.

"It's all right. It's just someone here for a visit." I winked at him and headed to the door with my towel wrapped around my waist.

When I opened the door, my grandfather came stomping in, without even a hello. "Where the hell have you been? Johnny called me because he said you closed your shop and left without saying a word to anyone. He was worried about you. I've been calling and texting, and you couldn't even bother to answer. You're not supposed to haunt us. We had a deal."

My grandfather stood with his arms folded over his chest, his eyes catching my near-nakedness. I folded my arms in a matching stance, trying to cover myself up. "Haunt? What are you talking about?"

"You know, when someone doesn't call you back?"

I laughed. "Oh, you mean ghost, like you've been ghosted."

"Yes. That. You are not supposed to ghost me."

Well, now I felt like an asshole. It was our deal. I'd texted him again earlier to say I was done on the water, but he was tight with a lot of the older folks on the boardwalk. Johnny ran the fish and chips place but was usually open for breakfast during the winter. Of course, I should have realized someone would notice me leaving or that

my shop was closed .

“I’m sorry, Gramps. I didn’t mean to ghost you. I was a little...distracted.”

“What could have possibly distracted you so much that you couldn’t even send a quick text?”

Nemo walked out of the bathroom, thankfully dressed. “Is everything okay, Cory?”

I couldn’t stop the way my lips tilted up at his worried yet determined expression, looking as if he was ready to protect me, even as uncertain as he was.

“ Ahhhh . I see. So you must be the distraction.” My grandfather smirked, and I felt my cheeks grow warm. It couldn’t be more obvious, with me in a towel and Nemo’s hair still wet, that we’d likely been in the shower together. He held out his hand to Nemo. “Hi, I’m Woody, Cory’s grandfather.”

Nemo stared at the offered hand and held his own straight out, leaving a space between them. I bit my cheeks to hold in the grin that fought to stretch as my grandfather arched his brow and closed the distance, squeezing his hand and shaking it.

“It’s nice to meet Cory’s elder. You look very similar, though your face has a lot more lines on it. Are they scars, too?”

I snickered as Gramps shook his head. “No, not scars, wrinkles. Wrinkles are a sign of wisdom.”

“Oh. You must be very wise then. ”

I barked out a laugh before tugging Nemo to my side and kissing the top of his head.



My grandfather's eyes held a hint of amusement before he straightened and held his head higher. "Yes. I am. And who might you be?"

"Gramps, this is Nemo. He's a...friend."

"Friend, huh? Since when? I've never heard him mention you before?"

"Cory didn't know my name before today," Nemo said, beaming with pride. God, he was so fucking adorable.

My grandfather turned toward me with a half smile. "Is that so?"

He wasn't judgmental and had always been supportive. In fact, I'd gotten way too in-depth of safety lectures from him, since sex had never been a comfortable topic with my parents. Not that it was comfortable with him, either, but it sure was thorough.

"Yes. He found me on the beach today. I was naked, but he was nice enough to give me clothes."

Gramps coughed on a laugh and leveled a stare at me. "You brought home a naked stranger from the beach?"

I really didn't know how to respond because that was exactly what I'd done, so I simply shrugged. Except Nemo wasn't a stranger, not entirely, but there was no way to explain that.

My grandfather burst out laughing, shaking his head. "All right. Well, it's good to see you're alive. Just maybe try to remember to at least send a text next time, so I don't have to think about you lying dead somewhere."

"I will. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you worry."

It might have been a little over-protective, but I wasn't the only one who'd been hurt by my accident. Physically, yes, that was all me, but I knew it had been really hard on my family, too. My mom didn't bother me as much as long as she knew I stayed in touch with Gramps. Communication with him was non-negotiable.

“Good. Now, your Nemo, here? Is this a one-time thing, or is he going to be around for a while?” My grandfather asked.

I looked down at the petite man at my side, who gazed back at me with a longing expression. It held a hint of worry, too. Worry about us? I didn't know what would happen with him, but I couldn't imagine letting him walk, or swim, out of my life now. “I hope he'll be around for a while.”

Nemo gave me a slight smile. My grandfather clapped his hands, drawing our attention away from each other. “Excellent. Then you'll join us for Christmas Eve dinner, won't you?”

“Oh? For your holiday? That is a special event, is it not?” Nemo asked.

“Yes, it is.”

Nemo bobbed his head excitedly. “Yes. I would very much like that, thank you, Cory's grandfather. ”

My grandpa smiled warmly, clearly won over by the man as much as I had been, well, maybe not as much , but I was happy to see him received well by someone whose opinion meant more to me than anyone else.

“Well, I guess I'd better let you two get back to whatever it is you were doing.”

“It's okay, we aren't having any more sex right now. Cory said we have to wait.”

My cheeks flared hot, even as I couldn't stop the grin. I might have to have a discussion with Nemo about the difference between private and public information. Luckily, my grandfather just laughed and waved goodbye before closing the door behind him.

I pulled Nemo into my arms and kissed him hard. He really was something else. And now I didn't have to hide him either, not that I'd planned to. In fact, my grandfather was the furthest thing from my mind when it came to Nemo. Now it was out there, and he would be joining us for our traditional Christmas Eve dinner. Already, I could picture him with my family. Something I'd never been able to do with other guys I'd been with. There was just something about Nemo that had him fitting right into my life as if he always was meant to be there.

"I like your elder, Cory. He seems very nice."

"He is. He's a really important part of my life."

"And you introduced me, like you said you would, with my name and everything. I'm so happy you named me." Nemo pushed up on his toes until our mouths met, and he played his tongue over mine. Fuck, this man had me wrapped around his fingers... and cirri.

When he settled back down on the flats of his feet, I brushed his hair aside. "Is there anything you want to see or do today? Whatever it is, I'm happy to take you."

Nemo's eyes fell, and he stared between us. "I'm not entirely sure. Your home feels like a safe place in the middle of the human world. I don't know if I'm ready for anything else. And well..."

When he stopped talking and bent to rest his forehead against my chest, concern flared through me. I rubbed his back. "What? What is it?"

“Well, I don’t want to leave, because I like being with you very much, but I’d really like to get my shell. I’ve never been away from it for this long before.”

His shell. Shit, I’d completely forgotten. It was a big deal that he’d even come with me, knowing he was leaving it behind. I didn’t understand that when I first offered, but I did now, sort of. As much as I could understand based on my limited experience.

“Of course, little one. Let me get dressed, and I’ll take you back to the beach.”

Nemo pressed his cheek against my bare chest. “Thank you.”

The ride back was a quiet one. Nemo watched the sights through the windows again, and I was lost in my thoughts. His shell. What would happen when he got it? Would he want to retreat into it as he said he often did? Would he want to return to the sea to be in his nautilus form? Would he show me that part of him?

I had no right to feel a claim on him after mere hours. It was mid-afternoon, and I had only just found him that morning. It was completely unreasonable to feel such a weight at the idea of him leaving, but I couldn’t fathom knowing what I knew now about who and what he was and suddenly having to go back to a boring existence without a man with tentacles. I needed to say something, to let him know I wanted more time with him.

Though he had agreed to Christmas Eve, which was in five days. He might not know the calendar days, but he seemed thrilled about it. I really liked the idea of having him there. I even imagined him in my home on Christmas morning as we opened presents by the tree. A tree I didn’t have. Getting one suddenly felt like a top priority.

“I think I should get a Christmas tree,” I announced into the silence of the truck’s cab.

Nemo turned to face me and wore a sad smile. “I think that would be very nice.”

“Would you want to help me decorate it?”

His eyes lit up, and the worry on his face lessened. It was still there, beneath the surface, but seeing him respond positively made me feel better. “Yes, Cory. It would make me very happy to decorate it with you.”

“We’ll get your shell first, okay? Then you can help me pick out a tree.”

“An artificial one, right?”

“Yes. Artificial. And we might need some ornaments, too.”

He reached over to twine his fingers through my hand and continued watching out the window. After a few minutes, he spoke in a soft tone. “Did you know that many species of both land and marine origin have nesting instincts as a form of courtship?”

I’d heard about various birds doing so, trying to attract their mates with fancy nests. I hadn’t known there were marine animals that did it as well. Still, I liked the idea. Add some sparkle and flash to catch Nemo’s eye. I didn’t think I needed it, but I wanted to impress him all the same, and if I got to share some of my favorite holiday with him, all the better.

Before I got ahead of myself, I needed to see if he was anywhere near the same page as me. “Courtship? Is that something you’re interested in? With a human?”

Nemo looked over at me. “With another human? No. With you? Yes, I am quite interested. Though courtship isn’t necessary.”

I squeezed his hand and felt a grin tug at my lips. “Neither is the build-up before sex,

but it makes it more worthwhile, more meaningful. ”

Nemo made a contented hum in the back of his throat. “You may court me, then, Cory.”

The grin broke free. “All right.”

The parking lot was full of cars by the time we returned to the beach. It was late enough in the day that the sun broke through the morning overcast and was warm enough to walk around comfortably in long sleeves or light jackets. Nemo, of course, was happy in his crop top, while I’d thrown a hoodie on.

I got out and hurried around to help him down, and his hand immediately returned to mine. I loved how easily touch came to him. There was no hesitation or concern, no worrying about who might see. Nemo’s hand felt so natural in mine that I didn’t care either. I didn’t usually, but I’d been with a couple of guys who, understandably, were unwilling to show any kind of public affection. It wasn’t what I wanted, though. I wanted someone who could fearlessly hold my hand or kiss me when we were swept away and the moment called for it. Nemo didn’t have any reason to know otherwise, which was refreshing in its own way. I vowed to myself to ensure he always felt safe to be himself.

“You said it was in Pirate’s Cove , right?”

“The cove beyond the rocks over there.” Nemo pointed to the rocky cliff that separated Pirate’s Cove from the main beach. We began walking toward the path that would lead us up to the top of the cliffs .

“When I was a kid, the cove was one of my favorite places at the beach. It always felt like a little magical world of our own, cut off from everything else. Of course, we would just climb the rocks instead of taking the path; it was part of the adventure to

get there. Once I took an interest in surfing, though, I didn't go as often, since the water tends to be calmer, the waves blocked by the rock wall. Sometimes, I would return to sit and ponder and appreciate the beauty, but I spent most of my time on the bigger beaches, following the waves."

Nemo gave a thoughtful hum. "I was drawn to it for the calmness and separation as well. It felt like a safe place to come on land."

"It is now, but it gets pretty busy when the weather is warmer. Unfortunately, a lot of other people know about our private world over here, too."

The path was a gentle slope, but as we neared the peak of the rocks, it was enough of an angle that I was starting to feel the twinge in my knee. An ever-present reminder that my rock-climbing days were over. In fact, it dawned on me that I hadn't been back to the cove since my accident.

At the top of the rocks, we reached the steep set of stairs that led down to the private beach. I exhaled heavily as I looked at them, and Nemo and I both said at the same time, " Stairs ."

I caught his eye, and we chuckled. "Not a fan either, huh? "

Nemo shook his head. "No, they are quite tedious. I am used to being able to ascend and descend with little to no effort in the water. Perhaps it will be easier this time since I've been in this form longer than usual and my legs are steadier."

"Well, I'll probably be slow going down, so you don't have to wait for me."

Nemo squeezed my hand before stepping in front of me to grasp the single rail. He looked over his shoulder at me. "We'll do it together."

I had to laugh at the determination on his face, as though we were about to conquer a much greater feat than a single flight of stairs. I gripped the rail tight, and we went down, one step at a time. The way I had to land on my bad leg, bring my other one down, and then lead again with the first leg made me feel like I was seventy instead of thirty, but my physical therapist would be proud. Up with the good, down with the bad. It had been said so many times during my time in rehab that it was now a mantra I repeated subconsciously.

Nemo walked just as carefully, though not as stilted as me, and we made our way down. It would have been laughable to see from the outside, but we cheered when our feet hit the sand at the bottom.

“All right, we made it.” I held my hand up, and Nemo looked at it, leaving me hanging. I chuckled and grabbed his hand and put it up, before clapping mine to it. “It’s called a high five. It’s used as a brief celebration.”

Nemo gave me a half-smile, but he turned away, his attention on one of the caves. It wasn’t quite high tide yet, but it was getting there. Depending on the time of year, the high tide could reach all the way to the rocks and the caves, but for now, it just lapped at the entrance of the low-roofed cave.

I’d spent a lot of time in those caves as a kid, feeling like the cove’s namesake. It was said that the cove was once used by smugglers, so maybe there had been pirates of sorts. It was funny how things seemed so big when you were a child. Looking at the cave now, I would have a really hard time getting into it, especially with a bad knee.

Nemo pushed up on his toes and gave me a quick kiss on the lips. “I’ll be right back.”

I had no choice but to wait there. It was beautiful, though, just as I remembered. Calm water, no one around. Seagulls sounded nearby. There were a few voices that drifted down from the lookout point above, but it still felt as magically isolated as it had



before. Why hadn't I been back?

The rocks? The stairs? Sure, it wasn't easy, but it was doable. I'd made it down here just fine. Slow, but here, nonetheless.

Nemo got down on his hands and knees and crawled into the cave. I smirked at the idea of him doing so completely naked. Thank God, no one had found him like that. It was a marvel he'd made it as far across the beach in the buff as he had. Well, fortunately, it had been early and cold.

