

Atoll

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Atoll

by [Hellenite](#)

Summary

Spend enough time in and around bodies of water as a kid and you'll find yourself wishing for gills, but now that Ranboo's got 'em, he'd do anything to get rid of them. But the world is drowned, nothing and nobody for miles, just endless ocean and the ruins of a life they used to live, and even with the gills, they feel like they're drowning some days too.

Air vents are so much easier to navigate after they're submerged, there's no awkward wiggling and dragging yourself along, just grab the edge and *zoop*- launch yourself forwards and off you go. All you really gotta worry about is if it turns too sharp and you smash your head into the wall before you can stop, but Ranboo's only done that like- *three times max*.

He knows what he's doing, they're a professional.

Unfortunately.

It is kinda eerie though, swimming through abandoned places like this, and yeah, he's a lot better suited to being down here than the other two, but even for him, it's still hard to tell sometimes if anything's lurking in the shadowed corners of drowned convenience stores.

Ranboo always makes sure to be extra careful, learned their lesson once the hard way about being aware of their surroundings and now they wait before venturing out into the open, keeps an escape plan in mind in case he needs to get out fast. He's a quick swimmer anyway, could outpace most things before but especially since all that webbing grew in between his fingers and toes a few months ago.

Bright sides always try and look on the bright sides-

Muted light filters in from up ahead and they backpedal just a little, slowing to a stop at the rusted out grate covering the end of the air duct, peer past the slats into the murky store. Teal tinted sunlight shimmers in from the front windows, creates rippling patterns across the tiled floor that confuse his brain for a minute, makes it think there's something *huge* seething across the ground, and he skitters back on instinct.

Danger danger big THING huge tail moving there gonna get us gonna eat us flee fLEE FLEE, the idiot, *illogical* fish brain wails at him like an air raid siren, and like so many times before, Ranboo has to grab it with their human brain ~~what's left~~, shake it around and scream right back, *there's nothing there it's just light bouncing off the floor calm down we're fine*.

It doesn't settle it much, anxiety and primal *fear* still lighting up under his skin, but he forces himself to creep back to the grate, curls their claws between the slats on the vent so they won't go lurching back again and *thinks*. The light hitting the floor is still in the same spot, *it's not a bigger fish it's nothing alive it won't eat you*, and there aren't really any signs that anything else has been in here anyway, *front windows intact no chewed up shelves you're okay*, so Ranboo pushes forwards on the grate.

The screws are so rusted out they give instantly, and he hangs onto the grate to stop it from sinking, cautiously pokes their head out and drags in water through their gills. It stopped feeling weird a long time ago, back when he almost drowned trying to figure out how the hell his body worked now, but they still don't particularly like it, always reminds them there's something *wrong* with them.

There's nothin' wrong with you you're just different that doesn't make you wrong, that warm voice washes through him and Ranboo hangs onto it like the lifeline it is, likes to think he can

feel a hand ruffling mercilessly through his two-toned hair, *you're still yourself and I still love you lil' bro.*

Love you too, they think back, sucks in another long drag of water checking for weird scents, but when it seems fine, *grease and oils and black things that stick everywhere hate it don't like it leave – no we can't go yet hush*, he huffs it back out, shooting bubbles everywhere. Ranboo makes sure they've got their mesh bag on hand as he slips out of the vent into what's left of the store, sets the grate down gently so it won't cause any vibrations, and then begins his hunt.

A bunch of stuff floats past lazily, waxed paper cups bobbing in the current alongside a shoal of plastic straws, some chip packets that Ranboo's quick to grab, careful not to punch holes through them as he tucks them away in his bag. There are some things that handle being submerged better than others, and that's what he's looking for, swims forlornly past all the candy bar wrappers drifting by, chocolate long since dissolved.

Ranboo sinks down towards the bottom of the shelves, digs through muck looking for mostly salvageable cans of beans and tomatoes, maybe a sack of rice if they're lucky, keeps piling things into his mesh bag until they're threatening to float out of the top. So much got destroyed when the coastline started flooding, entire chunks of the city got swept out to sea, but sometimes they're lucky and find mostly intact buildings like this, bring back everything they can so it doesn't rot further.

If it wasn't for how destructive the saltwater was, they'd honestly leave everything and make supply runs when needed since it was unlikely anyone else would grab it up. The seemingly endless bounty at the sea floor was out of reach for most people, diving equipment didn't really work without oxygen tanks after all, and no human in their right mind was wasting supplies to come down here for a can of pinto beans.

But then again, Ranboo *isn't* like most humans.

Not...anymore at least.

His hands slow to a stop rifling through shelves, one of them turning over as he curls fingers back into his palm, has to be mindful of the wicked sharp claws that jut out of nail beds he doesn't recognize anymore. They weren't always like this, he used to be able to do a lot more things with them, like fold paper cranes or play instruments.

Mom always said he should learn to play piano, *that they had the hands for it*, and Ranboo ended up playing trombone instead but the sentiment was still there. They had long hands that were good for doing elegant things like playing music and folding paper gently together, *gentle hands for a gentle person*, but not anymore.

Now he just looks like a monster with black empty eyes and claws for shredding and ripping things apart not safe are you insane shouldn't let it live should've ki-

Ranboo swallows rough and spreads his fingers back out, feels sinking dread watching the pale purple webbing between them catch the current, *has* to focus on something else to stop the panic attack that's brewing.

Along several walls of the store are huge banks of coolers, and there, easily picked out in this wash of blue is a bright spot of red, and Ranboo quickly swims over, starts fighting with the door to try and get it open. The pressure has sealed it shut *tight*, but they've got to get it open or be left to face all the things they *can't breath spiking up can't think can't breathe can't-*

-what the fuck is that what are you not human not anymore monster dangerous knife to your throat looking your brother straight in his panicked grey eyes should've killed it when you had the chance don't wanna die-

With a vicious tug the door pops open, brief rush of water and swirling bubbles as the ocean settles greedily into this new space, and head spinning, Ranboo starts trying to work the Cokes loose. He thinks he's just lightheaded at first, still reeling from the panic attack they barely managed to avoid, but his movements grow sloppier by the second.

The plastic bottles keep slipping away from his numb fingers, and Ranboo's really having a hard time getting them out, body a little sluggish and hard to control, and that's when he notices his vision is going kinda hazy, black spots darting over everything. They purposefully suck in a big gulp of water, knows their brain forgets sometimes to do it automatically, but it doesn't really help.

It's like being forced to breathe through a straw after you've just finished running laps. Sure, air is getting through, *but it's not enough God it's never enough*, and that's how he knows time's up.

After one last forceful yank, Ranboo manages to get a bottle free, scoops up two more now that they're loose and crams them into his bag, really stressing its limits. He probably won't be coming back down here for a while, so they do one last sweep, dragging deep pulls of water through their gills, trying to get as much oxygen to their spinning brain as he can.

The gills along his neck are small, probably close to five inches and there's only six of them, three on each side as they curve around their throat. They're not really enough to provide the oxygen his body needs to survive underwater, but they let him stay under *way* longer than most normal humans can hold their breath for.

It doesn't really feel like it's been thirty minutes, but after months of this, Ranboo's gotten a pretty good idea of his limits, floats back towards the ceiling and kicks in the direction of the air vent opening. They unsling their bag and push it in first, swims after it as he weaves through the cramped maze, eventually coming out the other end into the wider ocean.

Ranboo's done this so many times, *has seen this same sight so many times*, but it still manages to steal his breath a little, stokes strange feelings in the part of him he doesn't like to acknowledge.

A destroyed city stretches as far as they can see in every direction, disappears way off into the indigo gloom that clouds in like an underwater version of the horizon line, and just because there's no people down here anymore doesn't mean it's a dead place. Vast reefs grow up and over anything they can settle on, bring with them colorful shoals of fish and the things that hunt them, an entire new population making their commute down bustling city streets.

The skyscrapers cast deep blue almost purple black shadows, but where the sunlight hits the water it glows a vibrant teal, and his stupid fish brain eddies back and forth dreamily at the thought of warmer waters. It happens every now and again, but sometimes they get the urge to *stay*, to see what happens when he can't pull in enough oxygen anymore, wonders if that's the push they need, *the final mutation what would finally tip the scales make him more of what he's supposed to be-*

Ranboo shakes his head sharply, sends black and blonde hair swaying, *knows* they can't stay down here, *doesn't want to anyway – yes we do – no we don't* **shut up**, makes a beeline for the surface and the dark smudge bobbing across it. His ears pop with the pressure change, but it's nothing too drastic, eyes squinting against the increasing light, always sluggish returning to a normal shape after being down in the dark and the deep.

He pops up right at the back of the boat, kicks over to the wooden swim platform and hauls their bag up, makes sure everything made it before they start hacking the water out of their lungs. In Ranboo's humble opinion, this is always the worst part of transitioning between sea and land, has to basically vomit up all the leftover water in his respiratory system unless he wants to drown on land.

Spitting a globule of mucousy seawater out of their mouth, Ranboo hangs onto the swim platform and catches his breath, panting like he just finished running a marathon, tips their head up though when they hear their name called, "Ranboo, hey. You made it back in one piece."

"De...d-define *one p-piece*?" Ranboo jokes weakly, smiles at the annoyed tongue click he gets but there's a tanned hand held out for him anyway, pale scars cutting across knuckles, and they take it gladly, mind their claws as they're hauled up. He's usually a little unsteady when he comes back, something about his inner ear struggling to reorient being upright and not weightless, but he's used to it, only stumbles slightly.

There's hands on their elbows instantly though, warm weight that keeps them grounded, *I got you I got you you're okay I'm here I'll keep you safe*, and Ranboo doesn't know if it comes from him or his fish brain, but he slumps forwards a little bit, melting into the contact while a riot of, *safe shoal safe harbor family safe*, storms through them.

"Woah, someone's not got their land legs back, you get the bends or somethin'?" Techno jokes but he's also not joking, intelligent eyes narrowing as they scrutinize Ranboo for any possible injury or malady. He's got a protective streak a mile wide, makes him a little gruff and overbearing, and it used to annoy the *crap* out of Ranboo when they were younger.

Oh my God get out of my room I'm not in your room – those intense eyes hunting you down in the halls poking his head into your friend group you okay you find your classes okay – always early to pick you up from parties spam texts until you answer or he's gonna be at the front door hey lil' bro-bro.

But that was a long time ago, before any of this happened, back when Ranboo didn't have gills or claws or shark teeth, back when the world was normal and all he had to worry about was his older brother embarrassing them after band practice.

“No, m’fine just...lil’ sleepy.” Ranboo mumbles warmly, isn’t actually but they’re not sure how else to describe the soft leaden weight dragging all their limbs down, just wants to float in this feeling forever. The hands on his elbows slip off and then find themselves curling around his back, dragging him into a hug, and Ranboo is more than happy to go along with it, tucks their sopping wet head in the crook of Techno’s neck.

“M’kay, s’long as you’re sure.” Techno huffs, squeezes him briefly and Ranboo hums contently, ignores the way it twists and catches in his throat weird, “Ey, why don’t you go lay down for a bit, before you fall over an’ brain yourself? I’ll put the groceries away.”

That doesn’t sound like a half bad suggestion, *dry off sit up on the front deck check on the stills and the garden touch some earth oooooo you could drink your-* and Ranboo makes a sharp noise that *really* edges into being inhuman, but they’re talking quick over it to mask the sound, “*Oh!* I brought you something.”

