

Spring, a time of rebirth and new beginnings. When the flowers bloom from the snow-packed frost, and the trees return to their green rustling breeze. The sky returns to its dazzling blue, and the birds soar through its majesty again. Only, Hayloft couldn't remember the last time he'd experienced Spring. Let alone any season outside of the safe waters, untouched by the winds above, other than a small shift in temperature. Hardly noticeable for a creature with a hard shell to protect it.

The moment he'd met that half-haired cccat was the day that changed, though, wasn't it? Dragged from his safe waters of the oceans beaches into the Sun that warmed the sand he now walked along. The breeze that carried was cool compared to the warmth that beat down on his back. Hunched in the sand that he drew on with a stick. Waiting, oh so impatient for the chapped furred man to return.

How long had it been? He wondered. Since he'd even felt the heat of the sun on him. Back when he'd lived in that little village, now long since abandoned, just like his lost arm that likely still baked in the elements if not already torn apart for fauna scavenging for food. He didn't know, he didn't care. He didn't like thinking about it after the nightmares finally ended. Sterling often told him that maybe it would go away. The phantom pains would stop, and it would all be so much better, but would it? Now that he was stuck on land again, was it?

"Hey, you actually waited! Was worried you were gonna ditch!"

Chaps' voice called out from beyond the tree line. Trotting along in the dirt that transitioned into the soft white sands. He carried an old floaty, taped up with obvious holes that ate away at its cheap plastic through the years. How long has he had that thing, or did he just find it? After saving his ass a few times from drowning himself trying to swim he'd better hope he'd just found it or Hayloft would have some choice words to share.

"Why wouldn't I wait? I don't need you trying to kill yourself again." The large pod shifted, resting his hands on his knees to push himself up to tower over the cccat.

"Cmon, I brought a floaty this time! You won't even have to worry about me this time!" The tan cccat purred, ignoring the large pod as he trotted down the sandy beach to the edge of the water.

Chaps had never feared the water; hell, that's why they met in the first place. A fleeting adventure to learn how to swim that didn't come naturally to the wormkin species unless their host had been a fish. At least that's what Hayloft had heard. They were vulnerable in water, and death came too easily. Especially as the water got deeper and the shores dropped off into the deep, dark depths that nautipods like the cowboy thrived.

He was confident every time, Hayloft could admit that as he watched the furred creature wade into the water. Putting all of his weight onto the destroyed floaty as if testing if it could even hold up. Keeping part of his upper body dry as he clung to its dark plastic. "See? All you gotta do is spot me!"

Right... Spot him. Another word for save my ass if this thing pops. He was so confident and happy when he was in danger, wasn't he?

"That's one way to say keep me alive." Hayloft sighed, padding close to the water whose waves brushed against his hot shell. It felt amazing. He'd been sitting in the spring sun for too long, more like a hot rock than a fish who needed the water to thrive.

"Oh, please, you're no fun!" Chaps called, giving a half-hearted paddle back deeper into the water. He'd hardly moved an inch trying to figure out how to backstroke in a floaty, and for a moment, it made Hayloft smile.

"You're doing it wrong." He hummed, wading into the water until it was deep enough he could squat and propel himself forward. Of course, a nautipod like himself had an advantage when it came to swimming. Manta wings that helped him glide through the calm, cold water, not yet warmed by the Spring sun. Tentacles to help control his movements, and a life full of experience, swimming. "You're trying to swim like a frog, keep your legs straight and move them up and down."

He swam circles around the cccat, gentle and quiet. Bringing his hands up to cup the back of Chaps legs to guide him and bring them deeper into the dark waters.

"See, I told you you'd be a great teacher." Chaps chimed, hanging his head back against the floaty. Lose strands that hung in front of his face fell aside to look at the pod with a warm smile. It made Hayloft's face warm, similar to the way the sun felt on his shell, but this was different. It made butterflies in his stomach looking at him and the stupid smile he had on his face. He sure had ways to make Hayloft feel embarrassed, didn't he? Shy, even when he looked at him like nothing bothered him. Not even a pod that hated his guts in the beginning.

