

Ensemble and Nemo  
A novella by Georgina Parbrook

11:00

My name is Nemo Bailey.

Yes, I know, it's a stupid name. To be fair on my parents, they didn't know that two years after I was born a movie would be released about a fish with the same uncommon first name as me. No, they named me after the Latin for "nobody". I've never been quite sure why. Maybe it was because they hoped I would be nice and ordinary.

Well that backfired, didn't it?

I'm now on a beach on an island in the middle of the South China Sea with no food, no water and only a skim through of Lord of the Flies to help me survive. I hadn't even paid attention when I'd read that book in class. I was too busy mucking around with the other boys. I still got a good mark on the essay though.

Anyway, I'm now looking at the sky, lying on the sand probably looking a bit like a mermaid, or merman I suppose, after a night out. I contemplate throwing up in the sand next to me, but instead I get up and brush the sand out of my hair. I don't remember much, other than that there was a storm and that I fell overboard because I'm a clumsy oaf who apparently still doesn't know how to use all six feet of his body after a growth spurt a couple of months ago.

I held onto one of those little plastic water dispenser barrels that they keep on trying to ban because of plastic pollution. It had kept me afloat until I clambered out of the sea and onto this beach and shut my eyes. It was tiring work falling off a boat and swimming to shore. You had to kick your feet a lot and the shock really took it out of you. It wasn't too cold though, which was good.

The sun looks like it's nearly at its peak so I reckon it must be eleven o'clock. That's not bad. There's still some time for me to find some water and food and shelter before dark, because that's what they do in survival novels. At least, I think that's what they do. Maybe I'll build a fire too; at least I know how to do that. I paid attention that one time on the Year 7 outdoor pursuits camp.

Looking around now, I might not be stuck on an island after all. The sea surrounds me on both sides, but behind me there's a forest and in the distance behind the trees I think I can make out some mountains through the haze. Or maybe that's just wishful thinking. I walk along the beach, hoping to find some driftwood that I can use to build a shelter. Water will have to come later.

I hadn't seen very many sandy beaches in my life, at least not sandy beaches bathed in the sun. But I guess that's what you get if you've lived in Scotland all your life. I don't think I'd ever been out of the country until this trip to Hong Kong.

The sea smells different when there's a strong heat beating down on it, saltier and with a rancid edge, like rotting seaweed. The sand is hot to the touch when I bend down to collect bits of wood and plastic bottles. Normally I would shake my head in disgust at the pollution of the sea, but now this rubbish might actually come in useful.

My arms ache with the amount of driftwood I've collected, and there seems to be no shortage of it dotted along the shoreline, stark against the sand like dirt on a white school shirt.

The uniform in my secondary school had been such a pain, especially when I had after school rugby games in the summer with my friends. Those shirts would come back with grass stains the size of doorknobs and with mud streaked everywhere, but my Mum never complained. No, she spent hours trying to get those pesky stains out, and when I saw how long it took her I changed into my games kit before playing rugby.

I reach down again to pick up another piece of driftwood, still engrossed in the memory of those joyful summer afternoons playing sport, when I realize that the object half buried in the sand isn't driftwood at all, but a person.

The driftwood gets chucked aside as I scabble to dust the sand off the figure. It's a girl, with familiar ginger hair and a sunburn beginning to glow on her face.

Ensemble Adams, like me, is sixteen and cursed with an uncommon name. Before this morning we hadn't seen each other in six years, not since she and three of my other friends left our small town on the West coast of Scotland and scattered across the globe. Her mother was French and she and the rest of her family now live in Paris.

Some of my other friends had kept in contact with her over all these years. Paige is a social media expert and made sure to send me the odd message with news from the rest of the gang once and a while. She had informed me that Ensemble had become more than a little eccentric. I suppose that was to be expected. A tragedy drove all my friends out of my town and it had hit her the hardest.

Still, as I gaze down at her, I can't help but wish that I was stuck on in the middle of nowhere with Paige instead. She'd been fun to hang out with when we were ten and from her Instagram posts, she wasn't bad looking nowadays, with her long and silky blond hair and blue eyes.

Ensemble coughs and I feel guilty. I begin to shake her.

"Ensemble? It's me, Nemo."

Her piercing blue eyes flicker open. I'd forgotten how unusually light they were. She'd hidden away reading a book for the first part of the boat trip this morning before everything went wrong.

"You have sand in your hair." She informs me.

I run my hands through my brown hair, trying to dislodge the grains that stick to the salty water on my scalp.

"So do you." I point out. It was true, her flame-like hair was tangled and peppered with god knows what.

She sits up and wrenches her hair violently into a bun using a black hair band. "So where are we?"

"No idea. I fell overboard remember? There was that storm and I was sitting near the edge. I drifted all the way over here."

"After you got hurled over the boat broke. I grabbed a bit of wood and bobbed all the way over here." Ensemble says. My face must have looked devastated as she asks, "why did you think there was so much driftwood on this beach?"

Indeed, there was a lot of driftwood that now looked a lot like the spruce hull of the boat we had rented for the morning. I wondered where the others were. I pushed them out of my mind. There was no point in thinking of them, or I'd get too sad.

"Well, someone will come looking for us soon at least. If they know the boat got destroyed they'll see the last place it was on the radar and connect it to here. We won't have to wait long."

"Okay." Ensemble says. "Have you seen any of the others?"

"No. Did you see any when you were floating away from the boat?"

"No, but the waves were really big and choppy and I was more preoccupied trying not to let go of my driftwood, so I could have missed them."

"Yeah. I'm sure they're fine." I reassure myself. I walk over to the pile of driftwood, pull out a plank of wood and sit down on it. Ensemble joins me and we look out over the now motionless sea, waiting to be rescued.

12:00

"I don't think anyone's coming." Ensemble says, easing herself off the driftwood. We'd been sitting there looking at the sea for an hour, according to Ensemble's assessment of the sun's peak.

"They'll come. We just have to be patient."

“Whatever you say Nemo. I’m going to build a sandcastle.”

I bite back the urge to tell her that this is a matter of life and death, not a family holiday to the beach. After all, the longer she’s kept occupied the less time we’d have to spend in awkward silence.

She begins by drawing a large circle in the sand, and then using her hands, she digs a moat on the lines. The sand she digs up gets piled onto the middle, until it’s a mountain surrounded by a ravine. The moat gets deeper and deeper until I hear the splash of water against her hands.

“You’re going to ruin your clothes.” I say.

“They’re already ruined.” That was true. Her cropped and cuffed jeans were covered in seawater and her t-shirt was stiff with salt. “Besides, my clothes are the least of our worries at the moment.”

She smooths the pile of sand until it looked less like a mountain and more like a volcano, with a flat bit on top. Then she plunges her fist deep into the moat and brings up dribbling wet sand. It splashes over her blue jeans. She places it on the flat bit on top and smooths it out as if it were a pancake.

She does this many times, the wet sand layers growing smaller and smaller as the castle gained height. Then, after the smallest possible pancake comes up, she grabs another fistful of sand but instead of smoothing it, she lets it dribble, creating an intricate pattern of lines bundled together like worms. Finally, she places one tiny grain of sand on top.