He wiggles out of Techno’s hold and drops to his feet, pulling out the Coke bottles, lifts one up triumphantly, “Ta-da! They might be a little shaken up so be careful but- yeah!”

Techno takes it and grins wide, showing off slightly crooked teeth and crinkling his eyes as he spins it around in his hands, “Yoooo! Dude, I can’t *remember* the last time I’ve had a Coke.”

“There’s a whole bunch more down there if you want. I could...go back down later?” Ranboo offers as he pops up, but they know what the answer’s probably going to be, watches the smile slip off Techno’s face, “Ah. Thanks, Ran, but we’ll probably get goin’ before too long. I’ll mark it on the map though.”

It’s about what he suspected, they never stay in one place long and hop between supply sites frequently, some bizarre dance that only makes sense to Techno and his paranoid wariness. Ranboo doesn’t complain about it, *how could they it’s literally their fault freak creature monster knife held to your throat should’ve killed it ax blade swinging by faster than you can follow stay away from him-* blinks some saltwater out of his eyes and nods easily, “Yeah, sure! Sounds great. Hey, where’s Phil? I’ll go bring him his.”

How readily Ranboo agrees smooths the tension out of Techno’s posture, gets his shoulders to relax and has his hands rubbing gently at the Coke bottle, and yeah, he is in charge of their little group, *oh captain my captain sung out late at night around flickering lanterns*, but he worries about it *constantly*. Techno overthinks everything all the time, can’t get a single second of peace and quiet in his head, and it’s kept them alive through so much crap, but it also makes him stress that he’s ordering them around like a dictator, *that he’s a bad person*.

Which is the furthest thing from the truth, Techno is one of the kindest, most loving people Ranboo knows, and they are so *incredibly* grateful for him. He doesn’t even want to think about what would’ve happened if they’d gotten bit and Techno wasn’t here, if they didn’t have that fiercely calm voice talking them back from the edge time and time again, those warm arms hugging him close as he cried terrified over all the ways he was changing.

I love you I will always love you, muttered furiously against the side of his head while he sobbed, blood in his mouth because another tooth fell out and something so much sharper

was replacing it, *you're my sibling nothin' changes that this doesn't change that okay*, shaking fingers combing through hair that used to be the same ash blonde but was now bleeding black in huge chunks, *I'm not leavin' you not for nothing I'm here I'll always be here.*

“Oh, he’s up at the helm.” Techno says easy, stooping to pick up the mesh bag, and Ranboo arches both eyebrows, flinging his hand out as Techno stands back up, “I’m sorry- *you* left *Phil* at the *helm*? As in the place you *control the boat from*? Left *that* Phil there?”

“Yeah no I took the keys.” Techno drawls, fishes the rubber ducky keyring out of the pocket of his swim trunks and spins it around a finger, “I’m not an *idiot*. ”

“Oh thank God I didn’t think you were stupid, *but-*” Ranboo begins feigning great relief, sagging backwards comically far because this is a routine they’ve done so many times before, and Techno picks it up a beat later, deadpan but no less exasperated, “-yeah of course, as funny as it was, I really don’t want another episode of *Mad Max Fury Boats-*”

“-truly a dark day for the crew of the S.S. Steve. In fact, I don’t think I’ve recovered mentally-”

“-don’t blame you. Truly some of the worst drivin’ I’ve ever been subjected to. I’d say we need to take him to an optometrist but I don’t think there’re any left-”

“-yeah but do they even make glasses that thick? I mean- we’d be talkin’ real Coke bottle lenses here.”

“Good point. We might just have to cut our losses and get him like- *a seein’ eye dolphin-*”

“I can hear you both, *you know?*” Phil calls, loud and exhausted from the helm, and Ranboo scrambles into the boat proper, grins up at the annoyed face that pokes over the top railing, “Yeah that’s kinda the point Phil.”

“You are such an unrepentant little bastard and you may have *everyone else fooled-*” He starts with extreme vitriol, but it melts away into fond chuffing as Ranboo holds his Coke bottle up, and knocking the brim of his straw hat back, Phil says in a much sweeter voice, “Oh now, I was just messin’ with’ya mate. You are *such* a love, always been my favorite.”

“Guys. Come on. I’m gettin’ tonal whiplash here. My neck can’t take it. Think of my vertebrae, my poor abused vertebrae” Techno sighs for probably the hundredth time, sounds tired and worn out, but he’s got that tiny, goofy smile on his face he’s only ever worn for his family. Scoffing indignant, Phil folds his arms on the wooden railing, leaning over the side to snark back, “Oh boo hoo. Cry me a river and then *I’ll* sail us up it flawlessly, *jackass.* ”

“Dunno...rivers get pretty shallow...you could...*perhaps*, beach the boat. Theoretically stranding us for *three hours.*” Techno replies in complete deadpan, pushes past Ranboo with a wink as he heads inside to the kitchen, bag bumping against his hip as he goes, Phil groaning overhead, “That was *one* time!”

Ranboo can't help it when he starts laughing earnestly, giggly and happy until something pulls odd in their back from the motion, and they wince, reaching a hand back around to massage along his spine.

"Back still botherin' ya?" Phil's voice asks, floating down trying to be all light and airy but it's leaden with concern anyway, and Ranboo nods, hisses when he presses against tender muscle, "*Mm hm*, I really don't know what I did, but I wish it'd *stop* with the temper tantrum."

It's been like this for a week or two now, just this...*long line* of aching muscles all down his back where the pain kinda comes and goes, but doesn't really seem like it's healing at all. Ranboo honestly can't remember a single thing they could've done to twist a muscle or pinch a nerve this bad, *hasn't had to make a quick escape has been very careful isn't even old like Phil*, and the not knowing is driving them a little crazy.

Pressing down a bit harsher than he should out of frustration, Ranboo drops his hand lightning fast and arches his back in discomfort, fiery tendrils of pain burning their way up his spine. They hiss long and drawn out, ignores how weird it sounds near the end and tries twisting to get the pressure off whatever is hurting so bad, but nothing really seems to work.

"Hey, I think Tech's right. You should take it easy for a bit, maybe go...lay in the sun or something? The uh- the heat might help?" Phil suggests lamely, scratching through his scraggly blonde hair, looks at Ranboo just as concerned and lost as Techno does. Neither one of them has any idea on what to do to help him, wouldn't even if he wasn't half fish monster, meter out what little ibuprofen they have and tell Ranboo to sleep it off.

It's not that they don't care, *they both do so incredibly much ax whizzing by at the speed of light clench your eyes shut doesn't block the sound out harpoon straight through the jugular seething blue eyes and a harpy shriek don't touch him*, but it's just that no one onboard has any real medical knowledge.

Honestly...no one onboard knows much of *anything* useful.

The highest level of education any of them have would be Phil, who was in the middle of getting his PHD for ornithology, which is arguably *wildly* unhelpful both now and even back before everything went to shit. Techno was an English major a year or two away from graduating, *also not super useful*, and Ranboo had barely started college, didn't even have a clue on what they wanted to do besides not be a disappointment, and just...*just don't get them started*.

Suffice to say, *none of them* were prepared to try and survive in a post-apocalyptic world with radioactive mutants and no internet, are doing the best with what they've got, but it's rough going sometimes.

Silver linings and all that, *always try and look on the bright side s'all we can do*, but Ranboo getting bit actually helps them a lot, means he can find food and supplies easier than most other survivors. Techno frowns every time Ranboo brings it up, grows quiet and distant, but it actually brings Ranboo a lot of peace to think of it like that, to know he didn't completely ruin everything by not paying attention to his surroundings like they really should have been.

It kinda sucks some days, *most days hate what it did to you hate how you don't feel like yourself anymore*, but he still maintains that even with the gills and the claws and the shark teeth, the lack of internet is unarguably the worst thing that could've ever happened. Ranboo sincerely believes they'd be able to cope better if it was still up, because without it, there's no way to binge stream TV shows anymore, or Google random *very important shit*, but mostly, it means there's no way to fact check Techno so he now wins every argument by default.

Sitting for over an hour debating the exact rules to Uno Techno placid and calm as Phil goes red in the face keeps trying to explain you can't Uno reverse an Uno reverse card but none of them know except apparently Techno and he won't let up and you're laughing so hard your sides hurt Christ you love them-

But besides the unstoppable headache Techno makes of himself, they manage pretty well everything considered, are doing better than a lot of other people they've run across. Personally, Ranboo likes to think it's because the three of them are dedicated to living as if nothing's really happened, and yeah, that sounds like pretty hardcore denial about the reality of the situation, but something has to give.

The way he sees it, the three of them can either sit around and mope and stress about the state of things, *how humanity is literally on the brink of extinction all the loved ones they've lost Ranboo turning into an actual fucking sea creature*, or they can joke with each other and dick around and do normal people things.

It helps take the edge off, reminds them they're all still *here, alive*, and that while things may be dangerous and scary, they've found some sort of stability together. It's why they celebrated Christmas last year like people used to, strung up fishing line and hooks on their orange tree, wrapped presents in old towels and sang terrible carols late into the evening. It's why Techno and Phil argue about the other's piloting capabilities, it's why they call their supplies *groceries* and named the boat like a middle-aged stockbroker, something stupid and goofy and entirely necessary.

It's why Ranboo nearly broke a claw trying to get Coca-Cola out of a cooler.

It's to help them remember that they're human, that even if that definition isn't as clear as it used to be for some, it still means they can care about others and take pleasure in the small joys they find.

"Yeah...sun sounds good right about now. Think I might go take a nap or somethin'." Ranboo sighs, rolling their shoulders as they toss Phil his bottle, waves off the litany of concerns that get lobbed at his back and edges along the gunwale to the front deck, soft flutter in his heart seeing all the plants bobbing and thriving in the sea breeze. They started the garden as soon as they could, *look I know you don't like veggies kid but you are gonna get scurvy I don't wanna find out if your teeth regrow*, and it became something of Ranboo's personal project.

The climbing vines of green beans twine through the metal railings, baskets hanging over the side filled with basil and cilantro, oregano relegated to its own pot after it ate the parsley last year. Huge bins crowd the deck itself, overflowing with squash and zucchini plants because you can literally not kill them, *Techno has tried multiple times if I have to eat one more of*

those green bastards, but tougher vegetables like that are easier for Ranboo to manage now that all his teeth function more like saw blades.

The amber wood of the front deck is warm under his feet, and even though he's above water, the fish part of them is already starting to nod off from the heat, lulled by the rocking of the waves and the contentment of being near their ~~shoat~~ family.

Ranboo sits down with only a mild wince and stretches out, flexes his toes and tries not to despair over the light purple webbing that connects them all now. *Can't change what happened can't go back can only go forwards look to a new horizon*, Ranboo sighs, makes himself stop glaring at the still faintly red scar on their calf, teeth marks in a jagged crescent curving over their skin, and flops backwards.

It takes a second to find a comfortable spot with how his spine protests, but Ranboo eventually settles and enjoys the sun beating down, listens to the soft sounds of the ocean lapping against the hull and the low rumble of Techno and Phil talking up at the helm, cracks his Coke open and just *breathes*, starts to drift off and dreams about what it used to be like, when the world was normal.

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They grew up with a pool in the backyard, not uncommon in south Florida where it's sweltering ten months out of twelve, and Ranboo remembers being in it practically every day, would come home from band practice hot and sticky and just jump straight in. Mom used to call him *my little fish*, which made him grin delighted back then, and they'd spit water at her before diving back under, but now it just makes their heart constrict, gills along their neck closing up in disgust.