I waited for Nemo to come back out. Waited several minutes. I didn't expect it to take this long. I heard shuffling, scraping sounds from within the cave. I hunched down and called out. "Everything okay in there?"

"I...I don't know." Nemo's voice had an edge of panic in it.

"What is it? What's going on?"

More scraping and sludging. The sound of wet sand plopping. "I can't...I can't find it."

The fear in his voice cut right into my heart. I didn't know what that would mean for him, but I knew his shell was important. Standing outside the cave, I felt completely helpless. I could try to go in, but I didn't think there would be room enough for both of us in there, and then I would feel more in the way than anything.

"Are you sure you have the right place? We passed a few other caves." I felt bad for even asking. He migrated across oceans, I imagined he had a fair amount of directional instinct.

"It was this one, I know it. I buried it here, and I've looked all around, and I can't

find it.” Nemo sounded like he was about to cry, making the pain in my heart dig deeper .

“Do you want me to come in?” I asked. I knew it wasn’t logical, but I would feel like a complete shit if I didn’t offer. I would do it, though. For him, I already felt like I would do pretty much anything.

“No. Stay there. I need...I need some time.” Nemo sniffed loud enough I could hear it over the laps of the water.

“I’m right here, Nemo. I’m not going anywhere.” Feeling useless, I leaned against the rocks and put my head in my hands.

After a long few minutes, Nemo crawled back out of the space. When he stood, his eyes looked vacant, and he didn’t move. I tugged him to me and wrapped my arms around him. He was frozen in my grip for a moment before I felt his body tremble and a pained sound escaped him.

“Shh. I’ve got you, sweetheart. It’s okay.” I whispered meaningless encouragement, because the truth was, I didn’t know if he would be okay. I didn’t know enough about him or his kind. My hoodie grew damp where his face pressed into it.

Nemo sniffed hard and mumbled something I couldn’t hear. I lifted his chin so his face wasn’t buried in my chest. His cheeks were streaked with tears, making me hurt for this man nearly as much as I had when my knee had been shattered. “What did you say? ”

“I...think...I’m...broken.” He sniffed between words before wiping a finger over his cheek. “I lost my shell and now the ocean is leaking from me.”

He looked so horrified by the tears, so na?ve, that I almost wanted to laugh, but I

couldn't, not when he was as devastated as he was. "No, sweetheart, you're not broken. Those are tears. It's a natural thing that happens when emotions, either good or bad, feel too big to stay inside. They come out as tears. Every human's tears are salty. It isn't the ocean."

"Nautili don't have big emotions. Not like this. I don't know if I like it."

I kissed the top of his head and rubbed his back. "I know. It can be hard. But it can be wonderful, too. I'm not saying it is right now—I know it's not—but there is good in it sometimes."

I mentally scolded myself. Now probably wasn't the best time for lessons on human-ness. Nemo clung to me, his hands gripping the back of my hoodie. "I lost my shell."

"I'm so sorry. What...what does that mean to you?" Was it something fatal? Would he die without it? I sent up a quick prayer to anyone who might be listening, because I couldn't stand the thought of losing him when I'd only just found him.

Another loud sniff. "I cannot return to the sea without it. "

I didn't know what to say to that. When I woke up in the hospital and was told they were doing everything they could to save my knee, the first thought I had was of surfing. The devastation of losing something that was a part of my daily life. Losing the sea felt like losing a limb. How much more so would it be for someone who lived in the ocean, not simply played in it?

"I'm sorry, Nemo. I'm so sorry." I continued rubbing his back, not sure what else to do but hold him.

"I don't know what to do," he said in a raspy whisper.

“Would you be able to sense it if it was nearby?”

Nemo pushed back from me and pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes, as if trying to dam the tears. When he let his hands fall, I reached out and used the sleeve of my hoodie to wipe away the remaining streaks on his cheeks.

“If I’m in the water, I can find it, like an invisible line I could follow to it. On land...I don’t know. I don’t have the same senses in my human form. Even in my hybrid form, the earth gives off very different vibrations than the sea. I’m not sure it would translate the messages sent to my brain in the same way.”

“Do you think it could be in the ocean? What if you change and go in the water?”

Nemo shifted his gaze to the calm water behind him. “I’m afraid of what will happen if I go in and I don’t feel it.”

“I’m right here. I won’t let anything happen to you. ”

“And if it confirms my shell is well and truly lost? What then?”

“I don’t know, little one, but whatever happens, you’re not alone. We’ll figure it out together.”

His small hand rested on my cheek. “Thank you. You are very kind, Cory.”

He turned and walked toward the water, removing his shirt along the way. At the edge of the water, he looked around before stepping out of his pants. Naked, he walked into the sea. I ran forward, splashing into the shallow water, and watched as he sank down into the water and several tendrils slapped against the surface. They were thin, snake-like, and there were more than I could count as he disappeared below the water. I would have been more intrigued if it weren’t for my heart lodged

in my throat.

Again, I was left waiting, feeling helpless, but this time Nemo returned much quicker. Much paler. His brown hair appeared above the water. He gave a subtle shake of his head before flopping down, his head resting on his folded arms in the foot-high water, with his face below the surface.

I hurried to him, scooping him up. He was still in his hybrid form, his cirri formed below his waist and flowed from him like ribbons of flesh from the lower half of his body. It was a wonder to see him like this. I'd only gotten a tease with a couple of cirri in bed earlier, but seeing all of them was entirely different, each one flicking and moving on their own. Otherworldly, perhaps, but completely remarkable.

Strangely, they all seemed to react to my touch as they draped over my arm. Some danced over my skin, as if tasting me. A couple found their way beneath the bottom of my hoodie, wrapping around my waist. That mucus-type fluid they produced earlier when they'd locked onto my nipples released from the tips of some now, and I felt them grip my back and my belly. Being touched in so many places at once might have been alarming if I hadn't been so concerned about Nemo. I didn't mind it, though. It almost felt as if they were all seeking any comfort I could provide.

Nemo rested his cheek against my chest. I didn't want to rush him, not while he was clearly trying to process the difficult news he'd had confirmed, but it was still daylight, and right now his cirri were on full display, beautiful and mysterious as they were. Anyone could come down those stairs or peer over the railing at the lookout point at any time. The last thing we needed was someone reporting the sighting or getting photos or videos. Nemo would never know peace again if he ended up on the internet.

I kissed the top of his head. "I'm sorry, little one, but I think you need to change back. There's no guarantee how long we'll be alone here."

“Yes. You’re right.” His voice sounded so much heavier than the light airiness it usually carried. From what I could see, his lower half was all cirri, no legs, so I couldn’t exactly stand him up. I lowered him to the sand and turned around to block him from view as much as possible, despite my curiosity to see his body transform.

It didn’t take long before he walked to my side, on two legs. I hugged him quickly before getting his clothes. Once he was dressed, he returned to my side, as if needing to stay as close to me as he could, much like his cirri, wrapping around my arm and waist.

“Why don’t we go back to my place and then we can figure out what to do next?”

He dipped his head, and I began moving toward the staircase. I hated to do it, but I had to let go of him in order to hold the railing for stabilization. Nemo moved like a zombie in front of me. Our ascension was much slower than when we came down the stairs.

When we reached the top, I pulled Nemo to me again. His arms hung at his side as he let me envelop him. “You can stay with me as long as you like.”

I had kind of assumed—or hoped—he would return with me anyway, but I needed him to know he wasn’t alone. He had somewhere to go, even if it wasn’t what he needed.

He let out a heavy breath and answered softly. “Thank you.”

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:38 am*

I let Cory guide me down the path, unsure if I would make it on my own. Silence hung heavy between us, and I could sense Cory hurting as I did. I'd been able to sense it through the connection when my cirri wrapped around him after he pulled me from the ocean.

When we reached the bottom of the path, Cory hesitated instead of leading me directly to his truck. I didn't really care, not when I felt like my world was crumbling beneath me. He offered for me to stay with him, and though my response had been brief, the offer was huge. Even now, he was protecting and providing for me in the best way he could. There wasn't anything he could do about my shell, just as I couldn't. Maybe I did care that we weren't on our way back to his home; it was at least one place that felt safe.

Cory sucked his teeth. "This is really bad timing and I'm sorry to bring it up, but do you think we should pick out a few more outfits for you to wear?"

I inhaled and ran my hands over my white pants and cast a glance back to the cove. There was no telling how long I would be stuck, maybe forever. Though, I'd been hoping to be with my mate forever, just not like this. Still, I probably would need some more clothes. "I suppose that would be wise."

Cory kissed my cheek and led me down the boardwalk to his shop. We had to stay to one side as people on various wheeled devices zipped past us. It was far more crowded than it had been earlier in the morning. Cory leaned down and whispered the name of each new thing we came across. Surreys, bicycles, skateboards, tandem bikes. Everyone was in a hurry to get places. The human world was very fast. In my current state, I felt slower than ever. I suppose it made sense that they would find

ways to move faster, as two legs were rather tedious. The earth did nothing to move people along, unlike the sea, where you could catch a current and it could take you hundreds of miles with no effort at all.

I clung to Cory tightly when a bicyclist zipped by us. “Is it always so busy?”

“A lot of times, yes. It’s one of those places where people like to go to get away from the city and enjoy the fresh air and the view. Right now, many folks are on a break from work and school because of the holidays. Like I said, you were lucky it was early and cold when you walked across the beach earlier.”

“I had to.” The words came out so softly, I wasn’t even sure if I’d said them.

Cory looked down at me. “Why?”

I met his gaze and offered the best smile I could, which, admittedly, wasn’t a strong one at the moment. But Cory... he was the bright spot in all of this. “You.”

“How did you know I was here?”

“I felt you. When your foot was in the water, I knew it was you. I could feel you like I would be able to feel my shell, but I had to be sure.”

Cory’s eyes gleamed. “So it was you, your cirri, that I felt when I put my hand in the water.”

My tight smile grew a little wider and my unfocused eyes became a little clearer. I found my mate. I had to remind myself. I had found my mate. “Yes. It was me.”

“I thought so, but it had been a weird morning, so I wasn’t sure if my mind was playing tricks on me. Now I know more of what your cirri feel like, the little tastes



and flick they do to explore.”

If I were in better spirits, I might have said something about them wanting to explore him more, but I wasn’t there yet. Although... thinking about feeling his whole body with each cirrus charting a map of him perked me up... a little .

Cory unlocked the padlock and slid the door open, turning the lights on so we could see. He pressed another kiss to my cheek and gave my arm a light squeeze. “Go pick out whatever you want. I just need to check a couple of things while we’re here.”

I went back to the rack of clothes I’d found earlier, feeling each material to decide if it was something I could tolerate on my skin, and ended up picking out a few sets identical to what I wore in different colors. As I walked across the shop with the bundle of clothes on my arm, a man rolled up to the open door and popped his skateboard up so he could grab the edge of it.

“Hey, man, are you open?”

Cory looked between him and me with hesitation. I knew we’d only stopped in because of me, but I didn’t want to be the reason Cory turned someone away. I gave a nod.

“Yeah, sure. Just give me a minute to get my computer running and I’ll be happy to help you.”

The man headed straight toward the cold drinks along the wall. I went to the counter to stay close to Cory. It was still new and a little unnerving to be so near another human. I supposed I would have to get used to it if I was going to be staying on land. The thought made my stomach sink. Cory was wonderful, and his grandfather seemed kind, but beyond that, I didn’t imagine I would feel comfortable connecting with other people .

Cory patted the seat beside him. “Sorry, I should have closed my door. I wasn’t thinking about how busy it is today. Have a seat here, and we’ll head home as soon as we can.”

“It’s all right. This is your job.”

He squeezed my shoulder and gave me a half-smile. His attention shifted away from me as the man approached the counter.

“Just the soda and chips today?”

“Yes, I was dying and didn’t want to have to buy a whole meal. You’re a lifesaver, thanks, man.” He handed over a plastic card, which Cory tapped on a device.

“No problem. Happy Holidays.” Cory handed the man the card back, and he took it along with the items he’d selected. I sat in silence, watching the exchange. It was surprisingly quick, with an unspoken understanding between the two, and then it was over.

“Thanks, man, you too.” He faced me and gave a little wave, which I mirrored, a little taken aback by the whole thing. Would I be expected to know how to read the words that weren’t spoken? If I were underwater, it would be completely natural, but up here, I couldn’t sense the vibrations or information being shared. I played the short conversation back, surprised Cory didn’t have more of a reaction to the serious statement the man had given.

I grabbed my mate’s arm and spoke in a hushed tone. “You saved his life, Cory. That man...you saved him. ”

Cory smirked and stroked my cheek. “I didn’t, little one. It was a figure of speech, an exaggeration of gratitude. Sometimes, people embellish situations for levity, humor,

connection, or as a way to emphasize what they feel. I would say even you have a knack for a little embellishment. I remember you quite clearly saying you would combust if you didn't come."

"It wasn't an embellishment," I said with a pout. The intensity of the pressure building in my body truly felt like it would undo me.

He chuckled and gave me a light kiss. "I adore you, Nemo."