The sandcastle is tall, around half my height, and a good deal more impressive than the ones I used to make as a child with a plastic bucket.

“Where did you learn to do that?” I ask.

“My dad taught me and my brother when we went to France on a beach holiday when we were five. My brother’s better than me at it though.”

She dips her finger into another bit of sand a bit further away and draws another small circle. “Civilization is a weird thing, isn’t it?” She creates another castle so small that she doesn’t even need to create a base, just pile the wet pancake layers on. “I loved creating sandcastle cities like this. I used to imagine little people living in them. But now I hate living in a society with other people.”

I cringe. I’d been wondering how long it would take before she became eccentric. “Why?”

“Because people expect so much of me, when all I want to do is run across a wildflower meadow and through thick swathes of forest.”

“Like we used to do as children.”

“Yeah, and instead I’m probably going to live in Paris all my life, surrounded by an overwhelming mass of people with hopes and dreams that they’ll never achieve.”

“But you don’t have to live in a city.” I point out. “You could go and live in a little town.”

“No, that won’t help. There are so many unspoken rules in civilization. Like who said that it’s acceptable to sleep on a bed but not on a sofa? They’re the same thing. They’re both soft and filled with feathers. I just don’t understand it anymore. No, I want to go and live by myself in the middle of nowhere.”

“But surely you’ll get lonely.” I point out, trying to shut down the conversation. It was too early in the morning for philosophy.

“No less lonely than I feel all the time in the middle of a bustling city. I’ll just be by myself, maybe with a cow or two for milk and a pen of hens for eggs and a field for crops. And I won’t have to worry about money, or taxes, or Latin verb tables ever again.”

“But what if you get ill?”

“Then I get ill and die.” She finishes off her small sandcastle and draws some more small circles around the moat of the large one. “We risk dying every day. A car can come down the street and boom,” She claps her hands for emphasis, “we’re a goner.”

I know where her unusual notions about mortality came from, but it still unnerves me. “Where is this wonderful place that you describe?”

“Anywhere I want it to be I guess. Maybe even this island if we don’t get rescued.”

Does she actually want to stay on this stupid bit of land forever? Is that what she’s hoping for?

“Well too bad,” I huff. “We will get rescued.”

“But what if we don’t? Maybe we’re just better off living in nature.”

I clamp my hands over my ears. “Stop it. I don’t want to hear this,” I hiss at her as she starts off making her third small castle.

“You’re different from how you used to be.” She says, and I take my hands off my ears, hoping she’s decided to change the topic of conversation. “You look happier, but I think you’re actually sadder.”

I swallow, unsure how she could tell that a hollow ball had been spreading across my heart over the last six years, making me feel numb inside. I paste on a smile, unwilling to give her the satisfaction of being correct. “Well, as you get older life gets more complicated, doesn’t it?”

“That’s because civilization makes it more complicated. When we’re kids we don’t really belong to society. We belong to our parents and our tiny worlds where the worst thing that happens is that your Mum cooks you something you don’t like for your tea. But then you’re suddenly expected to know what you’re doing with your life and benefit society. And that makes me sad. I think it makes you sad too.”

I sigh in frustration. “Yes, maybe it does make me feel a little sad and nostalgic, but that doesn’t mean I’m willing to leave society forever and live like a hermit in the middle of nowhere!”

“I’m just saying,” She shrugs, “You might be happier living in nature.”

My irritation surges up at that last comment. “You’re crazy, you know that? We’re stuck in the middle of nowhere, probably about to die, and all you want to talk about is how you’re happy to be stuck here.” I shake my head. “What about your parents? What will they say when they think you’re dead? After everything they’ve been through how can you do that to them?”

She recoils as if she’s been slapped, but thankfully doesn’t seem to be about to cry or anything. I don’t know what I would do if I had to try and comfort her. She turns back to her infuriating sandcastle and moves to make another castle. I get a sudden urge to kick it down, but instead I look out to sea and watch for even the smallest speck of a boat on the great grey rock of the ocean.

Ensemble licks her lips and as I swallow, I realize that I too am hungry and thirsty. “I’m going to go and see if I can find some water and something to eat.” I offer, ready to get away from her and her annoying and whiny voice.

She jumps up, brushing the layers of sand off her jeans. “I can find something to eat. I learnt how to trap animals last summer as well as skin them and stuff.”

I nod, not bothering to question how she learnt to skin animals, “I’ll stay near the edge of the forest so that I can look out for a boat.

She rolls her eyes at me, as if she already knows that there won’t be a boat coming. I want to punch her for her pessimism. Can’t she see it’s the last thing we need right now? We both walk away from her sandcastle and into the soft shade of the forest.

1:00

Despite all her talk of being ready to go and live in nature, Ensemble couldn’t bring herself to kill the wild boar that she’d trapped. I grabbed a stick and slammed it through its skull with a sickening crunch. Once it was dead, she gutted it and skinned it whilst I build a small fire. We tore bits of it off and stick them on sticks to roast in the fire.

I pull my stick away deciding it is cooked. The meat is chewy and fatty, but still tastes good after flapping about in the sea for so long. Ensemble also looks to be enjoying hers.

“Do you think you are more logical or passionate?” She asks through a mouthful of food.

“I don’t know,” I reply, wary about engaging in conversation with her after the last time. “Let me guess, you’re more passionate?”

She grins. “You know me well. Logic is what my parents and society want me to possess, but I honestly think I don’t have any.”

“Everyone has to have some logic. It’s like being extroverted or introverted, it’s all on a scale.”

“Well I don’t think I have any.” Her red hair shimmers with the flames from the fire. “But I think you’re probably more logic than passion.”

“Yes, but I think logic is a good thing. Logic gets us food and water whereas passion gets us castles of sand which are beautiful, sure, but it’s not like you can eat sand.”

“So you’re saying that without logic in a survival setting like we are in now you’d die?” She clarifies, swallowing her meat and taking another bite.

“Well yes,” I say, “probably.”

“I disagree.”

Of course you do. I sigh inwardly. Of all the people I could have gotten stuck with in the middle of nowhere I get one who insists on engaging in intellectual debate with me.

“Why?” I ask her patiently. I might as well try to be nice to her, despite how much her voice grates against my skull.

“Because I believe that you wouldn’t last two seconds out here without me if you were all logic.”

“That’s not true.” I point out indignantly, “The only thing you’ve done since we got here is catch a wild boar and build a sandcastle.”

“Yeah, but I reckon if you were on your own you would just sat on a bit of driftwood crying or you would’ve sorted yourself out and then let the sadness hit you later.”

That had been my plan before I’d seen her. “Like you would’ve done any better,” I grump.

“No, I admit that without you here to build a fire and tear me away from building sandcastles I wouldn’t be looking too good either.” She places her now finished skewer on the sand. “What I’m trying to say is that logic is what you need to survive but passion is what makes life worth living.”

I remain silent, watching the sea as I sweat because of the fire and the sun radiating heat towards me.

“Don’t you think that without the odd flower or a pretty sandcastle you would begin to lose yourself?” She asks, wiping grease from the side of her mouth. “You couldn’t be happy or anything. All you’d do is focus on the day you’d get rescued.”