Things are...*different*, and it's easy to say you're okay with different, until you *are* different and not like, *'oh cilantro tastes like soap'* different but like, *'I'm a freak of nature'* different.

Which- Techno really hates it when Ranboo says that out loud, but what the hell else are they supposed to say? There's being the weird kid in your class with eclectic tastes and then there's being an actual sea monster, and if the latter isn't grounds for calling yourself a freak of nature, Ranboo honestly isn't sure what is.

Some days are good though, almost normal even, and Ranboo can be okay clacking his teeth at Techno while they argue playfully, doesn't find his laugh weird when it dips and pitches wildly, caught up in the strange frequencies he's capable of making now, *feels like their mind is their own*, and they're good, *they're okay they're themselves*, but then there's...*every other day*.

Then there's every other time Ranboo can't meet their own eyes, hates the alien slit to his pupils, knows they go entirely black when he's underwater and make him look like the monster he really is. There's the claws that jut from his fingers and toes, tips sharp enough to slice through pretty much anything, the honest to God purple webbing that spans between their digits, half black half blond hair and the gills along their neck that gape open like raw, bloody wounds.

It's anytime he loses his grip on reality, stops thinking like a human and instead devolves into whatever the hell he's become. Ranboo doesn't like talking about it, all the times when they've been out on a supply run and things just...*slid sideways*, the fish part of his brain taking over completely and dropping his consciousness into a blank void of nothing.

They always come back around eventually, *but it's scary it's horrifying it keeps him up at night afraid of the day when he won't*, but he'll blink back to himself, sour copper tang of blood coating their tongue, half a fish clamped between their teeth they were in the process of eating *whole and alive*, roils his stomach with nausea every time.

If the changes were purely physical, Ranboo might be able to learn to live with it, can see some practical benefits to being part aquatic in a world that's mostly below sea level, but it's the rift in his mental state that ruins any peace he might've found.

Ranboo calls it their *fish brain*, something that sounds relatively benign and harmless, but that's just to mask what it really is, a mess of bizarre, alien impulses that now crowd howling at the front of their consciousness every waking hour of his life. They're animalistic, *they're not human*, and it scares him half to death when the best solution he can come up with most of the time is, *can I eat it, or can I kill it before it eats me*.

"S'not safe anymore." Ranboo mumbles wet where they're curled into themselves at the stern of the boat, keeps scrubbing futilely at his eyes with the heel of his palm, has to be careful not to cut the delicate skin with their claws. He hears Techno make some kind of choked noise behind him, slight shift of his feet against worn wood like he wants nothing more than to come jerking forwards and comfort them, but Ranboo won't let him get any closer, not after what just happened.

Sitting on one of the benches in their little kitchen picking tender chunks of fish out of savory broth laughing at something Phil says hand lands on your shoulder like an electrical charge sets your nerves on fire whirling around lips pulled back low bas snarl rumbling out of your chest like a chainsaw revving get aWAY protect your fOOD-

"M'losin' control, c-can't keep it out an-anymore..." Ranboo snuffles, chest hitching miserably in stuttering sobs, thinks about how *many* intrusive thoughts they've been getting recently and presses shaking fingertips to razor sharp teeth, *the ones that were so close to biting Techno's hand off*, "I-I don't wanna *h-hurt you- m'gonna hurt y-you-!*"

Feet slap harsh against wooden planks, *no caution no hesitation isn't he scared you are*, and then there's the heavy weight of something falling down beside him. Ranboo gets yanked into a crushing hug, scent of salt spray and the cloying notes of sunscreen heavy in their nose, shouldn't be a comforting combination, but it is.

Makes him think of *home*.

Safe family safe shoal safe harbor safe here with them, his brain spins and *spins* at him, flooding Ranboo with enough serotonin he goes practically boneless, couldn't push Techno away even if they wanted to, and they *should* want to, *have to keep him safe have to make sure you don't hurt him don't turn him*, but his rationale has checked out completely.

Techno takes the chance and pulls him closer, and Ranboo can't stop themselves from burying their face in the crook of their brother's neck, tears welling up pathetically as a large palm smooths over his shaking shoulders.

"You're not gonna hurt me, *you'd never hurt me.*" Techno whispers fierce against the crown of their head, trembling fingers carding through their hair trying to offer comfort, but all Ranboo feels is soul crushing despair as he cries, "I-I'm not *m-me anymore!* I'm not n-normal, *I-I'm not human I'm n-not your sibling-!*"

"*Stop IT!*" Techno demands, fingers digging in like red hot brands against the back of his skull, tense like they can somehow force out everything that's *wrong* with Ranboo's mind, "D-Don't say that! Don't *you-!* You're my sibling- *you're my lil' sibling*, an' *I'm* your big brother and I'll- I-I'll *protect you-*"

His voice cracks and it's one of the worst things Ranboo's ever heard, because Techno doesn't show his emotions much, keeps everything on a firm leash, but the pure *anguish* leaking out right now makes every one of his words tremble, "Big brothers protect their *l-little siblings-* they- t-they keep them *safe.*"

Ranboo feels something warm drip down onto his face, blinks in confusion until they realize what it is, tries to pull back but Techno's grip is like iron. "I'll keep you safe- *y-you'll be safe*, promise Ran, *promise.*" Techno whispers ragged, tears slipping off the end of his nose as he bows his head, "M'sorry, *m'so sorry*, y-you're safe *you'll be safe*, sorry Ran *I-I'm so sorry...*"

"Tech? What's...you didn't do anything wrong, m'what're you sorry for? I...I-I'm the one that almost *bit you.*" Ranboo mumbles softly, wiggles closer and snakes an arm around Techno's back to grab at his braid, gently wraps his hand over the end of it like they used to do when they were little.

Techno doesn't say anything, which isn't uncommon for him, but his arms tighten, tears still silently rolling down and dripping warm against Ranboo's face. He's hiding something, *there's something he's not saying something he doesn't want you to know*, but prying and digging into stuff Techno doesn't want to talk about historically never goes well.

So, Ranboo keeps their mouth shut, settles closer, just lets themselves enjoy the comfort and safety their brother brings like a thick blanket, hopes his presence does the same, even as alien as it might be now.

And it must somehow, because Techno sighs, thuds his heavy head to rest on top of Ranboo's, low rumbling starting from deep within his chest, and Ranboo feels tears prick at his eyes once he picks it out to be their mom's lullaby. The melody is slow and soft, *sounds a little sad sounds a little lost after everything*, but they'd know it anywhere, and he joins in after a beat.

Ranboo has to mind their vocalizations now, hates how they can dip weird and inhuman at the slightest chance. He really tries to force his voice flat now, *wants it to be normal with everything he has*, but it keeps spiking odd and lilting, and they give up with a huff, shift so they can hear Techno better instead. His voice isn't crazy nice or anything, *but it's his*, and

that makes it perfect to Ranboo, settles both parts of his mind faster than anything else ever has.

They stay like that for a long while, just them and the deep music of Techno humming, soft sounds of the ocean lapping against the hull of the boat in underscore, rocking them both gently like they're its misbegotten children, another pair of souls lost at sea like so many others.

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It's a tricky thing to remember, how the world ended, because Ranboo *swears* it seemed like everything was fine one moment, but then the next thing you know you're hanging on for dear life as a hurricane that can't even be graphed tears your home apart.

Whatever went wrong, *it went wrong fast*, or...*more accurately*, it'd been going wrong for a long time but anyone that could actually do anything to stop it hadn't cared until the apocalypse was in their backyard, and by then it was way too late.

Ice caps melted, sea levels rose, weather patterns shifted violently, storms became catastrophic and around the world coastal cities began to fall, one right after another. It was all anyone could do to flee inland, but you either got out in time or you were stranded, left to the mercy of mother nature who bore down like a runaway train hellbent on vengeance.

And the storms that followed...*they were brutal*, violent, the worst anyone had ever seen and likely would *ever* see as the death count just climbed and climbed.

Ranboo doesn't know how many actually died, no one does really. They lost contact with the wider world almost immediately and never really got it back, but in the aftermath, they'd find the bodies, *floating on the waves trapped in sunken buildings sprawled out on rooftops*, and they found so many of them.

That's how they lost their parents, it's how a lot of people lost someone, in the madness of a storm that reached further inland than anyone was prepared for it to, and they tried *so hard* to outrun it, but it just...*it wasn't enough*.

Dad got trapped in the car and they had to leave him, and it nearly killed Techno but the hurricane was dragging the sea further and further inland and they *had to go*, and then for how easily mom's hand slipped out of his own, Ranboo is still convinced she let go on purpose, was afraid she'd drag them into the frothing current as well and chose his life over hers.

And it's one of the worst things in the world living with that. Knowing someone gave their life for yours when you're not even sure if it was going to matter or not, and for days after, Ranboo didn't think her sacrifice *was* going to matter, just assumed he and Techno would both be dead soon anyway.

No one was coming to rescue them, that was a given. Whatever was going wrong where they were was also happening in a thousand other places, and the Coast Guard had bigger things

to worry about than a couple lost civilians stubbornly clinging to life in the wake of a massive hurricane.

But despite the odds, despite the winds and the currents and the massive waves, despite *everything* that seemed to want them dead, Techno refused to give in. He frantically hung on to whatever he could while the water just kept rising, made sure Ranboo did the same, and uncaring storm surge continued drowning anything that didn't have the good fortune of wings or gills.

Surviving was exhausting, but Techno made them do it, seemed completely possessed by the drive to keep going, kept pushing through and hauling them both up, like he was convinced that by simply living, he was flipping a massive middle finger at everything trying to kill them.

Eventually though, the storms moved on, the sea settled, and for the first time in what felt like a lifetime, the sky was visible again. The water never really receded though, and Ranboo realized on the roof of a floating house that this was their new normal, pushed sopping blonde hair out of his eyes and stared out at the drowned world they now called home.

He had no idea where to go from there, looked to Techno, *always looking to their older brother hanging on to his hand his braid hiding behind his broad back you'll keep me safe right always*, and for maybe the first time Ranboo could ever remember, Techno looked just as lost as him, and it was the single most frightening moment of their life.

Rescue aid never reached them and was never going to, but regular people did, came by in their boats that had survived and pulled them aboard without hesitation, passed out sand caked water bottles Ranboo greedily drained until he felt sick. They were in the same boat as all the other survivors, both metaphorically and literally, numb with shock and unsure what to do next, kept waiting for some piece of reassuring news that it was all going to be okay, but it never came.

When they could get signal, all of them huddled around the radio wrapped in space blankets and old towels, listened with sinking despair as the reports grew more frantic and upsetting by the day, harried newscaster speaking of fighting and riots back on what land was left, how short supplies were growing shorter and that the threat of war loomed on the horizon.

They called it the end of the world, and watching bodies pop to the surface one by one over the coming days, it really felt like it was.

And it might not have been a good idea long term, but at the time, Techno was twenty two and Ranboo was eighteen and neither had ever seen war or fighting or death, but they knew the ocean, *they knew the sea*, and they decided to stay where they thought it was safer.

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Watching the sun glitter across the water is still one of the most beautiful sights they've ever seen. It dances and jumps like the embers that leap off summer sparklers, looks almost unreal with how bright it shines, *flashing glint of polished silver winking fish scales giggly feeling in the pit of your stomach diving beneath the waves*, and he never gets sick of it.