I stared at him, feeling warm for the first time since I'd come out of the cave without my shell. The cold water didn't bother me, but a chill had filled every part of my body; feeling empty without my shell, my home. Except... Cory. His presence and adoration had started filling those empty spaces... a little.

"I adore you, too, Cory."

Our gazes were locked on the other until we were interrupted by the sound of shuffling feet and mumbled voices. More people had entered Cory's shop while we weren't looking.

Cory's expression changed from awe to apology. "Shit. Sorry. I hate to ask them to leave, so it'll just be a little longer."

"It's okay. I can wait."

One family turned into a few more who lingered long enough to look through the shop, checking out jewelry, clothes, and what Cory called souvenirs. It was much different from the first man who came in knowing exactly what he wanted. These people hadn't come with a specific goal, but instead seemed to enjoy their time in Cory's shop. There was laughter as they tried different things on, or appreciative comments when they found something that interested them. It was fascinating to

watch. More than anything, they seemed happy.

We stayed in his shop for another hour, and I closely observed each interaction, trying to study the way people communicated. A few greeted me as I sat beside Cory. Following his example, I even offered a ‘ Happy holidays ’ to some. They all smiled and responded the same. It was... pleasant, surprisingly. Maybe this human thing was easier than I expected.

Once the shop was clear, Cory shut everything down. “Come on, let’s get out of here before anyone else comes.”

With the clothes I’d picked out in a bag, he turned off the lights and locked the door behind us.

“Happy holidays,” I shouted out to a person who rode by on a bicycle. They waved and shouted it back. “I think I’m getting the hang of this human thing.”

Cory huffed out a laugh. “You’re doing great. Thank you for being so patient. I didn’t expect to have so many people stop in.”

“It was nice to watch you with them. You bring a lot of joy to your customers.” As much as I’d used the time to observe interactions, it was Cory who held my attention more than anything. He was a beautiful person with a good heart. Of course, I’d already known that, but it made me feel even more grateful to have him as my mate.

“I try. The beach atmosphere tends to lend to a more cheerful spirit in general. It’s not always so, but I try to keep it chill.”

“I thought the temperature was pleasant,” I said as we reached the truck.

Cory snorted. “Thanks, Nemo.”

He opened my door, and I climbed in, pulling the seatbelt on for myself, and clicked it into place. When Cory got in, he turned to face me. “How are you doing?”

I inhaled deeply. It was easier when I had been distracted and hadn’t had to think about it. I feared if I let my mind dwell on my shell, I would have a harder time coming back up to the surface. “I’m...okay.”

Cory narrowed his eyes, clearing sensing the lie, but he reached across and brushed my hair back. “It’s okay if you’re not.”

My eyes grew warm, threatening to release tears again, which is exactly what I didn’t want, but I couldn’t voice anything, so I simply nodded.

“All right. I’m thinking we pick up some food and head home. I’m not sure I feel like cooking tonight. ”

“Pick up food? Off the ground?”

Cory’s eyes lit with humor. “No, little one. There are restaurants that make food, so you don’t have to. So we can stop at one, place our order, and they’ll make what we request. Then we can take it home to eat in privacy.”

As a scavenger, it was strange to think about having to prepare food. In my nautilus form, I would simply float around and find whatever remnants I could. Though... I wasn’t in my nautilus form. The thought sank in my belly. I would have to get used to finding or making food in this form. I did enjoy the breakfast Cory had made for us. It was a rather exciting experience. Perhaps I would find something as tasty as eggs and toast.

“What food do you like to pick up, Cory? I’d like to try something you enjoy.”

“Yes! Challenge accepted. I’m introducing you to a California food staple. We’re getting tacos.”

“Tacos,” I repeated, loving the way the word sounded. Ta-cos. Tacos .

“I know just the place, too, and it’s on the way home.”

“Home? I thought we were going to get a Christmas tree.”

Cory slid a glance over at me. “Oh. I wasn’t sure you were still wanting to do that. I know it’s been a difficult day.”

“It might be nice to have something to focus on, besides they bring you joy, and I want to make you happy. ”

His hand landed on my leg, giving it a light squeeze. “I’m already happy with you, Nemo, but maybe it’s not a bad idea. Okay, we’ll go to the store, then dinner, and then home.”

Another tiny empty space filled within me. I didn’t think I would ever not feel the ache of my missing shell, but Cory helped, and I would have to focus on it.

We pulled into a large parking lot that was filled with vehicles. Cory sucked his teeth and said, “Ah, fuck. I forgot about how busy it would be so close to Christmas. A lot of folks are looking for last-minute gifts and stocking stuffers.”

As I opened my mouth to ask what stocking stuffers were, Cory continued, “I’ll explain more later, but just know it’s going to be crowded inside, and sometimes a crowded store can create a little tension. So if you like, you can stay in the truck while I run in.”

The thought of being out here all by myself was more than a little terrifying. “No. I don’t want to stay here.”

Cory parked his truck and turned it off. “Just stay close to me, okay?”

Shopping must be scary if he seemed worried. Was his worry about the store, or for me? I didn’t know, but I would climb on top of Cory if I needed to. Would that be close enough?

As soon as we were out of the truck, I raced to his side and I clung to his arm, afraid to let go, like a seahorse anchoring itself to kelp. Cory was my kelp, and he would keep me from drifting away. “Is this close enough?”

He gave a soft laugh and patted my head with his free arm. “It’ll do, but you would be fine if you were simply holding my hand, too.”

I loved holding his hand, but I wasn’t going to let go of him. We walked, attached, to the store, and when the doors whooshed open, the noise inside made my skin prickle. If my cirri were out, the vibrations of the place would be overwhelming. I gripped Cory’s arm tighter. He grabbed what he called a shopping cart, and I realized it would be a challenge to navigate with only one hand, so I was forced to relent one hand from his arm, so we each had one free, and we pushed the cart together.

Expletives burst out from a couple of people as one person turned a corner and crashed into another person’s cart. I watched with wide eyes, my heart racing. In a panic, I called out, “Happy holidays!”

They both looked at me before pulling the carts away from each other and murmured apologies. I sighed with relief that the scene was over, but I scooted as close to Cory as I could, while still allowing us to move.

Cory nudged my shoulder gently. “Well done, little one. This time of year brings mixed emotions. People get really stressed out, especially shopping, but there’s also a lot of joy and hope, too. Sometimes, folks just need a little reminder. ”

I was definitely going to remember that. If a couple of words could turn a situation around, I was prepared to ‘ Happy holidays’ my way through the entire store.

Cory expertly guided us, avoiding any collisions like the one we’d seen, and when we reached the Christmas section, my jaw hung open. It was beautiful. So many lights and bright colors. My head swept from side to side as we walked through the aisles, trying to see everything.

“It’s pretty fun, huh?”

“Yes! It reminds me of the creatures that can create their own light, but nothing like this.”

When we walked into an aisle that had hundreds of tiny baubles hanging from ribbons, Cory stopped. “These are ornaments for the tree. There is also tinsel and garland, which are both glittery decorations to add some sparkle. Pick out whatever you’d like.”

“Anything?”

“Within reason. I’ll let you know if it’s not doable.”

I pushed up on my toes to give him a quick kiss. “Thank you!”

Leaving my Cory anchor, I faced the wall of ornaments. There were so many, it was hard to know where to start. Many had animals or people in funny costumes. A man with a red and white suit was done in a wide variety of styles. Snow, stars, feathers,



and long, pointy drops of frozen water. More designs than I thought possible. I scanned up and down carefully as I walked through the aisle until I saw something that made me squeal excitedly.

I took it off the hook and held it in my hands. The details weren't exact, but the likeness was close enough to see what it was meant to be. I rushed back to show Cory. "Look!"

He was beaming as he watched me, his ocean-blue eyes sparkling as if the setting sun danced across the surface of the water. "A seahorse?"

"Yes! Oh, I love seahorses. I've befriended many. They are such delightful, playful creatures. I've never seen a rainbow one like this, but I think I would very much like to have this one." Even in the unrealistic size and coloring, it gave me a tiny glimpse of home. It would be nice to look at, and maybe make me miss the ocean less.

"Of course, little one. I happen to love seahorses, too. I'm a pretty big fan of marine animals."

"Like nautili?" I asked.

"Mmm. Nautili have always been particularly fascinating to me, more so now." He gave me a wink, making my belly flutter with excitement.

I placed the seahorse gingerly into the cart. "All right. I'm done."

Cory snickered. "Typically, a tree has ornaments on all sides. It wouldn't do to have just one."

"Oh. I can get more?" I didn't want to seem like I was taking advantage of Cory's generosity. He'd already given me clothes that other customers in his shop would

have had to pay for. I was beginning to realize everything had a cost, and I came out of the sea with nothing.

Luckily, he didn't seem bothered, but I would have to inquire more about money later. Cory turned me, and pointed me back at the ornaments. "Let's get some more."

I returned to the wall and when I looked near the seahorses, I let out a loud laugh. "Ha! It's a crab!" I grabbed the bright red creature. It had long eye stalks with eyes that floated around. It was completely ridiculous.

I showed it to Cory. "It is completely unrealistic. Nothing about it makes sense."

He grinned. "It's whimsical; it's not meant to be realistic, just fun."

I returned several more times, adding more whimsical sea creatures to the cart. "Okay. I think that's all of them."

"Perfect. They're going to look great on our tree."

Soon we fought our way to the front of the store. I didn't cling to Cory quite as tightly, but I did continue pushing the cart with him, so we could be as close as possible. A sense of excitement I didn't expect to feel moved through me, as I thought of putting all the silly portrayals of sea creatures on a tree. I found the irony amusing. I didn't think I would find anything amusing today.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:38 am*

Seeing his excitement in the store had been amazing, especially after he looked so lost and heartbroken at the cove. It was infectious, too. I felt like a little kid, eager to get home and decorate the tree. Now that Nemo was here, it made me realize I missed decorating. It wasn't that I had a particular knack for it, but it did make me happy. Doing it when it was just me felt silly to go through all the effort, especially if I would be the only one to see it. But now I wouldn't be, and the thought made me feel giddy.

We stopped at my favorite hole-in-the-wall taco shop, and knowing everything was new to Nemo, I got a wide variety; carne asada, chicken, al pastor, and even fish. I got one of each in both crunchy style, where the tacos were fried, and street taco style, where they used smaller corn tortillas which were warmed but soft. The smell in the cab of the truck had me practically salivating .

When we got to my apartment, I gave Nemo the food and a couple of the bags with the ornaments, while I grabbed the tree. It was such a simple act, just taking stuff in, but it felt so domestic. I used to joke about liking that I was on my own, giving me the freedom to do whatever I wanted, like my grandfather, except... I didn't.

Once we got everything in, I cleared some space in one corner for the tree, and then we sat down to eat. Watching Nemo eat tacos made my favorite food ten times better. We discovered he liked the crunchy tacos because it reminded him of eating through a shell, and surprisingly, he liked the fish the least, because it didn't taste like fish. He made the most obscene sound when he bit into the al pastor tacos; marinated pork with a bright flavor.

Nemo caught me looking and wiped the corner of his mouth. "Everything okay?"

“Perfect. Just perfect. I am really enjoying watching you discover different foods. You get this euphoric look on your face and, if I’m being honest, it’s sexy as hell.”

Nemo grinned. “I appreciate your honesty.”

I chuckled and then he took another bite of his taco, emphasizing the groan. For someone so new to the human world, he was a natural tease. I threw my napkin at him. “Brat.”

“I’m not sure what that means, but you’re smiling, so I’m happy to brat.”

A laugh popped out of me. “I bet you would. ”

He finished his last bite of food and pushed his plate away. “I don’t think I can eat another bite. Thank you for the tacos. I like them very much.”

“Me too. In fact, they are such a favorite, there’s a social tradition of Taco Tuesday. It’s not required to have them every Tuesday, but it’s a fun option.”

Nemo’s eyes brightened. “Oh, I think that’s a tradition I would like. How long is it until the next Tuesday?”

“Well, I hate to break it to you, but Tuesday is Christmas Eve and we’ll be going to my grandfather’s, so we might have to wait for tacos.”

“Oh. Well, I think a meal with your family is a good reason to defy tradition.”

I pulled him out of his chair and gave him a kiss. “I think so, too. I’ve never brought a partner home for the holidays before.”

Nemo looked up at me with those big brown eyes. “You haven’t?”

“Nope. I’ve never had someone I was interested in enough to share the occasion with.”

“Is it okay that I will be there?” Nemo asked in a hushed tone.

“Absolutely. I’m quite smitten with you, Nemo.” It hadn’t even been an entire day, but at the same time, I felt like Nemo had been in my life for years. Nothing about it was logical, but his very existence was illogical. Now that he was here, it was easy to see him here in the next week, and beyond.

“I think I am smitten, too, Cory.” This man... he made my heart feel so full.

“What do you think? Are you ready to do the tree?”

“Oh, yes! I am very excited to put my seahorse in a tree.” Nemo giggled. Giggled . Fuck, it was the cutest sound.

“It’s going to look great.”

I opened the box for the tree and assembled it. Luckily, this one was pre-lit, so it would be easier to put together. After it was standing, I showed Nemo how to fluff out the branches to make it look fuller.

“It’s a tree!” Nemo exclaimed with excitement.

“Yup, now we get to decorate it.”

“How do we do that?”