“Maybe,” I grunt and finish off the rest of my food. “Well, maybe I should focus on the long run then. We have driftwood, maybe we should build some shelters or something?”

“Or we could sleep outside under the stars.” She suggests, leaping down to finish her sandcastle. I sigh and run my hands through my hair.

“I found a river earlier. I’m going to go and get some water for us okay?” I chuck my stick into the fire and stand up, grabbing a large plastic water barrel similar to the one I’d floated to the island on. “Watch the sea for a boat.” I command as she sits, her arms caked in sand.

She rolls her eyes. “Fine. If we want to build a shelter we should build it in the forest, I saw a pretty looking valley whilst I was looking for food.”

“I’ll see how close it is to a water source,” I snap.

“Okay.” She sighs and begins the last tower in her sandcastle. I turn away and head back into the leafy forest.

It’s quieter amongst the trees and more calming. The sun doesn’t constantly bite into your back and the sea doesn’t roar in the background of every conversation. It’s definitely jungle territory, reminding me of the pictures of the amazon rainforest I’d seen. The leaves are a more luscious green than anything Scotland could offer and offer a cool shade in comparison to the blistering heat on the beach. I can hear birds chirping softly to each other, and although the sounds they make are unfamiliar to me, I ache for home and the sounds of the woodpigeons and the finches and the robins that used to wake me up during the long summer holidays.

I had found a stream earlier before Ensemble’s shouts of excitement at capturing a pig distracted me. The girl thought she was Katniss Everdeen or something. I furrow my brow, trying to remember the path I took. The green foliage and thick tree trunks look the same.

A black bug appears on my arm. I swat it and blood bursts onto my skin. It was a mosquito. I had never encountered one before, but I had spent long hours researching them for a biology project about malaria and vaccines. The closest thing

Scotland we have to them is midges, but apparently mosquito bites itch a lot more. I'd better get used to them fast, seeing as Ensemble feels like we might be here for the long run.

Finally, I hear the splatter of a stream amongst the calls of strange insects and the wails of the birds. I run towards the sound and break into a small clearing with a waterfall by the side. Despite what Ensemble said about me being purely logical, I do have enough passion in me to recognize the beauty of it.

It is small, with a large tree trunk in the center. The bark has black scorch lines that lick up its side like flames. Lightning has struck this tree down. Around the trunk there's a tangle of roots and earth, the dirt the same dark brown as my eyes.

The waterfall is on my left, cascading down rocks like white silk. Everywhere else, flowers pop up the size of my fist and colored like bright sweets that my Mum never let me eat as a child. Too many nasty chemicals in them, she had said whenever I'd asked for them

This must've been the clearing Ensemble was talking about earlier. Maybe I shouldn't have snapped at her so quickly. She'd only been trying to help.

The intellectual debates are annoying, but looking back on it I see that maybe she'd also been trying to help me with those. They had taken my mind off of the desire to panic and punch a tree. She hadn't panicked at all, or looked scared. She'd just tried to make the best of it and I had gotten angry with her.

I'll be nicer to her in the future. I walk back through the trees, but not before filling up the water barrel with water from the stream.

2:00

Homesickness presses on me like a headache. I miss my Mum, my friends; I'd even pay five pounds to see my Dad. The heat is maddening and despite me drinking water, I still feel like I'm that set of cookies I had to make in food tech being burnt to ashes in the oven.

I'm sitting with my back pressed against one of the trees on the outskirts of the forest. The shade protects me from the sun and makes me a tiny bit cooler. I'm facing the beach, watching Ensemble build yet another sandcastle all the way down by the shoreline to stave off the boredom.

She doesn't seem to mind the heat that makes you sweat until your t-shirt looks like it's been left out in the rain, or the lobster-red sunburns that have sprung up across her exposed legs and arms and chest. I'm tempted to tell her to put some sunscreen on, but it's not like we have any. Besides if we're in for the long haul, we both need to get our skin used to this blistering sun.

"Ensemble!" I call to her. "Come and get some water!"

She pops her head up and scurries over. "I just had water." She plops down in the sand strewn grasses near the tree.

"I know, but it's good to stay hydrated. The last thing we need is you getting ill." I twist my mouth into a joking grin. "I could never forgive myself if I allowed my only companion to shrivel up like a prune and die."

She grins and grabs the water barrel. "I'm fairly sure that's not how dehydration works." Her lips press upon the rim and she takes a few gulps. She discards it onto the sand and wipes her mouth with her pale hand. "Isn't it weird to think how we got here?"

"What do you mean?" What could she be talking about now? The island? Being born?

"Like we were all so close when we were ten."

Oh. She's talking about our little group of six that splintered. We were very close. "Until Etienne died," I say.

"Yeah." Her voice turns soft, "I miss him so much, Nemo." Her eyes are shiny.

I put my arm around her shoulder. "I know. I miss him too. He was your twin, and my best friend."

"Mama moved us to Paris to try and leave his memory behind, but I still see him when I go to sleep. In my dreams we're both ten again and running around the woods outside your house."

"We had some good times, didn't we?" I smile sadly. "You know, if we ever get out of here, would you want to come back up to Scotland and stay with me? We could visit the lake and the woods if its not too painful."

She leans her head against my chest. "That's very kind. I'd love to go back." She pauses and we watch the sea lap onto the sand. "It must've been hard for you," She said suddenly. "When Etienne died in that accident, you didn't just lose your best friend, but you lost all of us. I went to Paris, Kai's parents got a promotion and moved to Hong Kong, Paige moved to a posh boarding school and Gigi went to live with her Grandmother."

"It was hard at first but I made new friends in secondary school. When the email from Kai inviting us all the way over to Hong Kong as an end of exam treat came in it was the first time I'd thought about our little group for months."

That was a lie. I thought about them every day when I walked through the woods to get to school. I sometimes thought I could see the ghosts of our ten-year-old selves playing amongst the brambles and thick tree trunks.

"My Mum didn't want me to come, but I persuaded her." Ensemble said. "I thought it would give me some closure over Etienne."

“I know we only got here yesterday and barely saw each other till dinner last night and then had the boat ride in the morning, but has it?”

“I don’t know.”

We look out to the sea again, which shimmers like the tears in Ensemble’s eyes against the sunlight.

She smiles. “What is it?” I ask.

“Remember that time when we went looking for buried treasure in the woods?”

“Yeah you and Kai and Paige were totally into it with your little spades and buckets.”

“Gigi managed to get us crisps for provisions and you and Etienne stole your Dad’s map to find the treasure.”

“I’d forgotten about that!” I sigh. “I don’t think my Dad has ever forgiven me for that map. Didn’t we manage to get it soaking wet?”

“Yeah because it rained after about an hour of us searching. Everyone went home other than you, Etienne and me. We must have spent hours digging and digging and digging and even when you guys wanted to head home because dinner would be ready you stayed with me and we kept on digging.”

“I don’t think we ever found anything, did we?”

“No, but sometimes I feel like I’m still in those woods, digging deeper and deeper in an attempt to find something, but it never being there.”

