

"Big brother!"

A Nautipod no taller than most people's hips went around the clubhouse with a magazine in her hand. Since Baker and Vette were busy at the auto shop, she sought after her big brother with some questions. It wasn't too hard to find him; he napped in his room, lying on his back, hands on his chest, and helm closed tight. That didn't prevent the sister from letting herself in, however, and startled him awake by jumping onto his chest. Opening his helm a little, there was a page shown to him about swimming, and got the idea pretty quick.

"Ace, I really wanna try to swim! Mom and dad said they'll teach me tomorrow, but I really wanna learn now!"

Ace stretched his body before he sat up, holding his sister in his hand and the magazine in the other to read it. There was a want to reject her request because it wasn't possible he recovered enough to get back in the water, but the pleading face paired with her big eyes were the main factors for his decision.

"Uh...Sure, Sugar. The pool should be free today."

He spoke with a little smile, and his sister bounced happily before hugging his neck.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you! I'll get everything I need for swimming!"

When she hopped off and left the room, Ace's smile slowly faded the longer he thought about the swimming lessons. He still had issues being in the water despite the fish shell he sported, but he assumed a rejection could crush her little heart. He couldn't do that when she showed so much enthusiasm. Now, he had to figure out how he was going to give those lessons.

The preparation took longer on Ace's side while Sugar sat at the edge of the pool with her feet kicking and splashing the water. Because the bigger pool had a deeper end, she thought it'd be like swimming in the ocean. Ten minutes passed before she saw her brother arrive, and got up to hug him.

"You're here! Do we get to swim now?"

Her sparkly eyes gazed up at him while he chuckled, and patted her head.

"Not yet; there's something I want to ask you."

He said, hand gesturing for her to follow him to a beach chair where he sat down and she stood in front of him.

"Do you know how to use your merform?"

"A...what?"

She asked with a brow raised.

"A merform. It's like when you saw those Cccat centaurs the other day. We have something similar except our lower half are our tentacles, or a fish body when the shell is like mine. It's easy to change into."

He explained, going to the edge of the pool, yet didn't jump it. She followed him with a grin.

"Oooh! So it's like our version of centaurs!"

"Yeah, exactly like that. All you need to do is think about it. Let's try that on this end."

He picked her up and gently placed her in the water, kneeling at the edge once she was in. She immediately made attempts to change her lower half, and poofed into her Pod form every time. She huffed, changed back to humanoid, and looked up at Ace.

"I can't do it..."

He smiled and affectionately rubbed her head.

"Hey, don't beat yourself up this early. It's only the first lesson."

As happy as he looked, the time to get in the water crept up when he still wasn't ready to get in. But how could he give her demonstrations if he didn't hop in? Although he could change forms out of water, it was much better to use merforms in water. His shoulders slumped a little as he sat down.

"Okay. I'm joining you to help out."

He muttered, taking a deep breath and placed his feet in first. Sugar may have the mentality of a very young person, but she could understand the water made Ace uncomfortable.

"Brother, you don't need to. I don't want you to do something that you don't like."

"It's just water, Sugar. It can't hurt Nautipods because we were born in it."

Like ripping off a bandage, he pushed off the edge and was tall enough to stand in the shallow end. It grounded him enough to not be overwhelmed by his phobia. Once the hardest part was out of the way, he gave her a big smile to reassure her.

"You have the right idea, but how were you doing it?"

"Um. I was thinking of my humanoid form and pod form at the same time. It would've mixed them together, wouldn't it?"

"No. You have to think of the placement yourself, not give your body the pieces and tell it to figure it out."

He replied as his lower half shifted; the armor on his legs opened while his tail became bigger to fuse with the plates, creating an armored underbelly that connected to the merform half. He held onto the pool's edge and grinned at her look of amazement.

"See? Just gotta imagine where the parts should go."

"Imagine where they go. Got it!"

Sugar was more determined than ever to get it right. First thought she had was her humanoid form,

then where the tentacles should go. Like his leg plates, hers opened up to expose the soft body underneath to fuse them together and form her three tentacles. The plates surrounded her waist with veil-like fins sticking out underneath to resemble a skirt. She gasped when she peeked down and propelled herself up and down since she couldn't exactly jump.

"I did it, brother!"

"That's it, sis!"

Ace clapped for her as he grinned. It was The first step to teaching her the ways of swimming, now came the harder part; the actual activity.

"I think you'd know this with your Pod form, but I'll explain it anyway for your sake. Between your tentacles, where the beak would be, is an organ called a siphon that propels us. Most don't have a tail to move, so they use that to traverse water and, if they're really experienced like mom is, they can swim faster than torpedoes."