“It’s super easy. You just use the ribbon on the ornament and put the branch through it. You can put them wherever you want on the tree, but I would recommend putting

your favorite ones where you can see them easily.”

He went straight for the seahorse like I knew he would. Nemo studied the tree for several minutes, finally placing the ornament right in the center. One by one, we added each ornament to the tree, then rainbow tinsel, and a star on top.

Nemo stared at it. “It’s beautiful. ”

I knelt on my good knee, preparing to plug the tree in. “Just wait, little one. Why don’t you turn the lights off for me?”

“But I want to look at it longer?” Nemo whined.

“Trust me.” I gave him a wink.

He walked across the room and hit the switch on the wall; at the same time, I pushed the plug into the outlet and it sprang to life, the multi-colored bulbs casting a bright glow. Nemo gasped audibly. His hands were in front of his mouth as he came to stand before it. I stood behind him and wrapped my arms around his waist, my chin resting on his head.

“Now, what do you think of it?”

His arms folded over mine on his waist. “Oh, Cory, it’s magnificent. This is a wonderful tradition. You must do this every year.”

It was gaudy and obnoxious, and I wouldn’t have picked out the brightly colored sea creatures if it was up to me, but seeing the joy radiate out of him made it perfect. Complete perfection.

He sighed and leaned back against my chest, and this moment with him felt more like

Christmas than I'd had since I was a kid.

"What do you usually do after your tree is decorated?"

"Watch Christmas movies. Have you seen any movies?"

Nemo tilted his head to the side so he could look at me. "Hmm. No, I'm not sure what that is."

I pulled him toward the couch and sat down. Instead of sitting beside me, Nemo sat right on my lap, as if he was always supposed to be there, and I didn't mind one bit. "A movie is a story told by people acting it out, and it is recorded so we can watch it again and again. Christmas tends to have a lot of funny or romantic stories to help capture the spirit of the season."

Nemo nodded, trying to understand. "I think we should watch a romantic one."

"I like the way you think." I kissed the side of his neck, and he made that wonderful humming sound he did.

I picked out a movie about a snowman who came to life and became the love interest of the small town's new mayor. It was corny, but sweet. We ended up shifting on the couch so I could recline to the side and prop my leg up, and Nemo settled between my legs with his head on my chest. He laughed at moments that weren't intended to be funny, making me laugh, and he asked questions about the idioms that were used, making it an entirely different experience than if I had watched it on my own.

Nemo was very entertained and, in turn, entertaining. It was endearing as hell, but also fun. When it was over, he let out a loud yawn. It had been a long day, and he seemed to be handling things a lot better than I expected him to. Too well, in fact. I was half-bracing myself for it to hit him again, but I was glad I was able to distract

him for a while.

“Hey, little one, I think we should head to bed. ”

“Is it time for more sex yet? Because I think we have waited a really long time.”

A snort popped out of me. It was tempting. So tempting. I wanted nothing more than to explore every inch of him, but so much had happened in such a short time. I wanted to savor him, not just devour him, because he looked entirely too enticing.

“Not yet. Not because I don't want to, believe me I do, but I still think we should wait a little longer. Consider it part of me courting you and trying to be a gentleman. I want you to see I value you and want you for your heart and not just for your body. Even if it's a really incredible body.”

Nemo sat up and stretched, that crop top lifting to reveal more of his beautiful, fair skin. Fuck, was it too late to take back what I said about waiting? No. No. I could resist. He looked back to catch my gaze, giving me a knowing smirk. “Very well. We'll wait.”

I swung my leg around him to straighten it and stand. My knee buckled for a minute, but Nemo came to my side quickly and wrapped an arm around me, bracing me while I carefully put weight on my leg.

“Are you all right, Cory?”

“Yes, little one. I have good days and bad days with my knee, and I think those steep stairs are catching up with me. I'll be okay. It'll be better after some decent rest.”

Nemo stayed at my side as we crossed the apartment to the bed. He stood on his tip-toes and kissed me. “Can I help you with your clothes?”



Did I need help? No. But waiting or not, I would be foolish not to take him up on his offer. “Sure thing, sweetheart.”

He beamed as if I'd given him a gift. Damn, this man was going to spoil me for any other. Though it was hard to imagine another after him.

Nemo pushed his hands under my hoodie, pausing to play with the hair on my belly, an action that had my cock perking up. The playful look in his eyes told me he knew the effect it had. Yup, a natural brat. I smiled to myself. He pushed the hoodie up higher until my nipples were exposed. He stared at them and licked his lips. They'd been tender all day after that suction magic from his cirri and the idea of feeling them again made me even harder.

I narrowed my eyes when Nemo looked up at me. “You don't play fair.”

He shrugged with a wicked gleam in his eye. “It's really too bad we can't do anything about it tonight. But I want you for your heart, too, Cory, so it seems we can't.”

The laugh that burst out of me was muffled by my hoodie being pulled over my head. Once my arms were free, I threw them around his waist, lifting him off his feet, and kissing him deep. The move was a bad idea, especially when his legs went around my waist, but I simply could not resist. Nemo was the textbook definition of irresistible. The hint of the ocean on his tongue made me think of where else I wanted to taste him. Before I gave in to that idea, I pulled back, resting my forehead on his. Slowly, I set him down, putting space between us as I fought to not lose my resolve.

Nemo looked beautifully flushed, and his white pants were tented. Before I could say anything, he lowered himself to his knees, his face lined up with my crotch. Fucking hell. His position did nothing to quell the throb in my cock.

He started at the button on my jeans as if trying to work out how to undo it. Nemo

reached out and felt the button from the outside, as well as dipping a finger into the waistband to feel it from the inside, making me suck in a quick breath. I could have shown him or instructed him, but apparently, I was in it for the torment, because I said nothing. He went at it with both hands, pushing and pulling, his tongue sticking out in concentration. It was the most adorable thing ever. His determination to figure it out was only out-cuted by his little cheer when the button slipped free from the hole. Yup, I was a goner.

The zipper was easier to figure out, and he had it unzipped with my jeans rolled down my legs in a moment. When his hands returned to my boxer briefs, my hard cock barely contained, I stopped him. "I think I'll keep those on, thank you." I needed some sort of barrier to keep me using the head upstairs and not give in to what Nemo so willingly offered.

Nemo stood and gave my arm a squeeze. "Lay down and rest your leg, Cory. I can take care of my own clothes."

I would have protested, but I didn't know how much longer I could keep myself in control and undressing him might have made me throw this whole slow-courting thing out the window. Throwing back the covers, I did as he said, though I may have enjoyed the show of watching him remove his shirt and pants.

He'd been commando under them all day. I didn't sell underwear in my shop, and it didn't occur to grab some when we were shopping for the tree. I should ask, though with his sensitivity to materials, I wasn't sure he would want to wear something else underneath, but he should have the option. I'd ask him later. Not right now, with him standing there gloriously naked. Fuck, such a beautiful, lithe body that I desperately wanted to touch.

"Do you need anything to help with your knee?"

I wasn't used to having anyone look after me, but it was nice. He was so sweet, and I was perhaps more than smitten already. "Maybe one of those small pillows from the couch so I can prop my knee up."

He tilted his head for a moment. "Actually, I think I can help with that, if you would be willing to let me."

I had no idea what he had in mind, but after his cirri trick, I'd already decided I would be open to trying whatever he wanted. "I'm willing."

Nemo smiled and crawled into bed next to me. I felt a strange whirl of energy and jumped when a cirrus slid over my leg. Nemo flicked his eyes to mine, checking if I was okay. I gave him an apologetic smile. "Sorry, just surprised me. It's still a new sensation, but it's not bad, I promise."

"I understand." He placed his hand on my cheek, keeping my attention on him, as dozens of cirri slid over my good leg, which was closer to him, before they slithered beneath my bad knee. So many appendages touching my skin with their ends flicking over me like a lizard tasting the air with its tongue, only it was a lot of tongues. It tickled in ways that both fascinated and turned me the hell on. My knee lifted, cushioned by Nemo's cirri, like my own customized support, naturally contouring to my body's shape. It was unreal, but also kind of incredible.

"Is this okay?" Nemo asked carefully. I knew he was eager to help, but he also sounded small and vulnerable.

"Is it possible to lift a little higher under the center?" As soon as I asked, his cirri adjusted and gave my knee a slight bend, making it the perfect, relaxed position which relieved the pressure. "Ah. Yes, right there. And yes, it's okay. In fact, it feels perfect, just the right support where I need it. Is it...comfortable for you? "

Nemo smiled. “Yes. My cirri like touching you. I feel this sense of satisfaction from them, and it's nice to know I can help you.”

Seeing the flesh-colored cables snaking across my thigh and lifting my other knee looked like something out of a sci-fi movie, but as it turns out, I was definitely into it. Reaching down, I caressed my hand over the cirri, making them contract in response, squeezing me lightly. They had grooves and ridges I found really enticing. I ran my hand over them again, and Nemo giggled.

“You said no sex, but your touch excites them, so if you keep doing that, I can't guarantee they won't pursue more and it will be your own fault.”

“Fuck, okay, I'll stop.” We both let out a disappointed groan when I moved my hand away. Some of the cirri supporting my knee released their secretions, adhering to my skin. They began contacting and relaxing in a way that felt like several small fingers giving me a massage. Somehow, they were able to target the exact areas I needed it most. I let out a loud sigh and felt my entire body relax into the mattress. I used to get regular massages as part of my rehab and physical therapy, but it was something I'd neglected over the last couple of years.

“That feels really good, Nemo.”

“Good. Just relax and let me take care of you.” Nemo rubbed his smooth cheek against my scratchy one, then kissed my nose .

My leg's weightlessness and the soothing palpitations had my eyes closing before long as I sank into blissful rest.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:38 am*

Watching Cory fall asleep, knowing I'd been able to help ease his pain, made me feel as content and satisfied as my cirri did. It was, admittedly, even better than the way it felt when Cory brought me to completion in the morning.

I stared at him for a while, studying him without him seeing. His lips were parted slightly and he let out soft huffs in a slow rhythm. With his eyes closed, I missed seeing the dark ocean swells in them, but the corners were no longer pinched in pain. Cory looked so peaceful and overwhelmingly beautiful in this state. His short yellow hair was ruffled, and I itched to play with it, but I didn't want to disturb him. So I stared instead.

After a while, the novelty of watching him wore off and my attention waned. Unfortunately, without something to focus on, my mind began to swim. Soon it returned to the cove, to the cavern where I dug frantically, trying to find my shell. Digging over and over, covering every inch of the small cave. The panic I felt then was creeping back in. Any warmth I'd felt within me from my time with Cory had dissipated and a chill began sweeping back in.

My shell. It was gone.

Gone. Gone. Gone. The words became a whirlpool, catching me in its strong currents, pulling me under until I got pummeled into the depths. The whirlpool wouldn't be a problem for me if I had my shell to protect me. The worst that would happen would be getting disoriented, but it would be righted quickly with my cirri puzzling out where I ended up. Now I had no shell. I wasn't even safe from a fictional whirlpool.

Fictional. I'd learned the word from Cory when we were watching the movie about

the snowman. It was fun, and watching the couple fall in love made my heart happy, but I connected with it in a way, too. The snowman had to learn what the human world was like, but his girlfriend never cared. Just like Cory. He didn't care that I was different. In fact, it seemed he was rather intrigued by all three of my forms.

Not three. It would never be three forms again without my shell. I couldn't change into my nautilus form, and I couldn't return to a life at sea. It was dark outside; the city was quieter. Too quiet. I was used to the constant whirls and whooshes from the constant movement and the songs of other sea creatures.

Movement? Not here. Not now. The room felt too still. I felt too still. Cory's chest rising and falling was the only rhythmic sound in the room. I pressed my ear to his chest and closed my eyes. Hearing the ba-bumps beneath me helped, but it wasn't enough to surround me. To make me feel as I did when I was underwater.

I didn't sway and rock back and forth on the bed, no ocean currents to cradle me. Still. Quiet. Big.

Aside from the short rest I'd had after Cory and I had sex, I usually slept in my nautilus form. Confined within its pearly walls, tucked in, safe, and secure. Cory's apartment felt as if it had tripled in size. There was nothing to bind me and hold me tight. My arms and legs were loose, just hanging there. My cirri were occupied, but even then, I felt stretched too big.

Trying not to move Cory's leg as it was in a position which gave him the greatest comfort, I turned away from him. My cirri extended from their sheaths so they could reach further, as I brought my knees up to my chest. I circled my arms around them, hugging them to me. In my nautilus form, I would fold in half, with my backside going into the shell and my head and cirri meeting at its entrance. It was harder to get so compact in my human form, or even hybrid form as I was now; my joints didn't bend the right way. Knees to my chest was as close as I could get .

Making myself small, trying to imagine being inside of my shell, it didn't bring as much comfort as I hoped it would. Tears burned my eyes, and I began to shake. I cried in silence while tremors wracked my body.

I didn't know how long I'd been in that state. It could have been minutes, it could have been a millennium. The night was long, far too long, in a world that was too motionless and too vast.

"Nemo? Sweetheart, I'm here. I'm right here."

Cory's voice broke through the too-much-ness of everything, but it was faint, and I was worn. Emotionally, physically, I didn't have any strength.