“Why don’t you stop?”

“I don’t know. I feel like if I stop something bad will happen.”

I say, hoping to be supportive, “Well, if you ever feel as though you can stop, just know that I’m here for you when you put that shovel down for good.”

“Thank you.” Her gaze flits onto me. “Are you okay? You seem different from before.”

“I mean I am six years older than I was when I last saw you.” I smile. She’s not convinced. I might as well tell her the truth. “But yeah, I guess I feel like I don’t know what to do with my life. I manage to pretend to be happy but inside, I just feel so hollow.”

It was true. At school, when I was with my friends, I was this happy go lucky figure. I played football and rugby, I encouraged my friends to do stupid things like drink melted ice cream mixed in with maple syrup from the school canteen or climb up onto the school roof.

But when I got home, I felt numb. In fact, the only thing I felt at home was a twinge of fear, and that was when my Dad asked me for a chat about my future. I love my Mum, and I wish she could see me when I was happy instead of when I'm sad.

"I'm sorry," she tells me.

"I'm sorry too."

3:00

"What's your Father like? You said you two don't get on anymore."

We had sat in the shade of the tree for a while, watching the sea for any sign of a black dot that might be a ship. I was lazy and tired; the sun had melted my brain into mush.

I sigh. The last thing I want to talk about is my father, but I know she'll continue to press on if I don't give her an answer.

"I don't know," I admit. "He wants me to go and become a doctor like him and lead a perfectly average life. Take a loan out for university and pay it back over the years, find a girl and settle down and have two kids who go to a decent public school. But I don't think that's for me. If I'm honest, I have no idea what I want to do in the future and that kind of scares me."

"If you don't know what you want to do, that's okay."

"Really?"

"Yeah. We're sixteen. We've only just done our first set of public exams, and we don't even know how we did in them yet. Barely any of us know what we're going to be doing for the next year, let alone for the rest of our lives."

"You know what you want to do with your life."

"You said it yourself, my dreams are farfetched and stupid and irresponsible." Her fingers draw small patterns in the sand. "They were born from a dislike of society and my parents."

"Your parents?" I ask, surprised. When I had known them Mr. and Mrs. Adams, the latter from France, were kind people, always taking the twins on holidays to London and to France and on hikes. I had been jealous of Ensemble and Etienne back then, my parents never took me anywhere. My Dad was always too tied up with work.

"They're not how you remember then," She says, seeing the confused expression on my face. "They changed after..." She swallows. "Etienne."

I draw my knees up to my chin and wait for her to continue. My jeans, like hers, are still crackly with seawater and covered in sand, which is gritty against my hands.

“My Dad divorced her a couple of months after the funeral. He lives in London now. I see him twice a year or so. My Mum keeps on trying to get me interested in stuff and gets angry when I don’t do as well as she’d hoped at school or make any effort to make friends. She doesn’t accept that I’m different from how she wants me to be and I’ll never be the perfect girly daughter she wants.”

Ensemble copies my position, hugging her knees to her chest.

“Sometimes I look into her eyes and I see this small gleam. That’s when I know she’s thinking about him and how much easier her life would be if I’d died that night on the lake instead of him.”

Her eyes glisten. I’m tempted to say that I’m sure she wouldn’t ever wish that, but I keep silent. Now didn’t seem like a good time to talk.

“I miss childhood.” She says. “I miss when mucking about was adorable and being different was cool and quirky. I miss when running through the woods was encouraged and when I could draw and play without the threats of failing my exams.”

“I know. I miss it too. More than anyone could know.”

“People are happy to let their child be passionate, no, they encourage their kids to be passionate. They tell us we can be whatever we want to be when we grow up, that we can do anything if we put our minds to it. And then, we grow up. Cute chubby cheeks disappear and our faces slim down. We become teenagers and suddenly you can be whatever you want to be turns into choose these professions so that you get the most money, or go to university or else, or do this activity so you get into university. Passion is only acceptable for romance, and everywhere else there must be logic.”

“I know. I get so frustrated by it sometimes.”

“It’s why I refuse to grow up. It infuriates my mother. In the months after Etienne died, I read and reread Peter Pan.” She smiles. “I’d leave my window open for him at night and pray that he whisked me away so that I never had to grow up.”

I sigh and place my head in my hands. “I just feel so lost, Ensemble. So lost.”

“Well, at least we’re lost together.” She smiles at me sadly.

I smile weakly and put my arm back around her shoulder. She shrugs me off and tells me that I should go and get more water. She’s nearly drunk the barrel dry.

4:00

I slurp from the water and then hand it to her. She hasn't moved since I left, her piercing eyes fixed on the water. Those eyes cut into my soul earlier when we talked. I'd admitted more to her in the last five hours we'd been stranded here than I had in the last five years. Maybe it was the impulse to tell someone before I died.

She has a sip and then places it in the sand beside her. "Will you get angry if I talk to you about civilization again?" She murmurs.

"No. Sorry, I was grumpy earlier. I was more angry at our situation than I was at you."

"I thought you were going to kick over my sandcastle, you were that mad."

"I'd never do that," I lie indignantly.

She arches an eyebrow at me and then turns back to the sea. "I think we've established by now that civilization is both good and bad. It's good because all humans need that social element in their lives and it allows for culture and the arts, but you also need to follow the rules. Humans aren't designed to live in groups as large as civilizations. It was only when we figured out how to farm that we were able to do that."

She looks over at me, those startling pupils boring into my soul.

"We are animals. Animals dressed in clothes pretending to be so much more, but in reality we are simply animals."

"So you want to prove that we're animals by avoiding society?"

"No, I just want people to accept the fact that we are hardly better than monkeys and ants and tigers in the grand scheme of things. In fact, we're probably worse."

"So are you glad that we've gotten stuck here? So that we can truly be animals?" I press.

She sighs. "Yes, I'm happy about my current situation. In fact, I'd be willing to never get rescued if it wasn't for one thing."

"What's that?"

"You." My face must betray my surprise, because she continues, "You didn't choose this, and as much as you say that you aren't happy back in Scotland, I don't think you'd enjoy being stuck with me for the rest of your life very much."

"There's something reassuring about living here." I admit. "There's no uncertainty in the future. If we're still here in ten years time, we'll still be trapping and skinning animals and making sandcastles. If we get rescued, my life will be completely different in ten years. My life's completely different from how it was even six years ago."

"And you're scared of that?" She asks, not judgmentally.

“Yes Ensemble. I am.”

We fall silent. Barring my soul to her is strangely comforting. It makes me feel more ready to face the world again. I'd feared after our initial disagreement that we would never get on and I would be miserable whilst we waited for a ship to appear. Instead, she's allowed me to lay out my thoughts in a clean and orderly fashion, whilst staving off the fear and anger that simmers in the back of my brain like a toothache.

I've always been an angry person. Mum used to joke that I came out of the womb kicking and screaming and ready to fight off anything the world could hurl at me. I suppose that's why I'm so drawn to sport. It's a safe place to take out my aggression, where people's parents can't complain if their child ends up with a broken nose.

