

Essen-shell Escort

Nemo didn't notice when the sand started to shift. His tail was in the surf and his heavy eyes turned east, only looking away as his head nodded and jolted back up. Razzamere was too far to see from here, especially in dark so thick and hazy that he couldn't separate the sea from the sky. But the waves were calm. Somewhere, in that direction, under the watch of the lighthouse, the ray would be drifting between the cliffs.

His father was there, too. Probably brooding in his hut as Nemo brooded on the shore. Nemo missed him too, but just as he hoped to see the ray without taking a step closer to Razzamere, he found himself wishing his father would appear on one of the ships sliding into the Seaworn docks. That they would untangle themselves from that town and find him here. Like his familiars did.

Something pressed gently down on the end of his oar. He started. A seagull had landed there without a sound. For a moment, he thought he'd called it here – sneaking about in the dead of night was not typical gull behavior. But he felt no connection, no comfort, no company from this creature. Just... an unnerving disquiet.

He followed its gaze back across the sand, and there, beneath the red lamps –

“-Aah! No! No no no! Get!” he yelled, wrenching his oar out of the wet sand. The bird launched, honking with displeasure, into the night air. Nemo got to his paws and hurried to the nest. Two heads, too small for the turtles' gigantic – cosmic, almost, with their own gravity – eyes, were wiggling and shoving their way through the sand.

Nemo kneaded the ground beneath him and burst into purrs. For the next several minutes, his night was peaceful – the occasional glance and swat was enough to startle the seagull off when it wandered too close. The turtles smacked one another with tiny fins as they unearthed themselves in one giant mass. The red light gave off little heat, allowing for the pleasant summer breeze to carry the stray sand off their shells.

And then they were free, and Nemo's job got much harder.

“-Hey, only one of you is allowed to be wrong at a time,” Nemo fretted, hopping over a dozen little creatures as he hurried to unmake his trash pile. Confident that they'd know where to go, he'd piled all the litter behind the nest, towards the land – and about five of the babies were about to get lost in it. He pulled scraps of paper and cloth and tangles of seaweed out of the paths of wayward children. He laid a paw on some of the rocks and shells, assuring himself that they weren't sharp. And then he had to return to the nest, because the seagull was standing where he'd just been sitting, so close that he could see its feathers rise with excitement at the sight of an easy meal.

It took off when he drew near, but it stayed nearby – it didn't even land. Just circled like a vulture, waiting for him to leave again. He feared he'd have to strike it if he wanted it to stay gone.

That's not very fair. It's just hungry.

He didn't relish in giving it the fright of its life, either, but that seemed nicer than a fight.

The air brushed against his fur as it was displaced – around him, coiled like a spring, materialized an oarfish as long as a cat. Its fins were less fins and more chitin, twitching at the joints and reaching forward with two curved claws at each tip. Its face split open, revealing two enormous mandibles and a gape far larger than that of any fish.

The bird screeched and fled. On the sand beneath, every baby turtle began a panicked shuffle in a different direction.

“-No no no no! Not you! I’m sorry!”

Nemo tried, in the last desperate moments where he could see all the babies at once, to count them. No use. Well over fifty, he guessed, and then he was rushing around the sand, trying to clear the path of each individual one. It’d have been easier to hold smoke in his paws. He summoned the horseshoe crab – by salt and storm that thing was getting big – and waved frantically at the beach. “Roll around! Try to... To this!” Nemo snagged a plastic wrapper from the sand and jabbed it onto one of the urchin-like spikes. “Don’t hurt the babies!”

Obediently, the crab rolled away.

“You! You see these?” The oarfish swung its head towards Nemo as he dragged his paws through a wet patch, where he could see small bubbles forming. He unearthed and presented a tiny crab. “These will hunt babies! Pick these up. Put them down, uh... uh...”

Not really a safe place to put them, with turtles in every conceivable direction.

“*Nemo?*”

A jolt of familiarity ran through him at the voice, though he couldn’t remember which guildmate it belonged to right then – he waved in the vague direction it’d come from. “Watch your step! Turtles! Here, you can put the crabs in this pile of sand, and we’ll just make sure the babies don’t go here.”

The oarfish looked over his head at the guildmate and its many chitin whiskers twitched, ignoring him.

“I’m talking to you,” Nemo muttered.

“*What* is going on here?”

And it was that tone, that I’m-gonna-tell-Dad-if-you-don’t-grovel-right-now lilt, that made Nemo pause.

“-Wren!” He charged into her and squeezed, feeling her fur, the rough protective vest, the harpoon gun slung over her back, the way she wriggled in discomfort at the smell, and almost cried. He couldn’t see her in this light, but it was definitely her.

She stopped struggling and patted his shoulder awkwardly, her claws clacking on the crab charm. “Hey, bud. I got your letter.”

He nodded into her fur. “I sent it – I sent copies of that thing everywhere. I think even Peter got one. Can you help me with something?”

She moved a paw towards her gun. “Killing the sea serpent, I reckon?”