My cirri were showing me Cory had moved through their vibrations as he shifted beside me. They released from him and returned to me, nestling beneath my head to comfort me. It didn't help.

A warm hand landed on my back, rubbing soft circles. "Nemo? What's going on? Are you all right?"

I couldn't answer. I simply squeezed my arms tighter around my legs.

"What can I do, little one? What do you need?"

The fear in Cory's voice reached through the bigness of it all. I didn't want him to be afraid, but I was feeling so...lost. I forced myself to concentrate and pushed out the two words that nearly broke me. "My shell."

I felt Cory scoot closer to me. "I know. I'm so sorry, sweetheart. I wish I could make that happen for you, but even if I could it, won't be tonight. What do you need right now? Just for this moment?"

Concentrating on the heat radiating from his body, I tried to calm myself enough to speak. “Too big.”

“What’s too big, Nemo?”

“Everything. Land, the city, the room. Me.”

Cory kept rubbing my back, and it felt nice, like a rope I was holding tight to as I was spun around in the whirlpool. “You? What do you mean?”

“My shell. Feeling confined within its walls is comforting to me. Safe. I can’t shift into my nautilus form, and I feel too big right now.”

He kissed the back of my neck. “I’m going to try something. Do you trust me?”

“Yes, Cory. Very much.”

“Okay. Can you let go of your legs?”

I whimpered at the thought of unfurling. Doing so would make me bigger, not smaller, but I trusted Cory. It was the one thing I knew to be true at that moment. I drew a deep breath and released the tight grip I had on my legs.

“Good. I’m going to move you a little and after, if it doesn’t help, I’ll let you return to your little ball.”

I sniffed and nodded, bracing myself for whatever was coming. Cory reached under my legs and stretched them out. They were still bent at the knee, but my body was in more of a Z-shape than an oval. My legs wanted to come back to my chest so I could tuck myself into them, but I forced them to stay where he put them.



Cory scooted behind me until his chest was at my back. He formed his body against mine, so they followed the same shape. His knee was pushed into the bend of mine. His hips were so tight against me that I could feel his dick nuzzle my ass. It didn't stimulate me this time, but I liked the way there was no space between us. Cory slipped an arm under my neck and folded it across my chest while his other one came over my side and clutched around my belly, pulling me even tighter to him. My head was under his chin, my feet rested on his.

He surrounded me in every way he could. His warmth filled me from behind, radiating through me. It was as if Cory had become...a shell. Overwhelmed by it all, I choked on the sob that came out of me.

"How do you feel now, Nemo?"

It was as if a hole had been carved out of Cory and I fit perfectly inside of it. He covered me from head to toe and I felt... "Smaller."

"Good. Just concentrate on me, on our bodies together. You are not alone. You are not in danger. I'm here."

"Safe," I whispered softly, and Cory tightened his hold around me, squeezing me almost too tight. It was perfect.

"That's right, little one. You are safe."

I did as he said, concentrating on his body formed around mine. On every inch of skin where we connected. My tremors began subsiding, and I felt as if I was gaining some traction, enough that the whirlpool wouldn't drag me under.

My cirri reached behind me, sliding over Cory's waist and legs. They squeezed and pulled him tighter, snugging us together so that nothing could pull us apart.

Cory rubbed his chin on top of my head reassuringly. “It’s okay. I’m not going anywhere.”

With him there, feeling him, hearing him, I was able to relax enough to sleep.

It was a fitful sleep, but each time I stirred awake, I would feel him, both against my back and through my cirri, reminding me he was here with me. My human-shell mate gave me enough comfort that I was able to tuck back into him and fall asleep again.

I woke with a shout when a high-pitched tone sounded. Cory jerked behind me and then I felt him relax. “It’s all right. That’s my alarm I have set to wake me up. I’ll turn it off.”

He relaxed his grip around my waist and chest, but when he tried to move, he couldn’t. Cory let out a chuckle. “Can you get your cirri to let me go?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I forgot they were holding you.” I called them back in, shifting to my human form.

“You don’t have to be sorry. It was nice, like being spooned front and back.”

Cory rolled away from me and picked up his phone, stopping the obnoxious sound. I turned around to look at him. His furry chest and stomach were on display as he stretched his arms and rolled his head from side to side. “What do you mean spooned?”

“Hold on, I’ll show you.” My mate walked across the room to the kitchen. I sat up in the bed, curious to see what he was doing. When he returned, he held two utensils in his hands. “Spoons, right? When you stack them in the same direction, they nestle together.”

He put one on top of the other and I could see how the rounded side of one sat perfectly inside the other, and even the stems lined up. It was like Cory moving my body until it could line up with his. “So we were the spoons?”

Cory sat on the edge of the bed and placed his hand on my leg. “Yes, we were spoons or spooning. Did it help?”

I nodded. “Yes. It helped. You made a good temporary shell.”

He leaned forward and caught my mouth in a gentle kiss. “Good. I’m glad I could help.” He hesitated for a moment, his lips quirking to the side in thought. “Normally, I would be getting ready to head to the beach to get some kayak-surfing in before I open the shop, but I can wait. I do need to work today, though. The next couple of days are bound to be really busy, and it would be foolish of me to miss out on it. You can stay here and watch more Christmas movies if you like. ”

I leaned forward. “I want to go with you. I don’t think I’m ready to be here by myself.”

Cory gave me a half-smile. “Okay. I’d be happy to have you with me. I just don’t want it to be boring for you.”

“No. Not boring. I can help, too, if you show me what to do.” I wanted to be useful, and the thought of sitting and waiting for him all day made the panic Cory helped me fight off last night prickle under my skin.

“I’d be happy to. In fact, I have a shipment coming in today, so you can help me tag and organize everything.”

Having a job wasn’t necessary in the ocean. One’s job was simply to survive. As scary as the human world seemed to be, every second of the day wasn’t filled. There

was more time for leisure, and well, I wasn't exactly sure how humans filled their days. Being given a task felt nice. With all the ways Cory had helped me, I liked the idea of being able to do something for him, too.

"You can still do your kayak-surfing, Cory. I don't want you to miss the things you love because of me."

He brushed his knuckles across my cheek. "I wouldn't consider spending time with you to be missing out on anything."

My heart did that little flutter it did when he touched me so sweetly. "If you keep saying things like that, I might change my mind and keep you for myself."

"I'm already yours, Nemo." Cory gave me a wink. "But if you really don't mind, I would like to hit the water. Aside from waking up with you, it's my favorite way to start the day."

"I really don't mind. I think I'd like to watch you. I've only ever seen it from below."

Cory smiled and stood up, pulling me with him. "Let's get moving, then." He gave my ass a pat as he pushed me toward the bathroom.

We parked in the lot at the beach, and I helped Cory unload his kayak from the back of the truck. As soon as the smell of the sea reached my nose, I was hit with a powerful mixture of emotions. Longing, sadness, comfort, rightness. Perhaps coming today wasn't the smartest decision, not so soon after losing my shell.

Cory must have noticed I stopped following him, and he set the kayak's cart down and hurried to me. "I can take you back home."

I shook my head, trying to shake the dread away. "No! No, I don't want you to do

that. We're here. I'll be okay. I just wasn't expecting...so much."

"Will you tell me if you change your mind?" he asked softly.

I loved how considerate Cory was of my needs. I wasn't sure if I would be able to handle being by the water without going in it, but I was going to try. Even if all I wanted was to hide away from the world, my shell was gone, which meant I couldn't. For all I knew, I might never get it back. I would have to learn how to adapt .

Cory ran his hand over his hair, but then his eyes brightened. "Wait! I have an idea!"

"Oh? What's that?"

"I'll show you. Let's get down to the water."

Curiosity helped push out some of the dread within. I walked beside him as he wheeled the kayak across the sand and parked it near the edge of the water. Cory took off his jacket and pants, revealing a skin-tight black-and-blue outfit that covered him from his ankles to his neck. Then he grabbed another piece of clothing from the kayak that he slipped his arms into and zipped up his chest.

He scanned me and clicked his tongue. "I don't have a life vest for you, but then...you don't really need one."

"What's it for?"

"It's a buoyant vest that can help keep you at the surface if you fall into the water. I started wearing one after my accident, so I would never be in the same position again."

"I am very glad that you do, but I would be able to protect you if something were to

happen. And no, I wouldn't need it to save me. I am a strong swimmer." Even without my shell. I might not be able to shift into my nautilus form, nor would I be able to stay in the ocean. I was vulnerable to predators without it, but it wouldn't stop me from being able to help Cory. Nothing would stop me from helping Cory. The determination to be there for him filled me and helped pull me out of my own woe .

He grinned. "And the cold water doesn't bother you, either, right?"

I shook my head. "Nope. I am perfectly comfortable in cold water."

"Okay, good, because I don't have a wetsuit for you." He pointed to the suit he wore. "It provides insulation. I'm afraid you'll have to keep your pants on, but you are welcome to take your shirt off to keep it dry."

I was wearing a light green matching set today. I liked the white because it reminded me of my shell's interior, but I found changing colors made me feel excited. It looked completely different against my skin and was an easy way to have a different appearance. But... I much preferred being naked to any form of clothing. Without knowing why, I happily shrugged out of my shirt and added it to Cory's pile.

He pursed his lips in amusement. "Okay, first things first. I have to let Gramps know I'm going out on the water. It's the rule, but I'm sure he'll be happy to know I'm not alone. Afterward, I'm going to push the kayak into the water, and once it's deep enough, I'll get in. You can sit between my legs. It's not really meant for two people, but you're small enough, so I think it will work just fine."

Understanding dawned on me. "Oh! You want me to surf with you?"

"What do you think? Are you willing to give it a try? "

Riding on top of the water? It wasn't something I'd ever done. I'd played in currents

and let the tides move me, but I'd never experienced the power of the ocean from above. Except for when I had helped Cory and got him to safety after his accident. The idea of it was scary without the protection of my shell, but I would be above the water, not in it. And as Cory said, I would be fine if I fell into the water. Maybe I could do it.

"Yes. I think I would like to try it."

"We can paddle out past the waves and hang out where it's calm. We don't have to ride the waves. It's up to you."

I nodded and stared out at the ocean. A pain gripped my heart when I looked at it. Even more so as my toes touched the edge of the water. It almost felt like I was a visitor instead of someone who'd lived their entire life in the sea.

The water lapped at my pants, making the material cling to my skin. Cory pushed the kayak, and I trudged behind, fighting to keep my cirri within and not shift into my hybrid form. When we stood a few feet deep, Cory handed me the paddle to hold while he climbed on top of the kayak.

"All right, hop in, and you can sit here." He patted the space between his legs as he pushed them as wide as the kayak allowed. Cory held out his hand to hold me while I lifted my leg over his, careful not to bump his bad knee. Once I was in, I turned around until my back was to his chest. An arm wrapped around me and pulled until I was snug against him. It was a tight fit, but I didn't mind being wedged in with Cory. Aside from my shell, in his embrace was my favorite place to be. I only wished he didn't have the thick life vest on, so I could feel his chest against my back.

Cory's arms were on either side of me and he held the paddle across us. "How are you feeling? Is this okay?"

Sitting in the kayak and looking down at the water was an entirely unique experience. We floated above, and though we were in the shallows, I knew there was a whole world beneath us. My world. It was surreal, and yet, it wasn't all bad. "I'm...strangely a little excited."

Cory leaned forward and kissed my cheek. "That's great! I think you're going to like this. Just a little warning, though. I might jostle you a bit when I paddle with us sitting so close."

"That's okay. You can jostle me however much you'd like." I was simply happy to be this close to him and get to be a part of something he loved doing.

He dipped one side of the paddle into the water, pushing it back, and then the other side. My body tilted from side to side with each movement, his shoulders moving me with each pass of the blades. We started picking up speed and burst over the top of a small swell, making a sound pop out of me. "E-yah."

Cory chuckled. As we reached the bigger waves, he had to work harder to push us through them. I was fascinated by watching the smooth, fluid movement he had with the paddle. My hands slid down his arms, feeling his muscles tighten. With my touch, I could feel his cock grow hard against my ass, so much so that I wiggled back to feel it better. It made me happy to know I could have such an effect with a simple touch. Or maybe it was because we were surfing. Did it make him hard, too?

I wiggled again, loving the way it felt, and wishing I could get even closer than his life vest allowed. Cory chuckled. "You gotta stop that, little one, or I'm not going to be able to concentrate."

"Does surfing always stimulate you?"

He laughed and pushed us through another wave. "In many ways, yes. It's an



adrenaline rush, but no, if you're talking about my cock, that's all because of you."

A satisfied smile stretched my lips, happy to be the cause of it. But since he didn't want me to continue rubbing against him, I put my hands on the middle of the paddle to give me something to focus on. I felt the up-down movement of it as Cory continued to work it. Learning the rhythm of it, I spread my hands until they were just inside where Cory's were placed. Instead of simply holding on, I began to push and pull along with him and I felt our speed increase ever so slightly. Had that been because of me? My heart jumped. It almost gave me the same feeling as when I was in my nautilus form and drew water into the chambers of my shell before expelling it and propelling myself through the water.

"That's it, you're getting it," Cory said from behind me, making me feel a burst of warmth with his affirmation.