Years have gone by where I've had to check my temper, making sure it doesn't bubble over whenever someone pushes me a little too far. I've let it fade into grouchiness, but the familiar flaming anger does appear from time to time, erupting like a previously thought dormant volcano.

It happens when I'm stressed or had a shock. The knowledge that the boat Kai had hired this morning for our first day of the reunion had smashed in a storm and scattered me onto a remote bit of land had been both of those things, owing to me losing my temper with Ensemble when she started talking about civilization.

I can easily see why people find Ensemble weird. Her eyes make you uncomfortable and her accent, a mix of French and Scottish, is strange. She's annoying because she's so determined to show you what she thinks and feels, but she's also a little naïve. Yet her heart is in the right place, and now that I think about it, I'm sorry I would ever have chosen someone like Paige over her. That is, to spend the rest of my life with if need be. Not like anything romantic, but more as a friend.

I'd like to think that she wouldn't mind me too, despite my awful temper and grouchiness. I listen to her rants and allow her to see how I feel, something that I haven't allowed anyone to do for a long time. Now that I think about it, I would do a lot for her, and I would be devastated if she ever came to any harm.

“You know, the whole point of Lord of the Flies was to indicate that without rules in society we would be bad people.” I say.

She smirks, readying her counterpoint. “Well, those were stupid boys. I tell you, if there'd been a couple of girls with them they'd have been completely fine. Besides, we're in a very similar situation to those boys and we haven't started to hurl each other off cliffs.”

“People get hurled off cliffs in Lord of the Flies? I need to reread that book.”

“Hmm... I can't say I liked it very much.”

“That’s only because it’s about how civilization is better than nature and you disagree with that.”

“Yes, that and all the boys were stupid.”

“So am I a better person to get stuck with in the middle of nowhere with than the boys in Lord of the Flies?”

“Only slightly, besides, you nearly kicked my sandcastle over earlier.”

“No I didn’t!” I exclaim.

“One day its destroying works of art, the next its running stark naked through the woods brandishing a spear.” She grins and glances at me. “No, I don’t think that happens in the book.”

She yawns and places her head on my chest. My heart tenses as I feel the soft pressure of her head on top of my t-shirt.

“Do you mind being on lookout? This heat as made me sleepy.”

“Go ahead.” I say, but she’s already slumped on my chest, her bright red hair splayed out over my t-shirt. Her breath is slow and soft and her face seems calm and peaceful when she’s asleep.

I look back up to the empty, empty sea, and for once there’s no pit of despair in my stomach.

5:00

“Ensemble.” I whisper. “Wake up.”

I move slightly and her head slips down onto my lap. Her eyes flick open.

“What is it?” She moans groggily.

“It’s your sandcastle.”

Her arms fling out behind her in the sand and she pushes herself up to her feet. I get up and follow her over to the sandcastle, which is now very close to getting gobbled up by the greedy waves.

She sits next to it on the sand and I follow suit. It’s not unbearable like it was earlier; in fact, the soft afternoon sun is comforting, adding just enough warmth to stop the sea breeze from giving us a chill.

The waves aren’t the same clear and calm blue color they were earlier, the color of expensive beach holidays in tropical resorts, or the stone grey they were during the storm. They are a shade that is somewhere in between, with tips of pale white foam

peaking out as if someone had taken a thin layer of blue icing and spread it across a white cake.

The moat has expanded from the trench it was earlier. It is now more like an enchanting fairytale pond around the large tower, the sort of place, had it not been made out of sand, you could imagine the frog from the princess and the frog living in, perching in the reeds as it waits for someone to give it a kiss.

A gust of wind whirls past dislodging specks of the main body, its grains scattering into the breeze. The top of the sandcastle has dried to a bone and no longer has the firm hold it used to when it was wet. It is only a matter of time before...

Whoops. The tip of the sandcastle falls over and tumbles onto the ground. Ensemble crushes it with her toe, and it becomes just like the rest of the beach, with nothing to indicate that it had once belonged to a proud tower that had been built with such love and care.

The sea edges closer and closer, slowly beginning to eat away at the closest small castle in the circle around the big one. The sand yields easily, willing to escape its confines and float back into the sea, being transported once again around the world in the waters' currents. The grains would see creatures in that ocean that I could only dream up and rest on the wrecks of long forgotten ships, before being washed up on a beach somewhere far away.

I wish I could do that, float into the sea without a care in the world. No need to eat or sleep; just let the tides transport me around the world. Maybe I'd end up on a sandy beach off the West Coast of Scotland and be able to stumble up to a railway station and ride all the way back home, to the loving embrace of my Mother.

My Father, no doubt, would frown at me once my Mother let go, and demand to know where I'd been. For once, I'd tell him the tales of the things I'd seen, the sharks, the corals, the fish and the dolphins and he'd be impressed and pat me on the back and tell me that he was glad I'd had an adventure.

Or maybe he'd yell at me and tell me to work harder at school and that my grades were unacceptable and that I did want to go and study medicine at university didn't I so I'd better go and buck up my ideas.

The small sand castle is gone, and the water stretches its spidery fingers out to the other small ones next to it, licking at their sides hesitantly, and then lapping hungrily against them.

A large sweep of water comes in and flows into the moat. A few moments later another swathe of water comes in and engulfs the whole thing, ensnaring and demolishing all the smaller towers and surrounding the large one.

We have to scoot back to stop the seawater getting on our jeans again. They are still papery and crackly and we didn't want them to get even more so. Ensemble's pale

eyes are glistening as she sees the sea chew at the edges of the large castle, framed beneath the salmon pink and orange sunset.

Eventually the waves surround the castle, so that it is the only thing sticking out from the sea, like a lighthouse on a rock ready to guide us home. The sand quivers a little, and then with a tremendous whooshing noise, a dark wave that glows with the threads of red and orange in the sky slumps over the top, smoothing away the pretty details until it is like a large pebble instead of a weathered rock face.

The sea grinds it further and further down until it has sunk fully into the waves. I glance at Ensemble. The silver tears that run down her cheeks reflect the sunset.

“You okay?” I ask.

“Yeah. It’s just so beautiful.”

I tentatively take her hand in comfort. “I know.”

She leans onto me, and together we watch as the sun begins to slide out of the sky, allowing the stars to shimmer in its place.

6:00

I’ve built another fire, as the wood from the last one got swept away by the sea. Ensemble and I lie in the sand beside it, watching the flames flicker. We didn’t build it because we were cold, far from it, it is still sticky and humid without the sun, but as a beacon to draw our saviors in to rescue us.

It’s mesmerizing to look at. At lunch I was too busy trying to cook to appreciate the fire, but now the flames dance and crackle merrily, parts of it turning blue because of the seawater.

“Do you think anyone will ever come?” Ensemble asks, her face barely visible in the orange gloom.

“I don’t know. I hope so. But if they don’t, I don’t think it’ll be a huge catastrophe. You said it yourself earlier, at least we’re lost with each other.”

“You saw the clearing earlier, right?”

“Yes. You were right. It is pretty.”

“Tomorrow, we should start to build a house there.” I see her dreamy smile in the firelight. “Nothing too complex, just a small hut that we can call our own. We can store food, firewood and our water canteens.”