Ranboo always likes sitting at the bow when the boat is moving, hangs as far out as he thinks is safe like some kinda bizarre figurehead, tries to stretch and see if their hands can skim frothy blue waves. He grins slow every time they do, lazy thud to their heart feeling waves breaking against the ship's hull and the cool touch of water drying rapidly on his skin.

It's serene up there, the moist, salt laden wind that blows back in his face like a balm to his lungs, seems to ease whatever phantom ache plagues them on land, the same one that makes him miss pulling water in over his gills. Ranboo breathes through their nose deep, smells brine and wide open spaces, valiantly ignores the fluttering feeling skittering across their neck as his gills try to follow suit.

Sometimes the wake the boat kicks up is enough to draw dolphins and they chatter happily as they surf through the waves, surface with sprays of water and chattering laughter that Ranboo does his best to copy. When he's alone like this, they surprisingly can't find much shame in acting odd, clicks and whistles to the absolute delight of the dolphins, gets sprayed in the face and thinks about a pool with tiled waves along the edges and a little fish that grew up to be just so.

As de facto captain of the S.S. Steve, Techno usually pilots, half kneels in the captain's chair as he navigates them around submerged obstacles and riptide fast currents, sunglasses perched on his perpetually sunburnt nose, mess of a braid snapping behind him like a pennant. He's actually pretty good at it despite having never really sailed before, weaves in and out through the destroyed city with startling ease, can be bribed into gunning them fast over big waves to Ranboo's glee and Phil's utter horror.

In a real shitty twist of fate, Phil gets seasick fairly regularly, miserably crumples into a ball up at the helm and tries to keep his stomach contents confined to their rightful home *inside* his stomach. When he's not dying over the boat's railing or inhaling ginger ales though, he makes a good lookout, can spot rotor destroying debris faster than Techno and has a real knack for picking out possible supply sites.

But honestly, while that's all very helpful, it's a secondary concern, because what he's really looking for are other boats.

Their little ragtag group isn't the only one that survived and they're for *sure* not the only boat still in seafaring shape, the rumble of distant motors echoing up through the towering mess of abandoned skyscrapers. For the most part, people are content to live and let live, pass each other with uneasy nods and hands lightly resting on weapons, but if you mind your business, they're more than happy to mind theirs.

But of course that's only possible if none of them realize what Ranboo is, if they see what he *wants them to see* as they speed by, just an awkward gangly young adult who must get sunburned pretty bad given the hat and the sunglasses and the bandanna covering the rest of their face.

Just a regular human kid trying to live best he can and not a monster that's getting away with hiding in their midst.

For the most part, it works and no one questions it, but Techno is careful to keep them away from other people, declines offers to join communes or the communities that've sprung up on the more stable buildings. He's always very polite about it, firm yet genial in a way that reads as easy friendliness until you notice the hand he has wrapped just so around the shaft of his fire ax.

Techno isn't quick to violence but he is paranoid as all hell, something that's made even worse by a lack of regular medication and the memory of a knife held at Ranboo's throat. He doesn't *want* to hurt people, but he absolutely will if he feels like it's necessary, and what he deems *necessary* versus what *Ranboo* considers necessary are on very opposite ends of the spectrum.

Most people can take a hint though and wisely move on, but there's still the occasional gaggle of assholes, ones that giddily call themselves *pirates* and paint shit awful skulls on their hulls, puff their chests up to try and act bigger than they are. Ranboo used to be terrified of them, shrunk down behind Techno the first time their boat got boarded, breathing harsh behind the bandana covering half his face while the leader threatened them at sword point.

They'd taken Techno's ax, long bloody line running down his arm where he threw it up in defense, blood now dripping off it as he holds it out in front of Ranboo, trying to shield him from view as much as protect them, because a big part of protecting Ranboo *was* making sure people didn't see them.

Humans robbing humans is one thing, *lose their supplies lose their dignity most likely keep their lives*, but if one of them notices Ranboo, sees how there's something *wrong* with him, they'll kill him on the spot. It won't even matter that he's mostly coherent and not a gibbering madman, because it's still obvious what he is, can't hide the odd way their hair's colored, or the claws that curl deadly and sharp over Techno's calf, weirdly slitted eyes that are more narrow and thinner than a human's had any right to be.

But then again, they *weren't* human eyes, *because they weren't human not anymore what is that dangerous violent it's a monster can't save it have to kill it that's not your sibling anymore*, and he swallows rough, scared and angry and *helpless – no not helpless we're not defenseless – not now God not now* – and there's so many conflicting things screaming inside his head, they can't *think- run hide get out of here – use our teeth use our CLAWS soft flesh of their neck tEAR IT APART – no no no NO NO STOP NO don't do that don't be that God please no – protect our kin protect our shoal pROTECT OUR OWN-*

His body *aches* to move, instinctual impulses roaring through them so strong they're shaking, and Ranboo's scared, *they're so scared* of these men, of what they will do to him if they found out, *knife at your throat don't wanna die it's infected it's not human it needs to be killed*, scared of himself, *of how he knows he can hurt them has the trappings of a monster but tries not to have the mind of one – blood in our teeth blood under our claws BLOOD on our BROTHER prOtect HIM protect hIM PROTECT HIM K ILL T H E M – STOP IT-*

It's all bubbling to a breaking point, but before Ranboo can do anything, *cower in fear – KILL THEM ALL*, Phil comes crashing over the top railing like an avenging angel, slams into the lead guy and drives the deadly sharp point of his harpoon through the man's throat. They

go crashing to the ground in a sprawl of limbs, and Phil rips the harpoon free with a flying arc of blood, surges to his feet, kicks Techno his ax and then everything explodes into chaos.

Ranboo doesn't know how the fight went other than they won, inhaled in shock after Phil killed that first guy and was hit with a wave of, *salty nasty hot smell of blood rich slide of it down our throat when's the last time we hunted h u n g r y*- felt saliva pool in his mouth, *his eyes dilate*, and *bolted*.

Later, after the shouting had stopped and Techno came to find them crammed under one of the bunks, they pretended like they were hiding down there because the violence scared him, *begged* and *pleaded* and *screamed* for some time alone until Techno finally left on the verge of tears, taking the horrible *mouthwatering* scent of a fresh kill with him.

"G-God- why? W-Why m-me? What did...w-what did I ever d-do?" Ranboo cries into his shaking hands, presses too hard on accident and feels a small cut tear open along their cheek, weeping blood gently just like the tears that spill out of his eyes, "M'scared- I-I don't wanna be like this- I...I-I just wanna be *normal*-"

There was no normal though, not for him, not after he got drug into the sea by a rough pair of scaly hands months ago, water rushing to fill their lungs when they inhaled sharp, choked off screams disappearing in a spray of bubbles at the sharp hot *pain* of teeth sinking into their leg. They knew they were dead even before Techno pulled them from the surf, even before he saw the blood and saw how white his brother's face had gone, because the *second* his calf had been sliced open by one of those *things*, he knew it was all over.

I can fix it I-I can make it okay I'll fix it, Techno had stammered over and over again for hours, ripping the bottom part of his shirt to pieces to bind Ranboo's leg, and Ranboo had just let him, too numb with shock to really protest, stared ahead unseeing with saltwater dripping into their eyes. It wasn't peace or acceptance he found sitting in that partially flooded conference room, but almost an eerie kind of hopeless finality, knew that this was it, *it was over*; that there was no point trying to save them because they'd be dead within a few hours.

I'm gonna die, Ranboo remembers thinking and little else, *holy shit...I'm really gonna die*. They don't remember being angry or scared or upset about it, but he does remember the feeling of his brother sitting close, the sound of the waves a constant backdrop, *the salt on their tongue stinging in their eyes rolling down their face tears he never shed so the ocean did for him anyway*, and it's just that and those words.

He was going to die and he didn't feel anything.

Ranboo only asked Techno once to kill him and got nothing but ear splitting silence, offered to do it himself and they got into the worst fight they'd ever had, and then finally, when he was sobbing into Techno's shoulder, Ranboo begged him to take care of it if things '*got bad*', a flexible definition neither was happy with but could at least settle on for now, while Ranboo still had a brain that could think.

But something went wrong, *o-or right he doesn't know*, and Ranboo never lost it entirely, was conscious and present for the entire ordeal of their body mutating that first time, hot and nauseous and sick with something like growing pains but worse, *so much worse*. He thought

he was dying, *hoped they might be a few times*, laid there in the dim and the dark and tried not to scream, bloody fingertips raking huge gouge marks into the concrete floor with the new claws that'd just punched through their skin.

He didn't think he'd still be there after the pain subsided, *thought it was lights out game over back cover page*, kept waiting for the finger snap moment his consciousness would disappear entirely, but it never did, and for a little bit after that, Ranboo was stupid enough to hope he'd be okay.

It was a dumb thing to hope for.

The way it happened was gradual, almost so slow, Ranboo didn't really notice at first, and that's what made it so dangerous, *made them so dangerous*, because you couldn't tell something was wrong inside. Yes they looked like a nightmare, but they didn't *act* like one, *wasn't filled with desperate bloodlust could talk and think and make rational choices*, and he started to think he was an exception to the rule, *that he was special*.

He wasn't.

Of *course* they weren't, and it was obvious after a while, the way their mind had slowly started to change. Odd impulses and thoughts grew increasingly louder by the day, affecting his behavior, altering his mannerisms, *killing his humanity*, and they'd find themselves doing things or thinking in ways they'd never done before.

What'll it take how bad is bad enough when will you let me go, Ranboo would demand of Techno after he found himself chittering at sea life or inhaling smaller fish whole, and no matter what, he always got the same answers, *nothing and not yet and never*.

There was stubborn and then there was Techno, and somewhere long before any of this had ever happened, he'd determined that there was nothing on the face of this earth that'd take Ranboo from him, and you couldn't turn him from a path once he'd started on it.

"I am *never* givin' up on you." Techno would insist after every incident, tugged his little sibling turned sea monster against his side without any hesitation or fear, and Ranboo really wished they could be like him, could have the same unwavering faith and conviction, but he didn't, and sometimes, like when they smelled *human blood* and their first thought wasn't *gross*, but rather, *oh hey free meal*, he wishes it'd been over sooner.

That everything just collapsed in on itself after he was bit and he didn't have to deal with the aftermath, because watching it all fall away one chunk at a time, like how the skyscrapers and buildings here slowly succumb to the pounding fury of the tides, is a fate worse than death.

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People already hadn't been taking care of the planet before everything went to shit, slopped their nasty waste everywhere without a single care, but what ended up happening really was unintentional. When seaside cities began to fall, contaminants and pollutants rushed into the oceans like never before, chemicals that weren't ever supposed to be anywhere else luridly

spilling free, failing nuclear reactor cores were flooded and exploded and it...*did things* to the animals living beneath the waves.

And soon enough it started doing things to the people trapped at sea too.

Maybe the first couple just got bit by accident, or maybe they were so desperate for food they'd eat anything, but the virus, *the mutation the disease whatever it was*, spread like wildfire, ravaged anything it came into contact with. One bite, one scratch, *one single drop of contaminated blood*, that's all it took, and accounts varied, but in all of them, the infected never lasted longer than a few hours, would be writhing against the floor without fail.

It didn't even matter if you cut the affected limb off or not, once the virus had sunk its teeth in, there was nothing anyone could do but watch your rapid descent into madness. For anyone that got infected, it was like they'd gone rabid, whatever rational thought or agency they had dissolving away as they sprouted claws and gills and fins and scales, mutating into mindless killing machines that tore into anything that moved with violent abandon.