When we reached the calm part of the water past the waves, Cory slowed his movements and lifted the paddle to rest across our laps. His arms folded around my middle. "How are you feeling?"

I let out a sigh. I didn't expect to feel this...good. The combination of the sun shining on me, the sound of the water, our movement over it, and being enveloped by Cory all made for a rather enjoyable experience. "I'm okay. Surprisingly, better than okay. I'm having fun."

I could feel Cory relax behind me. "That's great to hear, Nemo. I love coming out here early in the morning, but it's even better having you with me."

I nodded and leaned back against him, looking out over the water. The land looked far enough away that it felt as if we were the only two who existed. Of course, I knew otherwise. Millions of creatures kept us company. I wished I could leap off the boat and swim down to the depths to encounter them. The pang that I expected to come

with the thought was minimal, as I was fairly content where I was.

“Should we try to catch a wave, or do you want to stay here?” Cory asked and leaned his head to rest on mine. It felt really nice to just simply be here together, to be in his arms. I probably could have stayed like this all day. I wanted to know what it was like, though. To feel the rush that Cory talked about, to know what it was like to ride a crest.

“Let’s catch a wave.”

“Yes! All right, here’s what we’re going to do.” Cory gave me instructions for when we would paddle and when we would stop and lift it out of the water, so we didn’t create drag. We would have to work in tandem, our movements in sync.

He turned us around and pointed us toward the shore. “You ready?”

My heart raced in anticipation as I gripped the paddle with my hands right beside his. “I’m ready.”

“Okay, here we go.”

We pushed down with the right side first, then left, both of us moving together perfectly. A swell was building, and we raced to get to the top of it. When we reached the peak and felt it lunge forward, we drew the paddle out of the water and let the wave do the rest of the work. Suddenly, we were soaring. Flying at a speed much greater than I could reach with my own propulsion. A laugh burst out of me. Without thinking, I threw my arms out to the side, and my head fell back with my eyes closed as I surrendered to the sea. Surrendered in a way I never dreamed of .

It wasn’t long before the kayak slowed, and the bottom of it scraped the sand. My eyes opened. “Oh. It’s over already.”

Cory snorted. “Yup, it doesn’t last very long.”

“So, what do we do now?” I couldn’t help the disappointment that bled through my voice. The rush had stopped far too soon.

“We paddle back out and do it again.”

I turned slightly, so I could look over my shoulder at him. “Really? Can we?”

He met my gaze with a wide grin. “Absolutely, sweetheart.”

“Yes!” I shouted triumphantly.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:38 am*

We ended up surfing the waves ten more times. The muscles in my arms burned from holding them wider than usual to accommodate Nemo's body, but I loved it. I fucking loved every second of it. Surfing was a solitary thing typically, and I usually appreciated that, but having Nemo with me, seeing him radiate with glee from the thrill of it, and feeling him pressed against me the entire time, made it an altogether different experience. A truly incredible one.

The only downside was I'd been aching hard through most of it. At one point, I was certain I was going to come in my wetsuit with his perfect ass bouncing against my cock. It had taken a herculean effort to get my mind off it because that wasn't a mess I wanted to deal with before work .

Nemo was practically glowing by the time we were done. He was breathtaking. And of course, his linen pants were soaked, leaving nothing to the imagination as they adhered to him. Fuck, the sight of him practically had me salivating.

Once I had my shop opened, I gave him a dry pair to change into, or that image of bending him over the counter might come true. But that wasn't how I wanted our first time together to go.

Luckily, the shipment I'd been expecting had come, and it had been a good distraction... for both of us. Nemo seemed excited to learn how to help. Before long, my first customer had come through the door.

It had been a busy day, and I was glad I didn't stay closed for the day. Nemo had taken to organizing and shelving products really well. He seemed perfectly pleased with the task. Precise too, facing everything forward exactly right. He stuck his

tongue out as he concentrated on sorting bracelets and was just so fucking adorable.

Having him here certainly made the day go by a lot easier. I usually didn't mind the quiet times and the solitude, but his presence made everything brighter. I even let him have a go at ringing a customer up after he'd watched me do it several times. He wasn't good with money yet—I imagined there hadn't been much opportunity to count cash at the bottom of the sea—but he was so pleased with himself, and proudly announced 'Happy Holidays!' to every single person.

If I were a rational human being, there was no way I could fall for him as quickly as I had, but rational went out the window after having been spooned by dozens of cirri all night. What did rational matter? Because I was... falling for him. Completely, madly, wonderfully, falling for him.

By the time we got home, Nemo was yawning. "I didn't know working could be so exhausting."

I snorted. "Yes, it can be. It was a very busy day. You did great, though. I'm so proud of you."

Nemo beamed up at me through sleep-heavy eyes. "Thank you, Cory. I'm proud of myself, too. I think we should celebrate with sex."

The way he said it as a factual statement had a laugh popping out of me as I threw my arms around him and lifted him off his feet. "You are a quick learner."

"Yes, I am." He smiled widely.

"First dinner, then we'll see what happens." I set him back down on the floor of our apartment. Our apartment. Funny how easily that thought came to me, how much he filled the place and made it feel like it was ours together.

“Can I turn on the Christmas tree?”

“Sure thing, little one. I’m going to change and then I’ll fix something to eat.”

The lights turned on, illuminating the apartment in multi-colored hues. A smile stayed on my face as I undressed. I could feel Nemo watching me, his eyes boring into my ass as I bent over and pulled up my flannel pajama pants. Fuck, if that didn’t make my blood rush south. At this rate, I was about ready to bypass dinner and jump straight to dessert, but the soul-deep need to take care of Nemo forced the thought aside. It didn’t mean I couldn’t make it a quick dinner, though.

Boxed spaghetti noodles and jarred sauce. It wasn’t anything fancy, but it was fast and easy. I could cook, but the hungry stare in Nemo’s eyes when I turned around after changing was living rent-free in my head, and I was ready to move things along.

He’d been suspicious of the spaghetti at first. I hadn’t thought about the noodles looking like cirri. But after assuring him it wasn’t, he seemed to enjoy it. I loved watching him discover new foods, loved watching him do pretty much anything, really.

After dinner, Nemo helped me wash the dishes. He seemed to enjoy helping. Everything was so new it didn’t feel like a chore to him. Not working, not cleaning up. He found joy in these things I often took for granted.

Once we were done, he stood in front of the Christmas tree, staring at the seahorse with a half-hearted smile. I knew it reminded him of the sea, for good and bad. I hated not being able to do anything to get him back to the ocean. Selfishly, I wanted him to stay right here, but I knew he belonged to the ocean .

I stood behind him and circled my arms around his middle. Nemo sighed and leaned against me, his head falling on my shoulder. I kissed the top of his brown hair. “What

are you thinking about?"

He was quiet for a moment. "The sea."

I bent my head lower, kissing the side of his temple. "I figured as much. Is there anything you want to talk about? Or anything I can do?"

"I think tomorrow, when we go out surfing, I might shift and swim, to try to feel for my shell again."

"That sounds like a good plan." There had been a moment before we caught the first wave that I feared he would leap into the water and never look back. Instead, he stayed with me. I kissed next to his eye. He closed them and made a soft hum. Nemo tilted his neck to allow me more room.

When he spoke again, his airy voice came out a little thicker. "That is my plan for tomorrow, but for tonight..." Instead of finishing his thought, he pushed his ass back against my crotch, the flannel rubbing against my sensitive skin, causing us both to moan. I slid my hands down to grip his hips, pulling him closer.

"Is this what you want, Nemo?"

He sucked in a sharp breath. "Yes."

I was dying to get between the perfect soft mounds of his ass, but there was something I needed to do first. Turning him around in my arms, I bent over him and kissed him hard. His mouth opened immediately, inviting me in. His lips were so soft, his tongue explored mine more confidently, and his taste had a hint of brine that went straight to my cock.

Nemo threw his arms around my neck, pulling my mouth tighter onto his until there

was practically no room to even catch a breath. He was my oxygen, and I was his. I moved us backward until the edge of the couch hit the back of my legs. I would have dropped to my knees before him if I'd been able to. Instead, I broke our kiss and sat down on the edge of the couch, spreading my legs and pulling him to stand between them.

“Stay right here,” I said firmly. He watched my fingers slip beneath his waistband and slide the linen pants down, letting his cock spring free. “Do you remember what I told you yesterday?”

“You told me a lot of things yesterday, Cory.”

I smirked. “True. But remember, if there’s anything you don’t like, you can tell me to stop.”

His eyes darkened with hunger, and he nodded. He looked wild with lust, and the Christmas lights shining behind him made the contrast even more erotic. I lowered my eyes to feast on his beautiful dick that stood hard and strong before me. Glancing up, I licked my lips, watching him as I leaned forward and ran my tongue along the head.

“Oh!” He let out a surprised shout, but he didn’t give any indication he wanted me to stop. Thank fuck, because he tasted so good, and I needed more. Again, I teased the head of his cock, swirling my tongue around it. Nemo groaned obscenely, and he stepped closer, clearly wanting more.

When I opened my mouth and took the whole head into my mouth, his hips bucked, and his hands landed on my shoulders. “Ah! Cory!”

I hummed around him and began to swallow him down. The deeper I went, the tighter his grip on my shoulders. His fingers pressed in so much I thought they might



leave bruises. The thought had my dick throbbing in my pants.

Nemo was breathing hard, but still hadn't made any move to stop me. So I gave in to what I'd been craving. I dove down, letting my tongue work around his shaft, and pumped with my mouth. He groaned loudly with each bob of my head. I was sure the neighbors could hear everything with how loud he was being, but I didn't care. I fucking loved it.

When I went down to his base, his cock hitting the back of my throat, a fluttering over my stomach had me groaning around him. I knew what it was this time. I had felt it enough to understand a cirrus was reaching into my pants, followed by more until I felt the pants being pulled down and my cock freed.

Grooved tendrils found their way to my cock and when they wrapped around it, I very nearly came on the spot. At least ten cirri were twined around me, and when I felt them secrete their mucus, adhering to my cock, I popped off Nemo to let out a loud groan.

“Oh, fuck!” I felt the cirri pause, but I shook my head frantically and grabbed Nemo's ass before he could ask if it was okay. “Don't you dare stop.”

He grinned down at me, but his mouth fell open when I took his cock back into my mouth. The cirri squeezed, working together, as they slid up and down my cock, like several hands working me at once. Fuck, it was almost overwhelming. I focused on the weight of Nemo on my tongue, feeling him in my throat, as the cirri pumped me. I hollowed my cheeks, increasing suction, as it felt like the same was being done to my cock.

Nemo shouted and spilled down my throat. I worked him, swallowing every drop. The cirri twisted and worked faster until it was too much and I came hard, spurts hitting my chin and Nemo's balls. I pulled off then, needing to catch my breath as

aftershocks shook me to the core.

Falling against the back of the couch, I couldn't even care about the mess we'd made. Nemo straddled me and climbed onto my lap. He wiped my chin with his hand before nuzzling up against me.

"That was incredible."

"Mmm," Nemo hummed and wiggled closer. "Your mouth felt really good on my cock. So warm and wet. I liked it a lot. "

I chuckled happily and squeezed my arms around him. Always so direct. "I liked it, too. You tasted so good. And your cirri? Holy shit, Nemo, that was amazing."

"I couldn't stop them. They were too excited."

"Fuck, if it's going to be like that, I don't ever want you to stop them. At least, not when we're in private."

I felt him let out a contented sigh and sink into me. "Do you know they send me messages and images? While your mouth was on me, I was feeling your pleasure, too. It was...wonderful. I want more."

What would that be like? To feel your partner's pleasure as your own? Fuck, this little man was such an amazing being, and he seemed unstoppable.

"More, huh? You sure about that?"

"Mmm. Yes. I want to feel you in every part of me, to feel your pleasure with my body and my mind."

“Every part of you?” I slid my hand over his ass and dipped a finger between his cheeks. He let out a soft gasp and pushed back against my hand.

“Yes, Cory. I want to be filled with you in every way I can. I want to mate with you.” The desperation in his voice had my cock recharged and ready to go much more quickly than it might normally, especially after such a big orgasm.

I pushed against the back of the couch, holding under Nemo’s ass, and stood with him, letting my pajama pants fall to the floor. He wrapped his arms and legs around me, clinging like a koala, as I stepped out of my pants and walked him to the bed.

Lowering him to the mattress, I grabbed a tube of lube out of my nightstand and realized I didn’t have any condoms. It had been a while since my last hookup, and it hadn’t been on my mind to restock. It was Nemo’s first time, though, and I had used protection since the last time I tested. Still, I didn’t want to take advantage of his na?vet  . I sat on the edge of the bed and ran a hand over my hair.

“Nemo, before we do this, I want to make sure we are being smart and safe. Humans can sometimes transmit infections or viruses through sex. I was tested a while back and am negative for infections, so I can’t pass anything on to you. But I want to give you the option to protect yourself. If you would like to, I can get a condom, which acts as a barrier and helps prevent infections from passing.”

Nemo’s eyes softened, and he rested his hand on mine. “I have heard of such things, but sea shifters can’t contract human illnesses. We are an ancient race that have outlived many other species through time. Nautili even saw the creation and destruction of dinosaurs. Not me personally, mind you. I am merely a youngling of twenty-nine years. You are so very kind to think of me and my safety, though. I can’t tell you how much I admire your care.”