“Sounds good.”

“We should also try and explore a bit, maybe see if we can find a cow or some chickens or something. The boar was good but I don’t think I could live off that the rest of my life.”

“I know.” I say, “It only tasted good because we were tired and hungry but it was quite fatty.”

“Yeah, we also need to find something other than meat to eat, otherwise we’ll get scurvy or something. We need to find seeds so we can grow crops and stuff.”

“What do you think we’ll miss most about the outside world?” I ask, reflectively.

Ensemble smirks. “Chocolate. What about you?”

“I don’t know. Getting used to not having a phone is weird. I keep on reaching for it in my back pocket, only to remember that it got washed away in the storm.”

“Maybe this will be good for us.” She suggests. “To get away from technology for a little while. Everyone our age is so wrapped up in it in the real world.”

“I guess. When we get back, I’m so going to sign up for an outward bounds course, just in case something like this ever happens again.”

We fell silent, both of us thinking that it wasn’t a question of *when* we got back, but *if* we got back.

“Are you scared?” She asks.

I try to grin. “Less so, now that I’m with you.”

“You’re a good person Captain Nemo.”

“Captain?” I ask, confused.

“It’s from *1,000 Leagues under the sea*, by Jules Verne. The captain of the submarine is called Captain Nemo. I thought that’s who your parents named you after.”

“I don’t know. I always thought they named me after the word for “no one” in Latin. But I’ll add *1,000 Leagues under the sea* to the list of books I need to read.”

“It’s funny, I’ve just realized you and me have opposite names. Nemo means no one, and Ensemble means together in French. We are together and no one.”

I laugh. “That is strange.” I sigh. “I’ve always wanted to change my name to something more normal. In fact, it’s probably the first thing I had planned for my eighteenth birthday in two years time.”

“What would you change it to?”

“I don’t know. Something uncommon but not super weird. Maybe Ash?”

She shakes her head incredulously. “No way, you’re not an Ash.”

“What, do you know someone called Ash?”

“No, but loads of young adult books have hunky male love interests called Ash.”

“So you’re saying that I’m not good enough to be a hunky male love interest?” I place my hand over my heart in mock offence. “You’re quite the heartbreaker Ensemble, ouch.”

“No, I didn’t mean it like that!” She objects quickly, her face tight with worry that she’d offended me. I turn my face to the fire so she could see my face screwed into a wicked grin.

She slaps me. “Don’t fool me like that! I’m bad at telling when people are joking and when they aren’t.”

“Sorry.” I mutter, although I’m still smiling.

“It’s not that you aren’t hunky or a good love interest, it’s just you aren’t as annoying as the Ash characters in books. You aren’t territorial or protective and you’re kind. I bet you have all the girls drooling after you at home.”

I shake my head disbelievingly. “No. You are very much mistaken. The girls at home don’t even look my way. But I bet the boys in Paris are all after you.”

“No way! So far you’re the only one I haven’t managed to scare off with my talk of passion vs. logic and civilization vs. nature.”

“I like your talks,” I offer to be polite. I realize with a start that it’s true. She gets so animated when she talks, her pale eyes sparking and her pupils flitting about constantly like they were following a butterfly. Her hair glows bright red next to the fire, like lava on the sand.

“How about Peter?” She asks suddenly, and I realize that she’s gone back to discussing name options.

“Like Peter Pan?”

“I guess.”

“Nah. Maybe I’ll just stick with Nemo.”

“Well, one thing is for sure: Ash is trash.” She giggles. “That rhymes.” She sings through fits of giggles, “Ash is trash. Ash is trash. Ash is trash!”

Her voice is surprisingly airy and delicate and reminds me of a bird. Her laughter is infectious and soon my smile has transformed into a similar giggle. We sit in the sand, laughing and laughing until we get tired.

The night is inky black and crickets chirp from the invisible forest somewhere behind us. The sand has become cool and the fire has quieted down a bit. Everything is still, and the hot and humid air wraps around us like a blanket.

“We should go to sleep. We’ve had a long day.” I say.

“Yeah. I wonder what time it is back home. Will my Mum have had her dinner by now or not?”

“Don’t think about that.” I say comfortingly. “Besides, there’s a time difference from Hong Kong to Paris.”

“Oh. Goodnight Nemo.”

“Goodnight Ensemble.”

We turn away from the fire and close our eyes, waiting for sleep to come.

7:00

It’s cold, colder than I’ve ever been. Even colder than I was on DofE when my sleeping bag broke. Someone is shaking me, but in my dreams I’m in the draughty kitchen in the house where I’ve lived since I was born, and my Mum is teaching me how to make bread.

“It’ll impress any girl and besides, fresh bread isn’t always something you’ll be able to come across. No son of mine will buy stale bread from the supermarket!”

Her vendetta against supermarket bread was well known, so I complied with her. I’d rather have been out going to the cinema in Glasgow with my friends, but something in the dream tugged me towards her.

She measures out the flour into a bowl and adds yeast, salt, water and olive oil. She commands me to mix it, and I start overenthusiastically, causing flour to flurry in a white cloud over the kitchen. When it settles and I can see again, I see the flour across my Mum’s face like clown make up and begin to laugh. She laughs with me, her mousy brown hair identical to mine bouncing in delight.

“Be patient.” She says. “The art of baking bread isn’t something that can be rushed.”

She takes the bowl and shows me how to mix it slowly. I’m about to take it and try again when a gust of wind blows and my Dad walks in.

The remnants of a smile disappear from my Mum’s face and the light goes out of her eyes.

“Did you make this mess boy?” He yells at me.

I nod, slowly.

“Clean it up at once! Go and study. You won’t need to learn how to bake bread when you’re a doctor. You won’t have time.” He sneers and another wave of air collides with me. Somewhere far away a woman’s voice is talking to me, saying my name.

“Nemo! Wake up. Nemo. Wake up.”

My eyes snap open and I close them again because it’s so dark that there’s no difference. Bits of water slide down my face. Someone pinches me sharply and I wake up properly, moaning in pain.

“Ensemble?” I ask, remembering where I am.

“Nemo, we need to go. The typhoons back.”

“Ty what?”

“Typhoon. A tropical storm. I think it’s the same one that sunk the boat earlier. It must’ve had a temporary lull where it hit elsewhere, but now it’s back and we need to move otherwise the trees will fall down and we’ll get crushed underneath them.”

The wind isn’t cold, but it batters my body fiercely. The rain mingles with the sweat from my dream. I swear and bring myself to my feet, still unsure whether this is a dream or not.

Ensemble grasps my hand and drags me along with her. The sand bites into my ankles as the storm whips it up like a monster of grains.

“Where are we going?” I shout, because the wind and the leaves seem determined to drown out my voice.

“Over to the shore, where the trees can’t touch us.”

She drags me down suddenly. “Here, we’ll be safe here.”

“How do you know?” I ask, wishing I could see her face through the darkness so I could know if she too, was petrified.

“We’re by the ocean. The trees can’t reach us.”

There was a huge crack and I feel a vibration in the sand. “That was a tree, wasn’t it?” I ask, grimly.

“Yes.”