“-No! No!” Nemo leapt away from her, fluffing up his fur and throwing himself in front of the oarfish. “They’re not – not that kind of sea monster. They’re helping me with the turtles. C’mon.”

As the pair picked their way around the beach, marking the general location of lost babies with twigs, the crab and oarfish worked around them. Though Wren usually looked at monsters through the sights of a harpoon, she did interact with them more often than the average cat, so she regarded them with casual curiosity. She explained to Nemo about the letter, which only arrived *after* rumors about a guild of cats killed in Greendoze, about leaving the *Red Drake* to hop from ship to ship until one could take her back to Seaworn in time to meet up with the Wayseekers. Nemo’s guildmates had not been keen to give up his name or location to the intimidating monster hunter, but Dr. Waystern knew he’d be on the beach tonight, and so-

“I’m impressed,” she said as they watched the last handful of turtles finally stumble into the waves.

“Don’t be,” Nemo huffed, on all fours and panting. “I’m the reason they scattered. The oarfish scared off the birds, but-”

“No, that you made it all the way to Greendoze without getting your tail eaten by hippogryphs,” she said, smacking his ear. “Where’d you get the money to travel that far? How’d you get them to take you in? Unless they were *looking* for the smelliest cats in Farsail.”

Nemo shrugged. “I sold the stingray figure. And I think they just assumed I was motivated, ‘cause-”

“-The one I gave you for your birthday?”

“Yeah, that one. The guild, they-”

“That was a gift from Mom. That was the last thing I had of hers.”

Nemo flinched. “I’m sorry, I just – I had to get out. I don’t know why. I didn’t even – I didn’t even tell Dad. He might think I’m dead. I.”

And he didn’t have a way to justify it, or to explain that he *had* died, scared and so far from home, so he burst into tears.

She retrieved his oar and held it out as he gathered himself. When he finally stood and took it, she offered him another pat on the shoulder, making the crab *clink* again. His tears almost overflowed again. None of the Wayseekers touched him so casually – no one in Razzamere, either. When was the last time he’d been hugged? Dad? “You don’t have to explain it to me. I left, too.”

You did. I’m still mad at you for it.

He didn’t say it.

“So. The guild. They’re good to you? Pay you well? Did they give you these... uh, friends? Do they all wear magic noseplugs?”

“They take good care of me. They – kind of? Gave me these? And they don’t mind the smell... much...” He trailed off, thinking of Astrophel.

Wren’s voice hardened. “Are they mean?”

“No, no. Not most of them. It’s better than home.”

Wren glanced down at the horseshoe crab, who was attempting to climb her leg. The oarfish slid between them and offered her a sand crab, apparently confused about Nemo’s instructions. “Good. Glad to hear it.”

Wordcount: 1558/850

Red Tide Redemption

“What do you see? Do you see *her*?”

Nemo ground his teeth and tried to shut Wren out. Stimulus to his body distracted from the stimulus from his latest familiar, designed specifically for this task.

Claws dug into soil and bark and stone. A long, whip-like tail slapped a nearby branch with frustration. A crown of sensitive spikes quivered as the pulse of a nearby snake quickened, startled. A forked tongue slid in and out, in and out, filling its triangular head with wild smells. So many unearthed worms. So many caverns caved in and open to the air. So many salty streams where the ocean rushed over the more broken pieces of the atoll.

The iguana-like familiar scurried through the heart of Dragon’s Rest while Nemo and Wren waited on the shore.

Though the iguana, Nemo also smelled familiar things – other Wayseekers had been to the atoll, searching for some myth or something mentioned by the Windrose guild. They left scent trails and pockets of smoke where they’d lit fires. But the nearest scent trail, the one

leading toward the crumbles of stone where the great wall had once stood – that smell was unfamiliar, but laced through with citrus and the sea.

“They smell something. This way.”

Wren didn’t wait for Nemo, drawing her harpoon and bounding ahead in the general direction he’d indicated. He wanted to warn her to watch her step, knowing first-hand how steep and twisting the path would be, but the words couldn’t find his tongue. He picked his way after her and turned his attention back to the iguana.

He kept waiting for signs of a much bigger party – hundreds of cats, perhaps sheltering in the crystal caverns or the sunken grove. He was itching to send his other familiars out, too, and scour every inch of this island for a sign of the Windrose cats. He had seen their refractions, relived the ending of their lives, watched them disappear upon this very beach –

And he could not convince himself that they were gone.

“They had magic. Like us. They might have – the way we did. Just woken up later.”

Wren glanced over her shoulder at him. “The sea doesn’t give up its dead, Nemo. Let’s move faster.”

“But – it does. Sometimes. Saga – the squid Saga, not the cat Saga – came back. *I* came back. And I saw Orca once, back home.”

“*Not now*, Nemo. Who knows what this sack of leeches is planning. Misty’s counting on us.”

Far ahead of them, the iguana heard paws slipping on stone.