"I may be a great teacher but you do suck as a student." Hayloft joked dryly, looking back into the waters until he brought them to a stop. Here, they wouldn't be too far from the beach but deep enough that they wouldn't touch the ground. Far from the creatures that lurked beneath, when they saw the dark sediment fur of Hayloft drifting alongside.

"Oh, please, you know you love me as a student." Chaps cackled, stopping his kicking once they'd stopped and instead relaxing into the float that cradled him beneath the hot sun. "Plus, don't think I didn't see you smile."

"Are you sure you're not just getting a heat stroke?" Hayloft could feel the smile on his lips cracking. Edging at the corners of his lips, trying to break free when he looked at him. There was just something about him... Something that made him... Happy? No, it couldn't be that. It had to be something else! After all, he was just a cccat. They were nothing like pods, and his host wasn't some sort of fish. He'd never be able to thrive in water like him. No matter how hard he tried and how much he'd compromise for him. How much...

*No, he needed to stop thinking about all that.* He was happy in the water! Sure, it was lonely living in the waters with no friends other than a grumpy old pod who spent their time dealing with lost folks. It wasn't like a warm cabin with freshly made food and a basement flooded just for him to visit. The occasional bed to crash on when he found himself lost in talking to Chaps for hours. Okay... Maybe he didn't like it here. Maybe he missed being on land like he used to.

Talking to someone who enjoyed his presence, liked floating in the water with him, and watching the clouds roll by. He felt... He felt good when he was with him.

"Hey, you ok?" Chaps voice broke into his thoughts. He brought his head up as he floated along in the water beside him. Letting the currents take them along, it's gentle pull.

"Oh- Yeah. I'm ok." Hayloft sighed, resting his hand on his stomach. Chaps had likely retorted at his terrible joke, and he'd been too lost in his thoughts to even notice. "Just thinking is all."

"What are you thinking about?" Chaps asked, not hesitating to ask further as Hayloft sighed.

"About... Your offer."

The offer to come live with him. Proposed after he'd stayed with him for days on end without returning to the waters edge. He had everything he needed in that house. Food, water, and companionship, that looked forward to seeing him every morning. He'd sworn off getting close to people again. Feeling anything towards a cccat after his village had been destroyed, and now here one was. Treating him like he was more than just a pod, he was a friend. His companion.

"Ya know you don't have to accept it any time soon. Visiting is just as nice! I still like having you come by!" Chaps was always optimistic, smiling as he gently kicked his feet and resting his head all the way back to the tips of his hair drifted in the waters. "I just like having you around. I'm happy that I met you, but I know you need time."

Yeah... Yeah, he did. But he'd had over 200 years to think about the land again after losing his arm. Only surfacing once every year when he'd needed his arm touched up or fixed. Since meeting the strange cccat, he'd been on land more than he had for a long time.

"If I'm honest, I think I've had enough time and... It wouldn't exactly *hurt* to... Ya know, live on land." Hayloft shrugged. Feeling his face warm again with embarrassment from saying something so sentimental. Glancing to the side at Chaps, who now stared at him with a dumb look on his face like he'd just been told he won the lottery. "Hey- Don't look at me like that. It's not that big of a deal, alright?"

"Oh no no! I'm just- I'm happy. I look forward to living with you more often. Just know you can go back whenever you want! Don't feel pressured at all!" Here he went, yapping his ear off with excitement as he stared at him full of glee. It was weird having someone so excited at the prospect of seeing him more. The grin on his face was almost contagious enough to make Hayloft smile. But not this time. It only made him feel more embarrassed and shy looking at him.

"Yeah yeah yeah- Just... Don't get too used to it, huh? Even if I'm staying with you, we'll still be coming out here to learn. So sit your ass up, we have a lot to do today." Haloft scoffed, brushing aside the tightness in his chest when he thought about living with him. Seeing his face. Being near him. Finding a sort of love again. Well. Maybe that's a bit too far right now... He'll get there when they get there if Chaps ever felt the same.

"You got it, boss!" Chaps chimed, pushing himself up to look down at Hayloft. The people of Skire weren't kidding. Spring really was a time for new beginnings. A fresh new start, huh?

Number count: 1801