The shines in Sugar's eyes were prominent as she listened, and became so excited to swim. She didn't have a second thought before pushing off the edge to try and use her siphon. There was a small problem, though. She tried using her arms with her tentacles, which only got her a foot away from him.

"Sugar, don't get ahead of yourself. Let me explain how to do it."

"Oh...Fine!"

She huffed, and slowly rotated to face him.

"You gotta bend your tentacles up like you're using legs to crouch to get the best flow, then push them out as fast as you can."

Following his instructions, her tentacles moved upward at first, but Ace saw an issue with her direction. He reached for her to grab her.

"Wait! Point it at the e-"

She forced them down before he could stop her. It lifted her 8 feet in the air, then she splashed down into the water with a loud squeak. Her brother, now concerned, pulled her back to the surface, thinking she scared herself until a laugh came from her.

"Are you okay?"

She nodded, still giggling from the mishap.

"Yeah! That was so much fun! I wanna do it again!"

"What about your swimming lesson?"

She didn't reply and continued jumping out of the water repeatedly, splashing down and drenching her

brother each time. The only thing that stopped her was Ace quickly forming his legs to hurry out of the pool and sit on a chair. His elbows rested on his knees, his hands were clenched together, and his forehead rested on his hands. She wasn't sure what happened, but she changed to her humanoid form and went to check on him.

"Big brother?...Are you okay?"

She asked, watching him take long breaths before he relaxed and lifted his head up to flash a smile at her.

"Yeah, I'll be fine. It was just a couple of bad memories, but I get over them pretty fast now."

He answered as he stood up and patted her back.

"C'mon. I'll reward you with some specialty ice cream."

Two months had passed since the first lesson. While it was fun for Ace to teach his little sister something new, he wasn't sure how well he taught her. She could swim efficiently, sure, but did he do enough to ensure she could swim in places that weren't similar to pools? He tried ponds, then lakes, and next was the sea itself. Their armored feet displaced the white sand as they walked along the shoreline with the waves gently soaking the soles. Sugar learned to not be so excited to keep Ace from being uncomfortable despite how much he said it wasn't a big deal. To her, it was.

Heavier footsteps followed right behind them, covering their smaller footprints as he watched the waves. He looked at Sugar before looking at Ace.

"Are you sure she's ready for this? The sea isn't something to underestimate as it can punish the best swimmers for the slightest mistakes."

"Pops, we don't need to frighten her before she even gets her knees wet. Besides, we'd never let her get lost at sea. You know that."

Baker looked out to the sea, slowly stopping with his children to watch the distant waves. They were calm for the time being.

"Of course, but we still shouldn't let our guard down, son."

Sugar wasn't thinking about the potential dangers, she just wanted to use her new skill to show them how good she was.

"Can I get in the water now?"

She asked, using her big eyes on them which worked on Ace. However, Baker covered his adopted son's mouth to keep him from answering.

"When we get to the pier, you can go in. It's just up ahead."

He said while using a tentacle to point at said pier. It wasn't too far up, yet Sugar sighed and nodded.

Ace glared at Baker as the hand was moved away from his mouth, then they continued walking.

"So what about the pier makes it safer?"

Ace asked.

"She can grab onto pillars if she feels the waves are too rough. It's how I and others gained confidence to swim in our merform."

"Oh, then it's an old way of learning to do it?"

Baker nodded, and patted one of the pier's pillars when they arrived.

"There's an abundance of these in this world and they're sturdy enough to withstand most storms. It made sense to use them to prevent ourselves from being swept away."

Sugar grinned, and went under the pier to get in the water, changing to her octo-merform once the water was deep enough and looked back at them.

"The waves feel so neat! Wanna join?"

As nice as it would be, Ace stayed with just his feet getting wet by the waves. Baker looked at him, noticing he stared at the vast sea without answering Sugar, then gave him a gentle tap with a claw.

"Son?"

"I'm...fine. You should be the one swimming with her; the pool was enough for me."

The big Nautipod nodded, but felt bad for not having Ace come with them. He taught Sugar to swim, he had the right to be in the water with her which Baker didn't want to take from him. Ace still insisted, and finally got Baker to shift to his own octo-merform to swim with Sugar. The child was puzzled, however.

"Why isn't Ace swimming with us?"

"He's leery about the sea for now. I'm sure he'll be able to join you in the future."

Baker answered, then held his daughter's hand with a grin.

"Want to dive?"

Sugar nodded and they both went under water for a casual swim while Ace watched from land. Sighing, he crossed his arms and frowned. It felt like he let his sister down a bit by not joining them. His fear was understandable, but when it got in the way of spending time with a family of swimmers, it became frustrating for him. He lifted his head up to watch the clouds and think about ways to speed up his recovery.

"Eventually, I'll swim out there with you guys."