“I wish that we’d built a shelter. Now we’re probably going to die of exposure or of some tree falling on us,” I hiss at her.

“We’re safe,” She reassures me, “I promise.”

The sand grains caught up in the storm beat against my back. I grit my teeth, praying that my t-shirt will give me some protection.

“It’ll pass soon,” She reassures me again, feeling around my face before ruffling my hair.

“I shouldn’t have let you distract me from the real problems,” I rasp at her through the night. “You claim to be some sort of expert but the first thing everyone is taught in scouts is to find water and then build shelter in this sort of situation and guess who found the water and guess who discouraged me from building a shelter straight away. You’re useless. I would’ve been better off on this island without you.”

“Stop it,” She whimpers. “I was trying to help. I just saved your life.”

Her tone softened me, and I felt ashamed of my outburst, brought on because of the shock of being awoken and the dream I’d had. My Father yelling at me always put me in a mood and left me on edge, even when I simply dreamed about it.

“Ensemble, I’m sorry,” I apologize.

“They always lose their temper in the end.” She murmurs, and I have to strain my ears to filter out the sounds of the storm to hear her. “I knew it. You’re just like all the rest.”

“Maybe I am like all the rest,” I admit, “Maybe I’m just a trashy Ash, but I have one thing that differentiates me from the rest of them. I’m stuck here with you, and right now our main priority is surviving the night. You can scream and punch me in the morning and I won’t object, but for now, we just need to stick through this.”

“Okay.”

I shuffle my body towards her, shielding her from the sand and I hug her. “Is this okay?”

“Yes.” She whispers, hugging me back. Together, our bodies block out the worst of the wind. We close our eyes, and try to ignore the raging storm. The wind makes the leaves become a cacophony of rustling and the air is punctuated by the occasional crack, causing the ground to shudder. Whenever this happens, Ensemble grips me even more tightly and pulls herself closer.

I whisper comforts in muted tones when this happens and soon she relaxes a little and settle back into a fretful doze. But I don’t sleep. I can’t, not after my last dream and the strange and muted excitement of having an actual girl this close to me.

So we huddle, the two of us against the violent storm.

8:00

The moon appears as suddenly as the sun had plunged us into darkness. It casts shadows over her peaceful face, and for the first time I see how the slim curve of her nose makes her appear strangely delicate, and the small wrinkle between her brows that is a permanent reminder of her determination.

Her eyelashes are pale and long and shade her eyes like a palm frond. Her hair shimmers ghostly pale against the sand in the moonlight, the wind tossing it about until it resembles flames dancing.

“Etienne!” She screams suddenly, startling me out of my daze. It was the first time she’d said his name in her sleep.

“No, I’m not Etienne. It’s Nemo,” I murmur, stroking her hair.

“Oh Nemo. Where’s Etienne?” She asks, still asleep.

“He’s not here right now. It’s just us two.” I say.

“I’m so cold.” She shivers and I hold her tighter.

“You’re okay. You’re fine.” I whisper. “We’re fine. We’re going to be okay.”

A sudden wash of cold comes over my feet. It’s probably just a particularly chilly gust of wind. And then it happens again.

I start up and look down. The sea has come in and the waves are chewing at our feet, giving us sporadic bursts of cold. Soon, the tide will engulf us fully.

I shake Ensemble awake. “What is it?” She groans.

“The tides coming in. We need to find somewhere else.”

“It’s light.” She says, bewildered. “The moon has come out.”

“Yes, yes.” I say, trying to hurry her along because we needed to move as soon as possible. “Why don’t you enjoy the moon when we’re on our way.”

“On our way where?” She asks.

She did have a point. We couldn’t stay by the shore or we’d get soaked, but we couldn’t head into the forest either. The wind was still dangerously strong and the cracks of trees falling still punctuated the night.

“We’ll walk along the beach for a bit. Maybe we’ll find some rocks to take shelter in.”

“Okay.”

We stumble through the sand, ignoring the wind that threatened to blow us over and the rain that slammed into our skin like miniature rocks. Ensemble shivers beside me and looks in a bad way.

I wish I had a jacket or something to give her, but all of my clothes are wet from the rain and would probably do more harm than good. The beach is long and every time we reach a corner I hope that it will give way to rocks, it just carries on with an endless stretch of sand that looks white under the light of the moon, like powdered bone.

“I’m sorry about what I said earlier.” I say as we pass onto yet another beach. Our progress is slow because of our shivering and the sand takes twice as long to walk on as earth. I felt the need to break the silence.

“That’s okay.” Ensemble says. As she turns to me, her face becomes illuminated by the moonlight. She looks wretched with the rain running down her face like tears and her face bright red from being battered by the wind and the sand.

“No, its not. I was grumpy and angry and I shouldn’t have taken it out on you. Not again.”

She says nothing and continues on, placing one foot in front of the other. I’m tempted to stop, but she keeps on going and I have to up my pace to keep up with her. The trees crack and fall, but she still carries on walking and walking. I trail behind her, exhausted but not willing to let her out of my sight.

But then she stops and collapses onto the sand, sprawled out like a dead seagull. I halt next to her and kneel down.

“Come on Ensemble.” I say to her. “We have to keep going.”

She lies still, her eyes shut. For a moment, I’m afraid that she’s fallen asleep, but then I see her shallow breathing, too shallow for her to be dreaming. I scoop her up, groaning at the effort and carry her over my shoulder.

Every step is a battle, a conscious defeat of the temptation to stay and lie on the ground. Pain stabs into me from the weight of her over my shoulder, and my muscles strain to keep holding her. They are more used to wrestling than carrying.

Even worse is the fact that to avoid the risk of trees crashing down and squishing us in their wake, I have to walk in the water. It feels like walking through syrup instead of water.

It takes me much longer to walk up a beach than it had when Ensemble had been walking, but no matter how slow the progress is, I don’t stop. I’ll see a shell along the beach and I’ll say that I’ll stop there. Then I’ll get there and carry on, aiming for

another shell or pebble that the sea has coughed up, until I finish that beach and turn around for the next one.

Everything aches now, but I carry on, thinking of Ensemble. For her sake, I cannot stop. She will not survive the rest of the night without shelter, and neither will I.

9:00

On my shoulder, Ensemble stirs at last. I'm glad that she was the one who collapsed instead of me; because although she is tall and determined, there is no way she'd have been able to carry me this far.

I sit her down on the sand next to me, sighing as my shoulders ache. The moon is still out, bathing the landscape in silver light. The forest, which once was a jewel collection of colors, is now a black and white wasteland, with trees askew and leaves littering the shoreline. The wind is more violent than it was before, and the sea's grey waves are choppy. If the storm on the boat had been anywhere near as strong as this one, there would've been no way that Ensemble and I survived.

It reminds me of another set of waves, a long time ago.

The raft was a bright yellow. We'd stolen it from Ensemble and Etienne's father, who'd once brought them on a rafting trip with it.

Gigi had refused outright to get on it. She knew we weren't allowed to go on the lake without adult supervision. A wispy little thing, she was always the responsible one, the one to pull us back when one of us went too far.