“–It’s found someone!” Nemo yelped. Saga appeared, two tentacles wrapped around Nemo’s waist and one around his oar, freeing him to sprint on all fours across the shattered forest. Wren hurried to sheath her gun and catch up.

The iguana scurried after the sound. Whoever it was, they knew they’d been discovered – Nemo and the iguana heard them sprinting over the ruins towards the open plains. Since the atoll had threatened to collapse, the magic here had faded, but some of the residents – a flock of bright sheep, some horrific spider-esque shadow – could be seen rushing out of their way.

Nemo ran head-first into the stone wall.

“Hey! Eyes on your own paws, salt-sucker!” Wren hooted as she bolted past. “I CAN HEAR YOU, MARAUDER! WE’RE COMING FOR YOU!”

“Help! Help me! There’s a dragon!” someone called back.

A dragon?! The one that attacked the Windrose cats?!

Nemo and Wren charged ahead, thundering up the hill and swerving around one of the triangular towers. There, on its other side, the iguana-ish creature had cornered a molly, her once-white fur caked with dust and patches where the atoll had rubbed her skin raw. She bore no weapon – Nemo had a vague memory of the iguana hearing one clatter to the ground in the scuffle – aside from her claws, of which only half looked to be in working condition. The others were worn and dull or torn free. Wild, amber eyes were locked on the iguana, whose teeth were clamped tightly on her tail.

A Red Tide Marauder. Not, Nemo realized with a sinking heart, one of the Windrose guild. For a moment he was so furious at her that Saga lurched forward, tangling her arms and legs, squeezing just enough so that she could feel the barbs against her skin. She fell silent with terror.

Wren swung her harpoon up to her face. “Are there more of you?!” she yelled at the same time Nemo demanded “Have you seen anyone else here?”

The molly shook her head, still unable to speak.

“Thank you, uh... Dragon seems like a good name. Thank you, Dragon,” Nemo told the iguana. It scurried into the brush and, moments later, he felt the cold space of its absence in his head.

“Dragon is a terrible name,” Wren argued. “You should give them ship names. Like *Black Barnacle* or *Cyclone*.”

Nemo shook his head. “I’ve been thinking, like, Wrath, or Sorrow, or Shadow. Dragon fits better with those.”

Wren laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

Saga tightened its hold on the marauder, not quite fast enough to stop her from kicking a rock in Nemo’s direction. Nemo hissed. Wren stepped closer with the harpoon, leveling it under the pirate’s chin. “Easy. If I hadn’t promised Misty to bring you in alive, I’d happily feed you to the crabs on this very island. What were you doing here? Trying to steal Windrose artifacts? Or the dragon bones? How many monster-hunting ships have you pillaged?”

The molly’s ears flattened, and she still didn’t answer.

“It doesn’t matter, Wren. She’s done now.”

Wren lowered the harpoon with a snarl. “She sure is. Let’s go to the boat. Keep the squid on her – I don’t want her pushing us overboard.”

The walk back was slower, since the marauder – Penny Parsallow, according to Misty’s descriptions, one of the oldest pirates and a talented weapons engineer whose work was probably to thank for at least one of Wren’s tools – didn’t want to follow. Saga had to drag her, which was tedious when they had to pass the ruins or the swamp, where there were plenty of rocks and roots and muddy banks for her to grab or dig her paws into. Nemo and Wren chose to walk behind her just to keep a close watch. Nemo hoped she was more likely to run than hurt Saga – and if she did, she’d get a harpoon and an oar to the face for it.

“So, do... Dragon or Saga or... Darkness or whatever... know other sea monsters?” Wren asked quietly.

“They seem to recognize each other as allies?” Nemo said, unsure what she meant. “I haven’t introduced them to the other summoners yet.”

“No, do they – would they know which monster killed Orca?”

Oh. A hot stone of guilt turned in Nemo’s stomach. Orca had meant so much more to Wren than himself – he should’ve known not to mention her. “I doubt it. I saw the sea in my dream, and they smell like the ocean, but – I don’t think they’re actually from there. They don’t seem to remember anything they live through. And – the thing where we can be in each others’ heads. Even if they don’t always listen. I think they might just be... more of *me*.”

As he said it, he knew it wasn’t entirely true. His dream had come with a sense of community, of company, like he was part of a ship’s crew again. That they were choosing to serve some greater purpose together.

If his familiars were just his creations, then were they really company? Wasn’t he just... alone?

“Is that why you want to name them?” Wren guessed his train of thought.

“That’s part of it.”

Probably-Penny put up another fight at the boat. After Saga had – as gently as Nemo could manage – secured her to her bench, Wren held up her loaded harpoon again just for good measure, and Nemo reached for the oars. It would be a long, awkward trip back to Seaworn. He

almost wished he could convince Wren and Penny to wait here overnight, so he could keep searching for any Windrose survivors without the trouble of another journey.

Penny cleared her throat. "You're taking me to – to Misty? To where she has the other Marauders?"

"You'll find out soon enough," Wren growled.

"Yes," Nemo said, having no patience for a show. "Most of them."

After that, Penny stopped fighting them.

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