People had a dozen names for them, *reefers anglers cudas ranhas*, but they all meant roughly the same thing, *dangerous deadly savage inhuman monstrous-*

And that's the only thing Ranboo saw whenever they could stomach looking in a mirror.

--

Nailed to a wall in the kitchen is a really shitty whiteboard that is quite literally *nailed* to the wall. They never were able to find one that still had hooks on the back, and after a few minutes of unsuccessfully brainstorming ideas, Techno had just taken the hammer and whacked the whole thing into place with three hits.

It was both impressive *and* alarming.

Anyway so they have this whiteboard nailed to the wall and use it to keep track of supplies and things they need, *-fresh water -gas -more beans -rice -no more fucking beans*, stuff like that, but there's this one little corner that has '*Wishlist*' done up in actual calligraphy, and underneath is all the stuff they would give an arm and a leg for.

Ranboo's written *Milky-Way* on it three separate times and anytime someone erases one, he just puts it right back. "We need the *space!*" Phil argues from behind him and still finishing up rewriting the last one, Ranboo looks back at him without blinking, grins with their mouth of shark teeth and says *overly* upbeat, "And *I* need a Milky-Way!"

Embarrassingly, Phil's is this old anime that stopped airing in the early 2000's that Ranboo only *vaguely* remembers as being okay, but that Phil swears on his life is a modern masterpiece. "I was in the middle of finishing it when things went to shit! I *gotta* know how the thousand year blood war ends." He groans, sliding down the kitchen bench in despair and without looking up from the stove, Techno recaps the entire plot in deadpan, deems it *mid at best*, and speechless with rage, Phil throws a flip flop at his head.

They don't speak for three days.

The only thing Techno wants is hair dye. Pink, specifically, adds a new line under it for emphasis every day until he runs out of room. "I...I didn't think you liked it that much." Ranboo mutters bashfully, strangely touched that Techno is so enamored with the color he let Ranboo pick for him over a year ago, and scoffing fondly, Techno rolls his eyes, "*Duh*, bro. It's like a signature at this point, *part of the brand*, can't let the apocalypse stop me from reppin' the brand, Ran."

Realistically they're never gonna find any of this stuff, saltwater is unkind to *so* many things, but it's fun to dream about, draws them all a little tighter together. It's kinda crazy how close they actually are already, makes sense with Ranboo and Techno because they grew up one after another, but Phil was an outlier, quite literally came crashing into their lives unexpectedly.

There's only so many responses to watching some guy full tilt ramp a speedboat off a crumbled section of wall, flip it, and then come crawling out of the burning wreck in one piece, but Techno still managed to come up with the most needlessly hysterical thing, "Dude are you blind or somethin'? Because if so, that's the best driving I've ever *seen*, and if not- *what the hell man-*"

And that's how they met Phil, who, after he was pulled onboard protesting vehemently that he could drive just fine *the steering wheel was just broken okay fuck off*, proceeded to vomit everywhere and then promptly passed out.

Techno was gonna dump him in the first dry place they found, which, Ranboo was fine with but at least wanted to wait until the poor guy woke up, their discussion quickly turning into less of a discussion the more heated it got, but Techno refused to bend and Ranboo refused to maroon some poor unconscious moron.

And then everything went out the window when Phil accidentally snuck up on them arguing.

In retrospect, it was kinda funny the way they all froze, but at the time it wasn't considering this random guy they didn't know had just seen Ranboo without his disguise and that was generally considered *a bad thing*.

It was honestly surprising how well Phil took being threatened bodily, didn't even flinch when there was the head of an ax digging into his throat, and after a lot of talking, like, *a lot of talking*, they managed to work something out. Phil offered to stay and be an extra set of hands, *for cooking for cleaning for fighting*, and maybe they'd all gone a bit sea mad, *thought trusting a stranger was a good idea*, or maybe it was how the calm, slow cadence of Phil's voice made the two of them remember someone else, but either way, Techno ended up stepping back, dropped his ax and held out a hand.

Phil settled into their lives like he'd always been there, rushed into cracks and gaps like how the ocean enthusiastically swallowed up empty spaces to claim as its own. He was a lot of things neither one of them were, *patient calm easy going laid back*, knew how to do more practical stuff than them, like cook and do laundry effectively and file taxes.

Not that that last one mattered too terribly much considering the state of things, but Techno still defiantly told him he hadn't been interested in filing before and sure as *hell* wasn't going

to start now, proudly declaring himself a tax dodger while Ranboo just sighed exhausted.

And Phil laughed. He laughed a lot, soft breathy chuckles and quiet snorts, would flip Techno's braid over his shoulder and then lean across to ruffle Ranboo's hair with next to no hesitation, an unexpected gesture that made Ranboo chirp in surprise the first time, absolutely mortified about it until Phil laughed, eyes crinkling in a thousand crow's feet as he told them they were *sweet*.

No one had told them they were *sweet* in such a long time, Ranboo didn't know how to respond, stared blankly long after Phil had left and wondered when the last time anyone had called him *sweet* was. Techno wasn't one much for mushy endearments, preferred to show his affection through gentle roughhousing and well-meaning teasing and sharing quiet moments together, not gooey words.

And Ranboo *totally* understood and loved that about his brother, knew Techno thought the world of him, loved him as much as you could love anyone, and it was such a stupid thing to be self conscious over, but it did make them wonder sometimes.

Opposites in so many ways, Ranboo kinda really liked mush, *really liked goo*, desperately missed the way mom would sing silly loving songs at them as she danced them both around the kitchen, ached for dad's tender pep talks and sweet encouragements. He was mourning things he didn't realize he'd needed so vitally, and it was so bad some days it was like a physical pain, deep sore stinging at the center of his chest, but Ranboo never breathed a word of it.

It felt wrong in a way, asking Techno for something that wasn't natural for him to give, or would be a chore for him to do, like he wasn't good enough on his own, and the guilt that came along with it was enough to push the notion from Ranboo's head. Things were fine the way they were, Techno didn't have to change anything and Ranboo was happy with what he got anyway. Really, they were!

But it was...it was just nice to hear it again s'all, the sweet words that didn't feel like they fit him very well anymore, but still made him think about things lost and people gone and a life he hadn't lived in so long, it was almost like a dream.

"He...ever remind you of dad?" Ranboo murmured low one night weeks later, sitting cross legged next to Techno up top where a dozen defunct sea charts spread around them in a semicircle. There was a flashlight clamped between Techno's teeth so he didn't answer, but he still kinda did in a way, hands stilling as they hovered over papers, furrow deepening between his brows, eyes going unfocused and glassy, and Ranboo knew he thought so too.

Things drifted into a little rhythm, *Ranboo scavenges Techno pilots Phil cares*, and before long, it's hard to imagine it being anything different. What do you mean there haven't always been three sets of knees knocking into each other under the little table, that there didn't use to be another pair of flip flops on the deck or a wide brimmed straw hat hanging from a peg.

How could there have ever been a time before Techno had a friend to sit with him while he drove, an ever interested ear that could stay and listen to classical literature themes for hours, or steady hands that showed Ranboo how to thread fishing line and cast off smoothly, a task

that was unnecessarily difficult because he kept getting distracted by shiny, winking lures, but that was okay.

It was always okay.

It's nice, having another person around, and for all that they joke that Phil is this ancient methuselah, he's really not that much older than Techno, and honestly, his mature, calm temperament does wonders for holding them all together. He'll never admit it, but Techno has less of a handle on things than he likes to think, gets lost sometimes down in the winding maze of his mind and that's where Phil comes in, the nonjudgmental hand that helps lead him back out.

“-you're okay, you'll be okay mate, just breathe, Tech. Listen to me, not them, m'kay?” Phil will murmur, dropping down beside where Techno's hunched into himself, hands clawed against his head trying to get it to stop, *to let up God stop make them stop*, bumps their shoulders together and starts reciting one of his old bird textbooks from memory.

Ranboo's never been good at pulling Techno out of his episodes, seems like his presence makes it worse most of the time, so he'll slip away quietly before they notice him, maybe drop over the side of the deck and into the sea, wants to do what he can to help and goes looking for the ruins of a nearby pharmacy.

It's never too hard finding them, Miami ~~is~~ *was* a big city, there was one practically every other block or nestled in the backs of big grocery stores, but it's finding viable medication that's the nightmare. Under normal circumstances, pill bottles hold up surprisingly well submerged for long periods of time, and with their lids intact, are practically waterproof as long as they're in one piece.

Keyword there being *one piece*.

Since they're sealed, the bottles have trapped air in them that makes them float, and you wouldn't think that'd be a problem, but it is, because medicine bottles are usually colorful or reflective and they bob in the current and *hey that looks like a fish like a meal take a bite sink your teeth in what is it-*

So most of the time when Ranboo swims through flooded pharmacies, the only thing they find is a floor littered with plastic bottles that have tooth holes punched in them, digs through it regardless trying to find any survivors.

Sometimes he's lucky and gets a solid bottle of ibuprofen or cough syrup, but when they've come down here for *Techno*, looking for a prescription that most places didn't have on hand even before, he always strikes out. Anything that wasn't readily available over the counter is almost impossible to get now, dissolved away after months submerged underwater, but Ranboo looks anyway, pokes around behind the counter in almost complete darkness.

Thankfully he can see pretty well down here, even with little to no light, pupils growing to swallow his entire eye as he slips through a cave-like blackness that's taken over commercial stores. Ranboo has to be careful though, because places like *this, dark and safe and sturdy*

walls and places to hide, it just screams *den* to so many things that are bigger than them and would love nothing more than to sink their teeth into a stupid piece of fresh meat.

They're extra cautious creeping through here because of that, have been nothing *but* extra cautious ever since the one time he wasn't, drags in water slowly and really presses out with his senses. This is one of the only instances where they'll listen to their fish brain entirely, relying heavily on instincts and impulses he usually tries to bury, but listens to now because he doesn't want to become some thing's next meal.

Opening themselves up to that side of their mind is...*odd*, strange in that it still kinda feels like him but just slid to the side, and Ranboo would never dare admit it, *not out loud hardly even to himself down here alone where there's no one and nothing but corpses to hear*, but when it's behaving, it's not the...*worst* thing in the world.

His skin tingles every time a stray current brushes past, basic information trickling in with it like direction and possible source and temperature, senses whirring fast on each inhale of water, checking for odd scents or warning pheromones. Everything is more responsive down here, *more electric more genuine more alive*, touch and smell brighter and sharper than Ranboo can ever remember them being, has him so delightfully aware of every inch of their body.

It makes something swell against their ribcage, tingly and excited, and he kicks out hard, twisting his body, spins in a tight loop for the hell of it, loves the weightlessness being underwater gives them. Ranboo feels a little silly thinking it, but it's such a magical thing, *so freeing*, and he takes a second to just flip and roll, enjoying the way it feels, cool but comfortable slide of water over their skin, *through his hair*, constant dull ache in his back lessened since there's no real pressure on it.

Damn, they did not know how much that'd actually been bothering them until it's not, wriggling happy as a pleased shiver runs down the length of their spine, and Ranboo feels so good, he impulsively curls backwards to see if he can try and reach his toes. A delighted jet of water puffs out of his mouth when he can, and twisting back around himself, they plant a foot on a cabinet and push off, go rocketing through the store in wild abandon.