He leaned forward and kissed me, pouring so much gratitude and affection into it that

it made my heart leap in my chest. I twisted, pushing him back onto the bed, and was about to lean down over him, but I hesitated. I loved being on top, diving between my partner's legs while watching their face, but my knee no longer allowed me to take this position. It couldn't handle me putting my weight on it like that, which was one of the challenges I'd faced when it came to hookups.

At my hesitation, Nemo scanned over me with his head tilted. He must have noticed the way my knee hovered an inch off the bed because he gave a quick nod, and before I knew it, his cirri were stretching out of him. Dozens of them reached up to meet my knee, cushioning it, and wrapping around it. The relief was instant, as was the reaction my cock had; perked up and excited to be handled in this way.

The cirri seemed to understand and anticipate my movement, as I pushed Nemo's legs wider and braced myself above him. My knee was suspended, weightless, yet still with enough traction to control my actions.

Leaning over Nemo, I couldn't help but be in utter awe of his beauty, especially with the way he looked at me. I bent down and kissed him, silently thanking him for knowing what I needed. It was the first time in eight years I'd been able to lean over a lover comfortably like this without worry or pain. I kissed him with thanks for rescuing me in the first place, for allowing me to have a bad knee, instead of the alternative where I wouldn't be here at all. Here with him was the greatest thing I could imagine. I poured my gratitude into him, poured the love that swelled in my chest, love that was too soon, and yet I'd been ready for it since he first appeared to me.

As we kissed, I lifted one of his legs and rolled my hips forward, my cock sliding over his. I swallowed his gasp, loving the hum that sounded in the back of his throat.

I placed his leg against my hip, and he took my hint, hooking it over me. Reaching between us, I slid my hand down his smooth torso, loving the way his skin reacted to

my touch. More cirri came out, slithering out and flicking their ends over my skin, tasting, sending images to Nemo.

He closed his eyes and arched his back as they roamed over every inch of my body, all while the ones supporting my knee never stopped. It was like having a hundred fingers touching me all at once, setting every cell in my body aflame.

I kissed him once more before pushing up to reach for the lube. Cirri wrapped around my waist, my legs, my arms, surrounding me. It was an unreal sight, and something I didn't expect would be so fucking sexy.

Nemo watched our bodies being twined together with a lust-drunk smile. "They like you, Cory."

"I like them, too." I smiled back at him and ran a hand over the grooved tentacles around my waist. They did that contraction thing I loved when I touched them. It reminded me of a sea anemone closing when they were touched. It sent shivers of pleasure through me, but Nemo was the one to groan.

With lube coating my fingers, I settled back over him and reached between his legs. He jumped at first when I circled his rim, but then he relaxed and pulled his other leg up higher. "I need to get you ready for me. Is this okay?"

He watched me intently, but gave a nod. When I pushed my finger inside, his mouth opened wide. I pushed deeper, and a hum rumbled in the back of his throat. "Yes. Okay, Good. Great. More."

I smirked to myself at his reaction. I loved getting to be the first one to see him like this and hoped to be the only one. He was mine . His pleasure was mine. His heart, his body, his cirri were mine . A possessiveness I'd never experienced before took hold of me. I couldn't explain it. It was there, crawling up from the very depths. With

Nemo splayed out before me, and my finger working into his hole, it locked it into place. I couldn't stop it. I didn't think I even wanted to. I wanted to lay claim to him, to make him mine.

I pushed another finger in, and Nemo arched his back, pushing into my hand. I pressed in deeper, brushing across a spot that had Nemo yelp in surprise. "Ah! What was that?"

"That was your prostate or p-spot. Do you like it?" I rubbed over it again, wringing a keening sound from him .

"Yes. Oh! Yes. Feels. Good." His words came out in panting breaths.

"Just wait, Nemo." I bent down and captured his mouth, swallowing all the wonderful sounds he made, when I inserted a third finger, stretching his entrance for me. Nemo reached down and grabbed his cock, clearly desperate to get off. But I wasn't ready to let that happen just yet. I pulled gently out of him, causing him to inhale sharply. I grabbed his hand and moved it from his cock. "Not yet, sweetheart."

The whimper he let out made me chuckle. I couldn't blame him, though. I was just as horny and ready as he was. Holding my shaft, I lined up the head with his hole. Nemo's hands slid up my back until they hooked under my armpits. "Please, Cory. I need you. I need to feel you inside me, to feel you everywhere."

"I need you, too, Nemo." I kissed him again and lunged forward. He let out a loud moan as my cock slid past the outer ring. He was so tight and hugged my cock so perfectly I nearly went cross-eyed at the pressure of his body squeezing around me. "Fuck, you feel so good."

"More. Cory. Deeper," he panted, his voice thick and desperate.

I carefully thrust deeper until I was seated fully inside of him. Nemo breathed heavily, but he gave me a nod, and I began to move. I pulled out slowly before driving all the way back in .

“ Ngh !” Nemo made uncontrollable noises that went straight to my dick, cheering it on. As I began to pump harder, Nemo clung to me with arms and legs, holding on for dear life. The cirri supporting my knee wrapped tighter around it and helped propel my action, urging me deeper into Nemo’s body.

A click sounded that I was too lost in him to recognize until I felt lube drizzle down between my cheeks. Nemo’s hands were still under my arms, and a moment later, I lunged forward with a gasp as I felt a cirrus probe my rim. I had bottomed in the past, especially when I was younger, but had taken to topping more frequently. The thought of his tentacles exploring me had me burning up with desire.

I continued to rock into Nemo’s body even as a second cirrus entered me. “Holy shit!” I paused my movement as they pushed in deeper, sweeping across my prostate.

“Is this okay?” Nemo asked, looking up at me with those beautiful brown eyes.

“Fuck, yes. Shit, it’s...yeah, I’m good.” I couldn’t even form words with all the sensations happening at once. My cock buried deep inside of him, and my hole getting explored by his cirri. It was a lot, but holy fuck, it was incredible.

The cirri pulled out of me, making me gasp. I rested my forehead on Nemo’s. Soon, they were back, but there were more. It felt like four of them had joined together to form a single member, and they pushed inside of me, filling me. Nemo and I moaned in tandem, and I began rocking back against the cirri, and forward into him. We were in a closed circuit, him and I. I was in him, he was in me. It was exhilarating, but it also made me feel a connection stronger than ever. We were bonded, so entwined that there was no start or end to us.

I didn't think it could get any better, but I was proved wrong as cool secretions seeped into my hole, and the grooved tentacles locked onto my channel, sucking and holding onto me. "Oh my God!" I hissed. The suction on my prostate was so intense it made my vision go blurry. I drove hard into Nemo and exploded, fireworks bursting behind my eyes. I was being massaged from within, milking everything out of me, as I filled Nemo.

He was panting and heaving, and warmth coated my belly as Nemo released with a shout. I lowered myself to rest on my forearms, trying to regain consciousness. The suction in my ass released, making me cry out again as another spurt of come shot out of me.

Nemo's legs relaxed and fell to the side. He rubbed circles on my back as I stayed lying on top of him, too spent and blitzed out to do anything else. Words tumbled out of my mouth without thought. "I love you, Nemo."

I heard them in the distance, but I was in too euphoric of a state to worry about it. Nemo let out a happy sigh, and whispered, "I love you, too. You are my mate, Cory."

I closed my eyes and smiled. Somewhere in my head, I knew it was too soon for such confessions, and maybe if it had been someone else and I'd just fucked and been fucked to oblivion all at once, the words might have been sex-induced and not had any meaning. But they did. They did with him, and he was so direct, I knew it was real to him, too. He wouldn't have said it if he didn't mean it.

I forced myself out of my serene state before I lost to it completely and succumbed to sleep right there on top of Nemo. He whined in protest when I pushed off him and all his cirri retreated, letting me go. "Don't worry. I'll be right back, little one."

My legs wobbled when I stood, but I maintained my balance and went to the



bathroom, returning with a damp towel to clean us both up. After I was done, I dropped the towel on the floor to deal with later and slid into bed beside Nemo.

“Can we be spoons again?”

“Sure thing, sweetheart.”

He turned on his side and wiggled back toward me. I snuggled in tight, tucking my knees behind his, and wrapping my arms around him. There wasn't an inch where our bodies didn't touch. Nemo sighed and folded his arms over mine, as his cirri wrapped around me once more, holding me tight against him. It was quickly becoming such a natural experience to be embraced by his cirri, I couldn't fathom sleeping without being surrounded by him from all sides.

“Do you really love me, Cory?” His voice was so quiet, I almost didn't hear him.

“I do, Nemo. I can't explain it, but I do. I feel like you were meant to be here, to be with me. I want you to be mine.” It was the kind of thing you didn't say unless you knew, with certainty, the other person was on the same page. But at this point, I couldn't be anything but completely honest with him.

“Nautili shifters have mates. One mate for their entire life. One being they are fated to find and be with. They have a special connection. If they get separated, they will always find their way back to each other.”

I knew there were a lot of animal species that mated for life. It was something I'd often found myself longing for. To have a special connection and a lifelong partner. It was then his words came back to me. He'd called me his mate. His mate . The word took on a new meaning now, an understanding of the weight it carried.

Mate.

Forever.

The thought should scare me, but it didn't. I wanted it. I wanted all of it. I never thought I would find a connection like this, but then there was no one like Nemo. No one, anywhere. And he was mine. This wonderful, beautiful, funny, amazing man—nautilus shifter—was mine.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:38 am*

Over the next few days, Nemo went with me to the beach, kayaked, and worked with me in the shop. Perhaps the novelty would wear off someday, but for now, I loving getting to spend all day together, and then coming home to eat, watch movies, and fall into bed with each other.

It was pretty near perfect, except for the times I caught him with a far-off look, and the corners of his mouth turned down. I'd caught that look of longing and pain in my own face after my accident. The loss of surfing, as it used to be, had taken a toll. My spirit had been broken as badly or worse than my knee. I knew a little of what Nemo was feeling, but I hated not being able to do anything about it.

Each day when we went out in the kayak, after making sure no one was near enough to notice, Nemo would slip over the side, shift into his hybrid form, and swim to see if he could sense his shell. Each day he came back empty-handed had been harder and harder. Luckily, it had been busy enough at the shop that it kept him from dwelling on it all day. At least that was what he expressed to me.

I did my best to hold space for him or distract him, depending on what he needed. I'd even taken him to see the Holiday Boat Parade. With each interaction and each new place we went, I could see what a long way Nemo had come with his fears and anxiety about the human world. Honestly, I couldn't even blame him. I'd lived here my entire life and there were still things to be anxious or afraid of. But I was so amazed by him, by each new thing he tackled. He was remarkable.

Boats were still pretty high on the list of fears because he'd experienced those in a way I never would. The noise, the disturbance, the pollution, it was a lot. There were many problems with boats, but as with a lot of things, there was some good, too.

Boats could be used for rescue, for transportation, and what I wanted him to see...for fun.

The boat parade was a local tradition that drew a large crowd every year. About two hundred boats cruised the harbor and shores, showing off fantastic light displays. The crowd had been overwhelming for Nemo, but we found a place along the harbor. He had become so taken with our Christmas tree and any lights he saw, that I knew he would love it.

He let out a squeal when the first boat came out, and for the rest of the evening, he stayed in my arms, making noises of awe. Catching the wonder in his eyes had me falling all over again. Wonder. That was what he brought into my life. With every kiss, every touch, every laugh, every squeeze of a cirrus, I was filled with wonder. It was a feeling I didn't think would ever cease with him in my life, and I didn't want it to.

Outside of our time in the shop, Nemo and I had been in a blissful little cocoon with just the two of us. Christmas Eve morning came, and I practically leapt out of bed, eager to get to show off the man I loved with my family. I'd gotten several texts from my parents who'd heard about him from Gramps and were dying to know more. I promised them they would get to meet him tonight for Christmas Eve dinner.

As excited as I was for everyone to meet him, I had to explain to Nemo that our sexual life was just for us. I was pretty certain I would die if he announced his discovery of his prostate at dinner. Although the thought was rather amusing and endearing because I could imagine him doing exactly that.

We'd had plenty of fun discovery on both of our parts. Each time we got naked together, it was new and exciting, and hot as fuck. His cock, his hole, his mouth, his hands; they would have been enough, but add in dozens of appendages that were able to do things to my body I'd never imagined—the man was what dreams were made

of... literally.

I hated to wake him when he looked so serene and beautiful, but we had some things to do before dinner. Gently shaking his shoulder, I called out his name. He blinked his eyes open slowly, and I was greeted with a sleepy smile.

“Good morning, little one. It’s Christmas Eve.” My voice came out in a sing-song tone. At that, his eyes widened, and he sat straight up.

“Oh! We have to make applesauce!”

“Yup, and we’re going to make cookies, too.” Applesauce was what I’d been assigned to bring, but after watching several Christmas movies, Nemo really wanted to try Christmas cookies like he’d seen in some of them. How could I possibly resist?

He threw himself forward and wrapped his arms around my neck. “This is going to be the best Christmas!”

I chuckled. “It’s your first Christmas, Nemo.”

“Yes! And I get to spend it with you, so it’s the best.”

I couldn’t argue with that. It already felt like the best one to me, too. Nemo got up, and since he seemed content to stay naked, and I didn’t mind the view, I gave him an apron to wear while we cooked. He worked with me in the kitchen all day with his gorgeous ass on display. That perfect little peach was tempting and distracting me, but we managed to get everything done.

I was able to find a light sweater with material Nemo could tolerate, because I knew Gramps would have something to say about me letting Nemo walk around in the winter in a crop top. Explaining he didn’t feel the cold wouldn’t have mattered.

We arrived at my grandfather's house and the sense of nostalgia I always felt here hit me square in the chest. It was different this time, though. Different because Nemo was here. Getting to share this space with him meant as much as having him meet my family. This was a huge step, one I was excited to take.

Nemo proudly carried the plate of sugar cookies. The frosting was a mess, but the joy he had decorating them had been the most fucking adorable thing ever. We stopped before reaching the front door.

"Are you ready for this?" Nemo's head fell, and he stared at his sandaled feet. "I don't know. What if they don't like me?"

I shifted the bowl of applesauce to one side and faced him. With a finger under his chin, I tilted his head up. "They will, I promise. It's impossible not to. My grandfather already does, and my parents will love you because I do."

His worry fell away, and his eyes brightened. "I love hearing you say that."

"Well, it's true. I love you, Nemo."

The door opened as he was about to respond, and we were interrupted by the squeals of my mother, who hurried out to meet us. I had to hold tight to the applesauce to keep it from falling as she flung herself at me. "Look at you, Cory. Don't you look handsome?"

"Thank you, Mom. You look beautiful, too." When she finally released her hold on me, I cleared my throat. "I'd like you to meet someone special. Mom, this is Nemo."

Nemo shoved his plate at her, smiling widely. "Hi Cory's mom, we made cookies."

My mom grinned and pulled him into her smothering hug, the plate awkwardly held

between them. “It’s lovely to meet you, Nemo. You can just call me Mom. How’s that sound?”

She released him and he stood there with tears in his eyes and a look of adoration on his face. “I would like that very much... Mom .”

Gah! Something was in the air because my eyes felt misty, too. I blinked hard to try to clear them. The joy on Nemo’s face at the immediate acceptance just about did me in. That and seeing my... mate with my mother. I wanted to scoop her off her feet and spin her around with the gratitude I felt about her reception of Nemo.

She looked at his plate and tilted her head, trying to decipher what shapes they were. “Is that an...octopus? ”

Nemo huffed. “Yes. They didn’t have any nautilus shapes, so it was as close as we could get.”

“Well, I imagine a nautilus would be a difficult shape to portray with a cookie. But I like it; a Christmas octopus. Oh, and a shark, too?”

“Yes. Sea creatures are sort of a theme for us,” I responded.

Nemo piped in, “You should see our tree! We have the best ornament. It’s a seahorse, and it’s rainbow-colored! Can you believe it? Seahorses aren’t rainbow-colored.” He laughed as if he’d told the funniest joke. I couldn’t help but join in because his joy was completely infectious. Even my mom snorted with amusement.

She brought us inside, where Nemo was introduced to my dad, who’d greeted him with a handshake. It was simply his way. Gramps called Nemo to the kitchen, demanding to get the first cookie. Nemo beamed and happily followed the command, eager to please my grandfather. Later, when I was alone with my dad, he gave me a

smile and a nod of approval. It was as much as I expected of him. It wasn't that I thought he would have a problem with Nemo. I meant what I'd told him, that they would love him, but it was just my dad's way. My mom did enough talking for both of them, and he was happy to let her.

A few minutes later, my grandfather had his arm over Nemo's shoulder, as the two came out of the kitchen looking conspiratorial. He was so small next to the old man, and yet, they looked like the makings of a buddy-cop movie. Something told me those two would get up to trouble together, and the thought made my heart feel like it would explode out of my chest. I couldn't imagine anything better than my grandfather taking Nemo under his wing.

"I like this one, Cory. You planning to keep him around for a while?" Gramps asked in his gruff voice.

My gaze locked with the petite man who had completely captured my heart. "A while, yeah. Like maybe forever."

My mom gasped, and I saw my dad's brows arch with surprise at the declaration. Gramps just gave me a wink and tugged Nemo to his side. "Sounds like we should kick off this party with a little celebration."

He released Nemo, who walked over and reached up to cup my face. His thumb scraped over my trimmed scruff. "Forever, Cory."

Gramps returned with a bottle of champagne and began pouring glasses for all of us. Nemo took one and sniffed it, making a face when the bubbles tickled his nose. I pursed my lips to hold back my smile.

Gramps lifted his glass high in a toast. "Welcome to the family, Nemo. Listen to your heart and it will always guide you home."



Cheers rang out, and I tapped the edge of Nemo's glass with mine and took a sip. He did the same before setting his glass on the table. He turned toward me and grabbed my hand, placing it over his heart. "My heart led me to you, Cory. You are my home."

The deeper meaning of his home hung between us, making a lump rise in my throat. I forced the lump down, needing to respond, not caring we were in front of my family. "I feel whole when I'm with you, that you were the piece I'd been missing and spent years searching for. You're my home, too."

I bent down and kissed him to the sound of 'aww' from my mom in the background.

"All right. Enough of that mushy stuff. Let's eat," Gramps announced, breaking up our kiss, but he gave me a wink when I met his eye. Just like that, Nemo was a part of my family, as he would be...always.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:38 am*

Nautilus families had their own form of connection and affection, but it was often more limited to the instincts that came from our shelled forms. I'd had a few laughs with some of my family above water, but it wasn't the same. It wasn't anything like the loud and expressive version I experienced with Cory's family, but it was captivating. Watching the way they talked and laughed and supported each other made me feel warm through and through. They had a special bond, and they had extended that bond to welcome me in.

A part of me was still missing, still far away, but Cory and his family helped me see that home was more than my shell, more than my refuge. It was him . That night, I decided I would stop looking. Stop obsessing over something that was gone and wouldn't be coming back .

The idea sat like a rock in my belly, but I needed to let it go and focus on the life I had with Cory. It was a beautiful life with him. He loved me, cherished me, and protected me. He was more than I could have ever hoped for in a mate. I needed to look ahead with him and not keep looking back. Starting with Christmas and the promise and hope it brought.

Cory

Christmas morning, I woke with a strange feeling in my chest. I thought it was my excitement to share the holiday with Nemo, or carry-over from the night before and my heart feeling so full at seeing him with my family. The sensation remained even after our breakfast and hot cocoa, making me feel restless. Perhaps it was simply heartburn after all the food I'd had the last couple of days.

Nemo sat in my lap, staring at the Christmas tree. “Do we have to take it down when Christmas is over?”

“Typically, yes, though people do it at different times. But if it makes you happy, we can keep it up as long as you’d like.”

“Hmm. I’ll think about it. I really enjoyed putting it up with you, and I think it would feel more special next year if we don’t keep it out too long.”

I kissed the side of his cheek, trying to focus on his presence. “You might be right.”

With my arms around him, I rested my chin on his shoulder. I felt a cirrus flicker over my skin as it wound its way around my belly. It was strange to think how, in less than a week, I’d grown used to feeling the thin tentacles on—and in —my body. They were a part of Nemo, and every part of him excited and soothed me. Except now. As nice as it felt, it didn’t soothe the agitation in my chest.

“Are you all right, Cory? My cirrus is sensing something bothering you.” Nemo tilted his head back and looked at me.

I ran a hand over my hair, not sure what to say because I didn’t understand the feeling, except that I felt like I needed to do something. “I’m very happy with you right here, Nemo. I don’t want you to think otherwise, but I have this urge within telling me I need to go.”

Nemo climbed off my lap so he could turn around to face me, concern etched on his face. “Go? Where?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Then you should go. You should listen to that feeling. Instincts are there for a reason. It’s something that comes natural to us shifters, maybe not as much for

humans, but it's there, and you should acknowledge it."

"I'm sorry. I don't want to mess up our Christmas."

"No. You aren't. If you need to go, then I'll come with you...unless...you don't want me to." His voice got softer as he spoke.

I grabbed his hand. "I want you with me. I'm just not sure where we'll end up."

"Wherever it is, we'll be there together."

His assurance was what I needed. Knowing he would be with me eased some of the disquiet I felt. "Okay. Thank you, Nemo. Let's do this. I guess it will be an adventure."

I grabbed my hoodie, and Nemo took his Christmas sweater, and we got in the truck and left. I didn't even know where we were going, but I had this pull inside of me. Since I was trusting my instincts, as Nemo said, I let the pull direct me.

Before long, we were driving along the PCH—Pacific Coast Highway—which followed the coast. We drove past our usual beach and kept going. Nemo placed his hand on my thigh, giving me a tether to hold on to while I embraced the unknown. Another twenty minutes down the highway and the pull grew stronger. It reminded me of the ache I used to feel when I stared out at the sea. An ache that I now realized had disappeared when Nemo arrived .

I inhaled sharply when that pull flared, making me swing the truck over to the side of the road and park on the street. I knew where we were, but then I was pretty familiar with almost all the beaches along California's coast. I just wasn't sure why we were here.

Nemo let out a loud laugh. He pointed to the sign of the beach. "Cory! It says

Christmas Cove!”

I smiled at that. It seemed almost too perfect that I was brought here on this day. Christmas Cove was one of the beaches in Laguna Beach at the southern end of Orange County. I climbed out of the truck, and Nemo came to my side, taking my hand and twining our fingers together.

We walked down the ramp that led to the beach. At the bottom, I felt guided to follow the path to the left, which would take us to the part of the beach where the tide pools were. I pointed out the sign to Nemo, which said, ‘ Collecting of rocks, shells, or marine life is prohibited .’

“You aren’t allowed to collect me, Cory.”

I snorted. “It’s a good thing I already have you.”

Nemo got distracted by the tide pools, giggling as he poked at sea anemones or talked to crabs. I couldn’t stay and watch him, not then. Not when the pull was so strong it was all I could think about. Beyond the cove, there was a dry stretch of sand where the water didn’t reach. The sunlight gleamed off something poking out of the sand .

I ran, well, trotted, toward the gleaming object. Going down on one knee, I hurriedly brushed the sand away and let out a shout when I saw what it was. “Holy shit!”

“Cory? Are you all right?”

My heart lodged itself in my throat and I couldn’t respond, but I scraped at the sand with my hand, trying to free it.

I heard Nemo approaching. “Cory?”

The object in the sand gave way until I held it in my hands. I stared at it with utter

disbelief. How? How did I find it? I'd never actually seen it, but I knew, without a doubt, that it was his. I fell back on my ass, landing in the soft sand.

When Nemo saw what I was holding, he froze. A loud sob burst out of him as he shouted, "My shell!"

He ran toward me and tackled me, pushing me until I was on my back in the sand. He grabbed the shell and clutched it to his chest. I held him as the relief of his fears, worries, and loss poured out of him.

"You found it. I can't believe you found it. Thank you, Cory!"

"I'm not sure how, but I am so happy I did."

"We're mated, Cory. We're mated, and you found the part of me I couldn't find. It was on land, and I couldn't find it. But you could because you are of the land." He peppered kisses over my face.

"Merry Christmas, Nemo. "

"Oh! Merry Christmas! Thank you. Thank you for bringing this back to me. This is the best gift! It means so much to me. I was prepared to let it go, but am so relieved I don't have to. I only wish I had something special to give to you, too."

"You already have. You are the best Christmas present I could have hoped for, Nemo. You saved me once and now you're here, saving me again by filling my life with joy. You're my miracle. My...mate. You're mine, Nemo. And I'm yours. I love you."

He kissed me hard and though his eyes were misty, overcome with emotion, he grinned so big it made my heart explode.

“I know it said no removing of shells or marine life, but I'm the marine life and it's my shell, so I'm not leaving without it.”

I smirked at his adorably determined face. “I'm not sure how it got here, but at least it managed to end up in a protected area.”

Nemo bobbed his head in agreement before looking out at the ocean. “Would you mind...would it be okay if I shifted for a little while? I've missed it so much.”

“Of course, little one.”

A flash of fear crept in as the thought returned of him going into the sea and never coming back. I forced it aside, though. It wouldn't happen. He would come back to me. But even if it did, we were mated, bonded. A tether connected us. If I could find his shell on a beach thirty miles away, I could find him in the sea. All I had to do was follow my heart and it would lead me to him. I watched with delight as he held his shell and ran full force into the sea. My humanness had me watching for him to come up for air, but I knew he didn't need to.

I stripped off my hoodie and walked out into the water, bracing myself against the biting cold. I was waist-deep when I felt a familiar flicker against my skin. A smile stretched my lips wide. I looked into the water, expecting to see his face, the face underwater I'd spent years dreaming of.

Instead, I caught a glimpse of the beautiful brown and white shell floating around me as the cirri fluttered against my skin. I let out a laugh. He was ten times bigger than any nautilus I'd seen in an aquarium, and he was mine. The color of the shell matched his hair and fair skin tone. I felt him, too. Within me. Even if I hadn't seen him go into the sea, I would have known him anywhere. My mate .

“Look at you! You are utterly remarkable. My little saint nautilus.”

\*Thank you for reading Little Saint Nautilus