He's forgetting himself a little, relishing the way his body moves and feels, darts too quickly over a shelf and it kicks up a swirling mess of old sticker labels that churn through the water like mad. Their instincts yank them back in a pinwheel of flailing limbs and bared teeth, heart rate skyrocketing as fight or flight kicks in hard, fish brain not sure *what* to make of the little white slips fluttering everywhere.

Run run RUN GET aWAY not safe not saFE NOT- but Ranboo ignores it, *knows better*, wrestles control back and gets everything to calm down, *stop baring your teeth stop trying to run its fine its just paper relax*, and his heart slowly climbs down out of his throat, fish brain a sullen grumpy lump in their consciousness.

Listen look don't like this not safe we're too little, it hisses at them unhappily, and Ranboo rolls his eyes, huffing out a cloud of bubbles, *really* shouldn't be talking back to it but does it anyway, *I know I know okay but we're down here for Techno I'll be careful...also screw you I'm not little*.

It doesn't respond with words, and it's not really a mental image either, more of a feeling really, *quick looping flip of a tail Cheshire grin with too much teeth clacking nip at your heels*, and the accompanying surge of affection is muddled enough, they can't tell which side of their brain it came from. *Small...small small small small*, warbles through Ranboo's mind, echoing back and forth unbidden, like if an intrusive thought was more benign and annoying rather than upsetting, *small tiny thing barely a minnow barely a guppy – you're really enjoying yourself there huh – yes yes giddy silly play little minnow*.

Ranboo can't help laughing at the complete goofiness he finds flooding his system, and giggling underwater is strange, kinda feels like hiccupping as water puffs in and out of their mouth, but it drags through his gills strangely warm and they rock into the sensation, echoing trill humming under his sternum in a way that betrays the *happy content overall peace happy here where you're supposed to be where you belong wanna stay wanna stay down here fore-rust of blood and crunch of bones cold water rippling against you something big moving through coming by claws and teeth and ink black eyes scales that rip fangs that shred get AWAY get OUT hide hide hide going to eAT US DIVE COVER N O W-*

And Ranboo does without hesitation, bolts for the bottom rack of a shelf and wiggles under it, pulse thundering high behind their ear, waits, hardly daring to breathe. *Still still stay still stay still*, both halves of his mind whisper in unison, and he tries, lungs starting to burn from holding his breath but he can't make the slightest noise, *can't even hint that they're here*, shrinks back slowly as a massive dark shape trails by.

It is bigger than them, *longer more muscular*, murky grey blue scales covering its back and limbs, thick tail with foot long spiney frills dragging leisurely in the water, propelling it forwards. Deep, echoing clicks crackle out of it's still kinda human mouth, eyes black and depthless just like his, but they're completely vacant, and it's so odd how he can tell there's nothing behind them anymore, that the person this used to be is long gone.

That could be me... Ranboo realizes in sluggish freezing horror, *that could be me I...could end up like that too*, stuttering an inhale quick and jagged, catches wrong on everything snarling up their throat, *don't want that to be me don't want to lose my mind...don't have a choice not anymore gonna lose it gonna lose yourself entirely*, fingers reflexively curling back in panic and in moments like these, he always forgets how they're tipped in razor sharp claws now.

He loosens his grip quick after he feels the sharp nip against the tender skin of their palms, doesn't want to draw blood with that *thing* trolling around, edges backwards and keeps his ears trained for the guttural clicks and rumblings of the reefer as it moves further into the backrooms.

Mind roiling with animalistic panic and barely coherent thoughts, Ranboo practically crawls out of the pharmacy, pulse thundering so loud his vision shakes with it. Anytime the reefer makes the slightest noise he freezes completely, muscles locking up tight in absolute terror and it's an acutal miracle, but somehow, they escape without drawing any attention.

It is the sweetest of reliefs to be out in the wider ocean, and they kick hard for the surface, streaking upwards as fast as he can, squinting painfully against the massive influx of light.

Ranboo comes up coughing at the back of the boat, drags himself up onto the swim platform with shaky limbs and empties all the water that's still sitting in their lungs, entire body sick from adrenaline and fear. They scoot as far away from the lapping of the waves as they can get, curl into a ball and hunch over trying to calm down, but the motion drags on his back like *fire*.

Pain aches and tears up and down the length of his spine, feels like something is pulling too tight, *pressing up from underneath*, but when Ranboo reaches a trembling hand back, all he can feel are the knobs of his vertebrae and nothing more. *What is wrong with you get it together calm down breathe having a panic attack*, they think, pressing the heels of his palms against his throbbing head, lips pulling back when a thought that's not their own wiggles it's way in, *good good strong swimmer fast make good hunter evasive survived proud of us-*

And it doesn't make any sense because there's *nothing there*, but he whips around with a snarl, low, gurgling sound of it rattling up their throat like a chainsaw revving. *No nO NO I am NOT doing this we are NOT a thing I- I hate you I HATE US*, Ranboo spits with as much mental vitriol as he can, pushes violently up onto unsteady feet and staggers further into the boat, wanting to put as much distance between them as possible.

Which is never going to work since it's all in his head and the reality of what that means drives him *mad*, because no matter what, they *can't* get away from it. It's like the ocean, it's everywhere you look, *endless blue for miles and miles didn't used to be like this*, it's on everything you touch, *crunch of sea dried hair sticky residue glued to your skin hate the way it feels*, it's in everything you eat, *salt and grit and brine taking it inside you making it a part of you forever*.

It's like the water that drips off their hair and rattles leftover in his lungs as he hangs his legs over the bow, *it's on him it's in them it is him they can't ever get rid of it*, angrily flexing webbed toes and hating every damn inch of them. *God*, does Ranboo despise the way he's changed, *mutated not normal nothing about this is normal*, and maybe some days they can trick themselves into thinking they're okay as long as they're still mentally together, but he's not.

He's really not.

There is nothing about this that he's okay with, *hates the gills hates the claws hates the teeth the eyes the striped hair*, and thank *Christ*, but he's one of the less fucked up ones, somehow didn't get the absolutely shortest straw that would've come with scales and fins and *a tail*.

Ranboo hunches over the lower railing and immediately hisses long and pitchy, stretches out again and arches their back, painful, aching prickling exploding up and down the length of his spine and he wants to scream. None of this is fair, *all of this is complete bullshit*, and they really try and keep a lid on this, *try and not cause more problems than they already do*, but it just comes bubbling out like a fumarole in the earth's surface.

He is- *so tired and exhausted* all the time, is sick of constantly worrying about people that want nothing more than to kill him because he's a reefer, and then stressing over reefers that don't care either way, would simply love nothing more than to *eat him alive* and gnaw on his bones for the hell of it. And being scared for his life practically everyday he lives it is so

draining and demoralizing and *God how are you supposed to keep doing this* and they're sick of it!

All of it!

It's hot as shitting balls every single God damned day, and Ranboo means *every day*, because the weather is so completely fucked and if it's not trying to bake them into little piles of goo, then it's attempting to drown them all with colossal storms that drag waves up higher than some of the surviving buildings.

Hurricane season was always rough, but now it's catastrophically deadly and the three of them barely got through the last one alive and Ranboo doesn't know if they'll live through another. Besides, even if they manage to, there's still the constant fear of running out of supplies or the boat breaking down completely, leaving them with no means of survival *and* stranded in monster infested waters.

They can't go further inland anymore like the rest of the sane people have, or the other two could, but Ranboo *can't*, is dependent on the sea as much as it apparently hates him, and the others won't leave without him, so now he just lives knowing he's damned them all here for eternity.

Which is just...*fucking great*. What a great place to be stuck forever!

There's bugs about the size of a half dollar, pythons as big around as your leg, morons that think they're pirates, and now, *somehow, actual fucking sea monsters*, air conditioning basically doesn't exist anymore, and yes he's aware they're being petty at this point, but *you* try living at the southerner most tip of Florida with no AC for almost two years and *tell him how you like it-*

Life sucks. *Life fucking sucks!*

And if *all of that* somehow wasn't enough, now Ranboo's own body is rebelling against them, *more so than it already has been thanks I really did want gills thank you for that*, and if he has to spend one more day with aching pains he has no explanation for they are going to lose it.

Angrily stewing over frustrations that've been festering for months, Ranboo almost misses the heavy thud of footsteps behind him, doesn't jump though when a large shape drops down beside them because a familiar scent floods past, *sunscreen and salt spray and warm spices and safety and harbor and home and-*

"Why're you wet?" Techno rumbles, voice a little scratchy like it gets after he's been breathing hard and muttering to himself, and grumpily propping their chin up on their knees, Ranboo huffs, "We live on a boat in the middle of the ocean, Tech. Water is *kinda* unavoidable."

"Yeah but you're like...*extra wet*. Like uber super, especially wet. I am literally watching water roll off your hair as we speak." Techno continues half jokingly but also not, keen eyes scanning Ranboo trying to figure out what's wrong, and my *God*, there is not enough time in

the world to even *begin* with that one. For a second, Ranboo has the intense, bubbling urge to laugh and gesture at himself, hand flying out and back in to encapsulate *everything*, self-deprecation thick in his voice as he'd scoff, *where to start where to begin it doesn't end don't have to look for long it's not that hard to see there's literally nothing right with me.*

But Techno wouldn't like that, would get all quiet and sullen, *worried side eyeing them scared to remember a conference room scared to remember what they offered*, unhappy pinch to his brow Ranboo *hates*, and he's already had a rough day, doesn't need his mopey little sibling making it worse, so they just sigh, shrugging as they mutter, "Just went for a little swim...s'hot."

The hum Techno gives him is far too easy, clearly doesn't buy that answer in the slightest, but he isn't going to pry as is the unspoken philosophy of their family, scoots closer and bumps their shoulders together, lets Ranboo off the hook with a low, "M'kay."

Is it still considered gaslighting if they're both doing it and are *aware* they're both doing it? Lying by omission isn't the best strategy for having a functioning relationship, but avoidance is kinda the name of the game in the Aetherman household, er, *boathold* (???), and after twenty plus years of it, Ranboo doesn't think either one of them are particularly inclined to stop.

He's not entirely sure where it comes from. Their parents were very invested in assuring both of them had as much access to healthy coping strategies as possible, were avid listeners and huge supporters of open communication, but even with all that stacked in their favor, something *clearly* went wrong with their children anyway.

Ranboo suspects he and Techno's tendency to talk around things is a mutated version of their parents' well meaning '*you don't have to share if you don't want to*' mantra, which was intended to make both their kids feel comfortable sharing things when they were ready, but has since been weaponized to bury what they don't want to talk about under layer after layer of avoidance.

Life was hard enough before when Techno was bouncing medications trying to find one that worked and Ranboo was doing the same thing but with gendered identity labels, both struggling to articulate feelings they could barely grasp, and now there's mutated fish monsters and a collapsing environment and a graveyard of thousands sleeping at the bottom of the sea.

Sometimes it's just easier to *not* talk about things, because as long as you don't acknowledge it, it makes it less real, and things that aren't real are a *lot* easier to get rid of than things that are. Or at least that's the theory, but even though Ranboo keeps most of their frustrated anger and gnawing anxiety to himself, it doesn't ever really seem to *go* anywhere like he desperately wishes it would.

It just sits, like a rotting cancerous thing, right in the center of his chest, and he never says anything about it because he doesn't want to make it anyone else's problem. *You own up to your actions never foist responsibility off on someone else*, mom taught them and taught them *young*, and she was right, *always was*, means Ranboo only has himself to blame for what's happened to them.

It was his lack of awareness in his surroundings that let that reefer get as close as it did, *his* carelessness that had him closer to the waterline than he should've been, and the *only person* that was at fault for them getting drug into the surf and nearly eaten alive, was Ranboo himself and no one else.

And it really is as simple as that.

This is Ranboo's struggle to bear, and the others shouldn't have to be subjected to him complaining and whining about it constantly, aren't the reason he's miserable and panicked six days out of seven. Nothing productive would come from talking about it. Ranboo would just make everyone else feel bad and they don't deserve that, so he tries to keep his damn mouth shut most of the time, refuses to burden anyone else with the shit awful feelings that strangle him alive and are nothing but a problem of his own creation.

Sometimes though, like if Ranboo gets asked a prying question point blank and *has to answer*, they'll always try to spin it as a good thing, make the other two convinced he's taking it in stride when in reality, he's barely keeping his head above water.

That's the secret part of this little game of pretend they all play, how Ranboo acts like he's still the same happy go lucky kid, one who may have been riddled with social anxiety and awkwardness sure, but was generally optimistic, upbeat even, and wasn't anything like this brittle, melancholy disaster they've felt like they've become.

Ranboo thinks they do a halfway decent job at hiding it, and yeah, there's the occasional breakdown from pent up emotion that has nowhere else to go, but he always tries to look like he's *bounced back* from it. He knows it fools Phil, is pretty sure it fools Techno, *sometimes even fools himself*, but like a lot of things about him now, it's just a front, *a disguise*, and there's no actual bouncing back.

Something has to give...might as well be me, Ranboo thinks, shifting their chin forwards on their knees, staring blankly out at the greyish blue waves reflecting a cloudy sky, and if they can make life easier by keeping all these painful fears and worries to themselves, then they will, because at least like this, with everything buried away deep inside him, the only one it can hurt is him.

And that's something they can easily live with.

"S'quiet today, huh?" Techno mumbles softly, reclined back on his arms as he surveys the sea in front of them, distant rush of waves breaking against the side of buildings and the sharp cry of gulls only things echoing back across the water. Ranboo hums noncommittally in response, doesn't really have much to say and drops a leg over the side of the boat to kick at waves, thinks that was just the *Random Techno Observation of the Day*, and is surprised when he tacks on a minute later, "S'just- *like*- still, ya'know? Very, *uh*, relaxed? I mean, the weather's like nice n' all and uh, yup. Kiiiiinda boring tbh."

If ever there was a more obvious topic change or horrendous attempt at small talk, Ranboo hasn't heard it, nor does he think he ever will because that was it right there. They turn to look at Techno in utter bafflement but he's not looking at them, profile steely and almost

regal, but with a distinct flair of discomfort you can read in the way his mouth is pinched to the side.

Small talk is not one of Techno's passions, nor is it even really something he enjoys doing in the slightest, would much prefer to get straight to the heart of a matter unless told to back off, and yet he's trying to do it right now for some reason. It's very out of character for him, but as Ranboo watches his brother twitch and fiddle with the drawstrings on his shorts, they think they've got something of an idea as to why.

Forever and always, Techno's number one priority has been Ranboo, and if their dad was to be believed, it's been like that since the day they put a tiny, baby Ranboo in his arms. When Techno really cares about something, he doesn't do anything in half measures, throws himself entirely into it with little regard for himself, and it's why Ranboo has to be so careful about what he asks of him.

They could demand the moon and Techno would try and get it for them, would lay waste to the world and set the crumbling remains at Ranboo's feet if he so much as asked. Techno would give *anything* for his little sibling, *his happiness his blood his life*, so much of himself that Ranboo lays awake at night terrified they're going to be what kills him, *that he's leading him to his grave*.

But, less dramatically, it means Techno will force himself to be more socially adept than he is, resorting to idle chitchat because he can tell Ranboo is upset and wants to cheer them up any way he can.

You are such a softie, Ranboo thinks with an adoring smile, shuffles closer and tries to settle into a more playful mood so Techno will stop worrying, voice leagues lighter as he teases, "I'm sorry, what's wrong with quiet? Do you *want* it to be crazy?"

"Dunno, maybe. D'give us somethin' to do at least." Techno sighs with a little grin of his own and tips his head up to look at the overcast sky, braid spilling down almost to the deck, splintering ends of it still bubblegum pink until about halfway up, "We kinda live and breathe crazy, bro, I feel like I'm suffocatin' over here without it."

"I feel fine so L to you I guess." Ranboo says in his best deadpan, does it mostly for the way they *know* it'll make Techno bark out a laugh, and to his immense satisfaction, it does, loud sound of that booming cackle lighting up the entire area around them.

"You can't L me!" Techno declares, rounding on Ranboo with a shining twinkle in his eyes as he reaches for them, "I'm Techno *'The Blade'* Aetherman, I'm un-L-able, I've never lost anythin' once *ever-!*"

"What about the twelfth grade science fair with the potato clock, or that judo match against that kid from Lakeland or the time you lost your bike or the- *ARGH!*" Ranboo laughs delighted as he's mercilessly hair ruffled to death, throws his hands up to bat at Techno's but more or less just lets him do it. Damp hair gets uncomfortably smooshed around their head, lanky tendrils of it sticking to their face and dripping leftover seawater everywhere, ticking down past his nose and it should be really annoying but honestly isn't.

It's really comforting actually, and Ranboo presses up into the contact, can't seem to stop the content clicking noise he starts making in the back of his throat. Moments like these are the ones he hangs on to the tightest, and looking out through their tangle of hair at Techno grinning at them big and unrestrained, Ranboo feels happier than they've been in a while, smiles with all their teeth exposed and doesn't feel any shame.

And Techno doesn't flinch, *doesn't even grimace*, though his smile does drop from *exuberance* to something more tender, hands now carefully raking snarled locks of black and blonde hair out of their eyes, gentle in a way most people aren't privy to see.

Ranboo leans into the touch, fish brain and human brain both flopping around happily, eyes going half lidded as a wavy of sleepiness crashes over him, *safe shoal safe here family harbor safe here*, mumbles out mushy and slightly slurred, "M'love you, Tech."

"Love you too, squirt." Techno murmurs back just as soft, that old nickname making warmth curl up from Ranboo's heart, unfurling across their bones like the way seaflowers twist open in balmy currents, and everything is perfect and wonderful until an echoing shout tears through their hard fought peace.

It's loud and guttural, *panicked and terrified*, ricocheting back through the buildings so it's hard to pinpoint where it's coming from, and Ranboo's stomach sinks as a second voice joins in, screaming indistinctly in horrified alarm. They lurch up into a tense crouched position while Techno does the same at their side, both on high alert for the whine of a boat motor or howling roar of monsters from the deep, but it stays just the two human voices clambering high in panic.

Ranboo leans out over the railing, claws gouging into the splintery wood, heart hammering high in his throat and mind roiling *ballistic*, trying to place the threat *trying to figure out what to do- run hide eat it mAYbe yes no HIDE yes what is it wHAt is IT WHAT* -hears sudden twin shouts of anguish and *there, movement*, a body plummeting entire stories into the frothing sea below, another hanging out desperately over the ledge, hand outstretched *trying to grab on trying to catch them slipped right out of your hand should've held on tighter she's gone you let her go bye baby-*

He's jolting to his feet without really being aware that they're doing it, body *possessed* with the terrible desire to *move, to react to help can't sit can't stay can't watch someone die*, but they're stopped in their tracks by a large hand wrapped crushingly over their shoulder.

"*What* do you think you're *doing*?" Techno snaps right at his ear, sounding panicked and confused, and with a blink, Ranboo realizes he's got one foot braced on the lower railing, was about to vault himself over the side of the boat.

"I-" They start and stop, pulse a thundering roar in their ears, crashing against the sides of his mind like waves against the shore, fingers clenching and unclenching spastically, keeps feeling the phantom sensation of a hand sliding out of their own, "I- *Techno* I- t-they're gonna drown they're gonna- i-if I don't- *they're gonna d-*"

"Yeah probably but *who cares*?"

“I-I do. *I care.*” Ranboo breathes, eyes forever trained on where he’s pretty sure that person hit the water, thinks he could make it out there before it’s too late, *thinks he could save them*, but the world seems to end again as they hear Techno snap, “Well you *shouldn’t.*”

Ranboo chokes on the air in his lungs and whips to stare at his brother, at the ferocious glare drawing brows down over such similar grey eyes to their own, but whereas Ranboo’s have always been lighter, *cloudy day at sea weak swells placid currents go where the wind takes you*, Techno’s are darker and more intense, *sharp snap of storm winds frothing whitecaps and the violent clash of thunder can’t fight against that can’t win it’s gonna take you to your grave no remorse-*

“Listen to me. The only people we give a shit about keepin’ alive are on *this boat*, an’ I’m *not* endangerin’ a single one of you for some moron I don’t know.” Techno shakes him for emphasis, fingers digging in sharp before sliding off easy, because that’s how it works around here, *Techno gives orders and you listen*, “If you go out there to Little Mermaid that idiot, they’re gonna see you an’ then *I’m* gonna have to kill them- *if* the fall didn’t that is.”

Gut churning unease doesn’t sit right can’t just watch someone die nothing you can do helpless to stop it – no no not helpless we’re nOt heLPLEsS – yes we are didn’t you hear said no told us to stay here have to listen – have teETh have cLAws have streNGth don’t have to LISTen -and Ranboo jolts, feet shifting quick across the deck in an aborted attempt to fling himself over the side that he barely manages to stop.

Stop it stop it STOP IT he’s right need to listen bad idea, they berate themselves, arms coiling across their torso and hanging on *hard*, but he can’t stop seeing in his mind a hand slipping out of his- *body disappearing beneath the waves terrible killing pain of loss getting drug into the sea the rough hands that pulled you back out not ever letting you go clinging onto your humanity by your fingertips fighting to keep your compassion your empathy your care for others lose things one at a time but not this never this all the things that make you-*

“Think about it like this-” Techno starts, turning to leave with the expectation that Ranboo will follow, *always chasing after his heels little hand wrapped around his braid do what you say go where you lead never protest r u m b l i n g growl under your skin not a n y m o r e our call oUr choice OUR decision*, “-either way, they were dead as soon as they hit the water. Their fate’s sealed...you can’t do anything about it, so just let it go.”

A lot of things seem to all happen simultaneously.

His pulse flatlines, skyrockets, and evens out all in the span of a second, mind a cycling mess of, *I can’t I can’t I can’t didn’t give up on me I got a second chance why can’t they*, body already moving without conscious thought. Sensations filter through in bits and pieces, warmth from the wood railing under their palms and metal rung cool against the soles of their feet as they vault it, his name frantically being shouted muddling out into white noise, rushing whistle of wind in his ears and jolting slap of breaking through the waves as Ranboo dives into the ocean.

Sound is muffled in a crushing swirl of bubbles that dissipates as they streak away from the point of entry, kicking vigorously in the direction that person hit the water, knows time is precious and limited and might already be up. Ranboo hasn’t swum this hard in a while,

drags water in across his gills like a bellows, head already starting to get woozy from oxygen depletion, but they can't give up, *not now*, push themselves harder, cutting through the ocean fast and effortlessly.

Swimming was something that always came naturally to him, *even before all this*, but Ranboo never was on a swim team or anything, so whatever proper mechanics there are for it, he doesn't know. It's not like it would matter much even if they did, human methods don't account for gills and webbed appendages, all of which help them race through the water like a marlin, maintaining speeds regular people just can't.

They twist into a current and let it help carry them along into the shadow of the skyscraper, backpedal quick with their arms and slow to a stop, chest heaving, trying to pull as much oxygen from the water as he can. Ranboo doesn't have a lot of time left before he'll *have* to go up for air, gills too small to keep his whole body oxygenated like any functioning creature should, knows they've got to make what minutes they have count.

Where are you where are you, he thinks, eyes frantically scanning the blue gloom for any sign of a person, *come on where are you let me help*, mind working fast to account for drift and an unconscious body's deadweight, *couldn't help back then can help now couldn't save her back then but I'll save you now*, and sinking down to the ocean floor, practically glowing in the gloom, is a pale shock of white with slack yet outstretched hands *asking begging for help trailing limbs and fluffy halo of blonde hair not as long as my little fish giggling spurts of laughter crinkled smile bye baby-*

And Ranboo plunges after them, snarls his claws in the front of their raglan shirt and starts trying to haul them up, but dragging an uncooperative body is *hard*. They keep wanting to sink, *no fight left, no will to keep going*, and even with the weightlessness water affords and his own strength, Ranboo is struggling, *blackspots crowding his vision need air gonna drown hah a fish drowning ironic shut up*, but he refuses to let go.

Couldn't save her couldn't save myself but I'm gonna save you let everyone down all the time but not now, they think with an ugly snarl of shark teeth, move to get a shoulder under their armpit and hoist Deadweight McGee up. Ranboo kicks hard towards the air they both so desperately need, mind frizzing and drifting in spurts, swaying into and out of memories and there's the *whisper of storm wind at the back of your mind so tired want to give up give in sleep forever large palms wrapped over your shoulders eyes angrier than the storm giving up isn't an option ya hear me*.

The surface mocks them, rippling and dancing so tantalizing close yet so far, *so tired of struggling so tired of trying just let go cracking flash of lightning or is that someone's voice no no you're surviving even if it kills me*, seems like salvation keeps scooting back two feet for every inch he manages to claws towards it, *hand that grips like iron around your own hauling you up won't let you go you're going to live even if I won't*, but with an angry gnashing of teeth and one, two, *three* violent kicks, Ranboo's head breaches the surface.

They inhale on instinct, start coughing and choking immediately as saltwater floods into their lungs, dip back below the waves frantically looking for air, but their gills are less than useless, and with neither one of his respiratory systems working, he's essentially drowning himself in two places at the same time.

GET IT OUT *Get it...out get it...* their mind sluggishly pushes at them, any sense of urgency graying out under a weighted lead blanket of exhaustion, and Ranboo weakly starts paddling towards the skyscraper. There's a sloped part of the roof that's acting like a shore, and he drags them both up onto it, collapses in the surf and pitches to the side, head swimming in a drunken haze as he hacks all the water out of his system.

It burns coming back up, stings in their nose and eyes, and they hunch over with salt thick in their mouth and rolling off their tongue, but the sweet *soothing rush of air thank Christ finally* is absolutely worth it. For a moment, the only thing in their mind is ecstatic relief at being able to breathe again, and they take deep even inhales until their vision clears, *until everything else comes rushing back in twin screams body falling into the waves sinking to oblivion can't breathe is going to-*

Twisting around, Ranboo crawls in a stumbling shamble of limbs to the person he pulled from the depths, rolls them onto their back and hisses through his teeth seeing how pale their face is. They're unresponsive, lay sprawled in the shallow water like a ragdoll, *like a corpse*, chest completely still and not rising like it should be, which means Ranboo's got to perform CPR if this person is going to have a chance.

He doesn't hesitate scrambling into place at their side, overlaps his shaking hands on their chest and tries to remember everything he was taught, bright red lifeguard whistle swinging from Techno's neck as he demonstrated on the dummy.

It's a lot harder than people think it is, Techno grunted back then, arms flexing as he pushed down until you could hear a quiet little click from inside the plastic chest, *you're probably gonna break somethin' but at least they'll live to be pissed off*, and Ranboo does the same now, snapping his arms down while *Stayin' Alive* trickles wheezy and offkey out of his mouth, *better to live another day and be mad than dead and at peace, know what I'm sayin'?*

Which Ranboo's never personally gotten that philosophy, thinks there's a lot of merit in finding peace even if it's final, doesn't understand why you'd want to struggle and fight your whole life if all that's left for you in the end is absolute misery.

But that's something people have to decide for themselves, and given the way this guy screamed plummeting off the building, *desperate and panicked and yet still righteously furious*, Ranboo doesn't think they're ready to go quietly into this good night.

They get to thirty compressions and stop for a moment, arms shaking pretty bad from the amount of force he's having to use, ragged panting betraying how worn out he is already. *Shit*, Techno wasn't kidding, this *is* a lot harder than they thought it was going to be, is made especially demoralizing by the seeming lack of response. Vainly hoping for the best, Ranboo leans over to check for breathing against his trembling hand, swears something nasty and colorful that'd make Techno bust out laughing when they feel nothing.

Techno may have taught him CPR because they both worked at the pool house over the summer, said it was a good thing to know, but *he* was the lifeguard, Ranboo just worked concessions. This is the first time they've ever performed it on a living person, *though that living part may be subjective at this point Jesus Christ shut UP*, Ranboo snips at the grim

humored part of his mind that sounds exactly like who you'd expect it to sound like, resettles their hands and begins again.

To be fair to his brother's dark sense of humor, this entire situation being underscored by the Bee Gees *Stayin' Alive* is morbidly hysterical and is something most people would *definitely* find funny, but Ranboo doesn't have the energy for it. He can barely focus on doing his chest compressions in time, fatigue weighing on them like a collapsed wall from their own near drowning, but he forces himself to get to thirty, pauses, *nothing again nothing still razor sharp teeth sinking into his lip nick slice sharp tang of blood*, flexes their claws, starts again.

There's nothing he can do besides keep going through reps, *no one to call no help coming left to die just like you*, can only hope it's doing *something*, ignores how their hands hurt and their arms are sore, keeps trying until he feels something pop under the heel of his palm, until the person shudders violently, until they finally jolt back into something that could be considered life, flailing to the side as they vomit seawater everywhere.

Ranboo nearly falls over as well but rushes to steady them, wraps a shaking hand around their shoulder to help guide them into a more stable reclined position, watches their face screw up in pain and stammers, "S-Sorry! I- I had to do- *like-* y-you weren't breathing so uh, *yeah*, C-CPR but like your ribs might be uh broken or c-cracked? Just a little? *Sorry...*"

That makes the guy groan impassioned and rough, eyes screwed shut tight while they try to get any pressure off their ribcage, voice garbled and shot to *hell*, but still tinged with an unmistakable accent as they bitch, "F-Fan-fucking-tastic. *Thanks*. T-Thank you for *that*- saved me only to...o-only to break my f-fucking bones you *dick*, *Christ that hurts-*"

"I- *s-sorry...*" Ranboo mumbles, shrinking back embarrassed and ashamed, really, *really* does feel bad about the whole possibly broken bone thing, but there wasn't much else they could do and they really didn't wanna let someone die if they could help it, wring their hands awkwardly together in their lap, "I-I'm honestly really sorry. I didn't mean to, I was t-trying to be careful but I-I haven't ever done this before *and just-*"

"Dude, chill. M'just fuckin' with you s'not-" But Ranboo never finds out what it's not because the stranger uncrumples their expression, squinting blearily against the light at first, but then their eyes blow wide in panic. They lock up instantly, looks like their brain is trying to process what's in front of them, *the gills the claws the slitted eyes shark teeth bi-toned hair*, and it's not a hard thing to understand what he is when Ranboo doesn't have their disguise on, *not a human mutated creature reefer monster mindless thing danger RUN-*

Whatever the stranger was saying dies in their slackening mouth, *terror* and *fear* constricting their pupils down to pinpricks in the livid blue of their eyes, and Ranboo slowly holds his hands up, *I know they're tipped in razor sharp claws I know there's indigo tinted skin between the digits but I'm not a threat I'm good I promise*, and the stranger whips their head back and forth, "N-No- *no NO!* God fuck- *please no!* D-Don't eat me! *PLEASE!* I-I don't wanna die, don't kill me *God please DON'T KILL ME-!*"

"I won't! I-I'm not-!" Ranboo tries desperately, and oh, hearing the way this person begs for their life tears him open from the inside out. It feels like their heart is breaking, crumbling away into a hundred little pieces, and they wonder if they'll ever get used to it, how people

look at them and only see a monster. The painful jolt from that thought kicks Ranboo in the chest, and he mistakenly leans forwards, *hand held out claws curled inwards I'm not going to hurt you please don't be afraid of me*, but the stranger scrabbles back on all fours terrified, crying out in agony as it pulls on their damaged ribs.

And Ranboo doesn't *think*, only hears sounds of *pain* and wants to *help*, follows after despite them begging and pleading and *screaming to stay away get back don't hurt me I don't wanna die leave me alone you freak constricting burn of tears in your throat begging pleading right back I'm sorry I'm not bad I don't mean to be scary I'm sorry let me help I just wanna help I'm not gonna hurt you I'm not a monst-*

"TOMMY-!"

Sudden, sharp slap of bare feet against slick concrete, creaking cock of machinery and a curse shrieked out he doesn't catch because everything in his mind yowls at once- *M O V E* -and he throws himself back, air whistling in front of their nose as something blows past, long flashing line of it embedding deep in solid concrete *holy shit is that a harpoon-*

Ranboo turns just as something slams into them, taking them to the ground in a brutal move that cracks their head hard against the rooftop, impact causing bright white stars to explode across his field of vision. There's a hand at his throat next, fingers crushing and ruthless as they force him to stay down, dig into their gill slits and *Christ alive it hurts it hurts so bad*, back arching painfully as they cry out in agony.

"*Stay the FUCK AWAY FROM HIM!*" The person pinning him down shrieks, and Ranboo blinks past the tears gathering along their lashes, looks up into the *angriest* pair of blue eyes he's ever seen, *seething froth of waves that'll kill you storm winds screaming past hurricane on the way nothing left in its wake*, snarled brown hair blowing back in a sudden gust of wind as they reach over a shoulder, "Go to *HELL* you fucking reefer!"

When the news stations stopped issuing evacuation warnings because there wasn't a point anymore, Ranboo thought he was going to die, but he didn't. Figured that they'd die in the aftermath of the storms that followed, but they didn't then either. Somehow survived long enough to get drug into the ocean to become a monster's meal, logically assumed that was it, but ended up living only to become a monster himself.

Basically the point they're trying to make is that any time Ranboo thought they were going to die, they haven't, but he thinks it'll stick this time, because there's the wicked sharp point of a harpoon swinging down for his jugular and he could fight back but he's not going to, doesn't want to hurt this person even though they fully intend on hurting him, so he guesses this is it.

He wonders if he'll end up feeling peace at the end.

Before they can find out though, there's the sharp rumble of a motor, grating horrible creak of a hull dragging along something hard, series of noises that sound suspiciously like someone being hit in the head with a can, the weight off Ranboo is instantly gone as a murderous blur goes streaking past, *flickering snap of a pink pennant terrible glint off a salt stained ax head don't TOUCH HIM*, and then all hell breaks loose.

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