Paige stayed with her on the muddy bank, claiming that she just didn't want to leave Gigi on her own, but she was biting her lip, her eyes wide as she took in the soft waves in the menacing water.

Kai and I had leapt on, forever eager to prove that we were brave and impress our peers. As for Ensemble and Etienne, they were already on it. They weren't going to face the consequences for stealing their father's raft without having a go on it first.

We had gotten out onto the middle of the lake when the rain started. We all started to shiver, but no one wanted to be the one who suggested we all head back to shore, so we carried on paddling around.

Then the wind picked up, rocking our little inflatable boat violently. Kai toppled off into the freezing water. Spluttering, he tried to make his way back to us, but the waves had drifted us too far away. The bank was nearby and he swam towards it, before leaping out and running towards Gigi. Paige had left to get towels.

None of us knew what danger we were in.

Our little raft drifted, the wind too strong against our pathetic little plastic oars. Etienne and I had looked at each other in concern, communicating in the way that only best friends can whether we should ditch the raft and swim back to shore.

We were too far away from the bank for that. With the cold, we wouldn't make it. Ensemble's hard eyes said that we should continue drifting. We'd hit the other end of the lake in a bit, and then we'd still have the raft.

Anxiety rose in my chest as I clutched my little oar, shaking from the cold. Across from me, Ensemble's lips were blue.

And then the worst happened. The raft began to sink.

We must've punctured it on some rocks or something, because the firm plastic was going soft like a cushion, allowing my bum to sink into it.

Uh oh.

The water rose closer towards us. Ensemble shivered and shut her eyes, too cold to care. It was up to Etienne and I to solve this.

Our eyes met. One of us had to get off and try to paddle the raft against the wind close enough to the bank so that the others could swim away to safety. One of us had to sacrifice ourselves.

I stripped off my jumper, not wanting the soggy wool to pull me down when I swam. I was the better swimmer. I was the one who was most likely to get us to safety. Besides, Ensemble needed Etienne. Nobody needed me, other than maybe my mother, but she could always have another son. Maybe she'd name him something decent.

I wrench off my shoes and chuck them into the water. I wouldn't need them where I was going. I dipped my feet in first, feeling the cold rush; they turned numb in the water. I edged onto the side of the raft, my hands clasping the edge as I prepared to plunge into the cold.

I took a breath and shut my eyes.

I was thrown away from the water's edge, the soft plastic cushioning my fall. A splash sounded and I twisted my weary head to one side, seeing Etienne in the water, frantically kicking and propelling the raft along.

"No." I croaked, and tried to wrench him back up. I didn't have the strength. I looked back to the waves. With two of us kicking we'd get further, maybe far enough for us all to make it to shore.

"Ensemble!" Etienne shouted, his voice hoarse.

She started awake, her eyes wide. Her lips were so blue it looked she was wearing purple lipstick. She saw what I was about to do a minute before I did it. She pounced onto me, pinning me on top of the raft.

“Let me. Please,” I whispered, “I might be able to save him.”

“No you can’t.”

Etienne’s kicking went on for a long time. I struggled against Ensemble’s grip, but she was too heavy.

Kick. Kick. Kick...kick...kick. Silence.

Ensemble released me and we dived off the side of the raft and swam to shore. We sat on the mud until the world went black.

We told everyone that Etienne fell off the raft. I convinced myself that it was all a hallucination brought on by the cold. I don’t think Ensemble ever questioned it.

I wonder if, like me, floating to the beach made her think of that day on the raft.

10:00

“What are you thinking about?” A small voice says behind me. Her eyes flutter open, looking white in the light.

“Nothing. We need to keep on moving. Can you walk?”

“Nemo,” she whines, “no. I’m tired. Can we just sit here?”

My legs give away and I slump next to her. “You know a tree could fall and hit us here at any time?”

“I know, but I don’t care anymore. I’m so tired.” Her eyes shut again and she leans back.

“No! Ensemble now is not the time for sleeping.” I shake her and her eyes open again. “I need you to walk. Please.” Groaning, I hook my arm around her and pull her up. She staggers when I let her go, so I place my arm back around her to stop her from falling.

She takes a small step. Then, gasping, she takes another one.

“Well done.” I whisper to her encouragingly.

“Please,” She whispers, her chin wobbling, “talk to me.”

“What about?” I ask, unnerved by her vulnerability. I’d never seen her look so afraid, not even when I found her washed up.

“Anything.”

“Well,” I swallow, “You know how you said I was more logic than passion? I think you’re wrong. I think that right now, I’m in the middle of those two. I’m equally logical and passionate. Just like I’m somewhere between the imagination of my childhood and the rigid snatches of adulthood.”

We take another step.

“I think that you were right, all along.” Step. “Living in the passion of childhood is worth it.” Step. “It’s so much better than this constant struggle into adulthood that my parents and school and everyone is trying to inflict on me.” Step. “And now, I want to live here, with you.” Step. “I don’t care about civilization anymore.”

We make progress across the beach, her head nodding slightly from time to time. I can’t tell whether she can hear me, or if she even cares about what I’m saying, but I keep on talking to her and we carry on stumbling through the night.

“Even though I know nature’s dangerous, trust me, the last twelve hours have taught me that, I’m not afraid.” I babble, and we take another step. “Death can strike at any second.” I gasp. “Even now, us walking on the sand instead of in the sea runs the risk of us getting crushed by a tree. But I don’t care anymore. Death will happen when it happens, and I can’t stop it. It’s so freeing, Ensemble, knowing and accepting that fact.”

The sand grates against my feet, and I realize in surprise that we’ve reached the end of the beach. An empty forest of trees struck down by a forest fire long ago looms in front of us. Tree trunks are strewn everywhere and a layer of ashes still coats the area. Ashes, that on my feet, I’d mistaken for sand.

It would be a good area to rest for the rest of the storm, but the ashes remind me of the one funeral I’d been to, where we’d scattered ashes across the clearing in the woods. I couldn’t sleep on something remarkably similar to all that remained of my childhood best friend.

Ensemble’s face is paler than usual, and her eyes are wide. “Don’t look at it.” I tell her. “Just look at me.”

I lead her through the wasteland, highlighted in gruesome glory by the light of the moon. Ensemble moves faster, not waiting for me to talk, just hoping that on the other side of a pile of logs, there’d be a meadow filled with flowers for her to rest in.

“Ensemble, I don’t know if you really care what I’m saying or anything, but I need to tell you. I’m ready to live here, in nature, with you, forever. I’m ready and I want it so badly. If we can just get through tonight, we can have a future here together.”

I stop to move some burnt logs from our path.

“And yes, I’ll miss my Mum and you’ll miss your parents and maybe one day, we might even get to go back and see them, but for now, it’ll just be us living a simple life. A life ordered by Mother Nature and where the only complicated thing is the relationship between us.” I move to clear another set of logs. “Which I guess isn’t that important. We’ll always be friends.” I look at her, but her eyes are not on my face. Slowly she raises her hand up, pointing at something behind the logs I cleared.

“Look Nemo,” she says, smiling. “Light.”

11:00

The light came from a collection of small buildings in a clearing. It was a village. A small village, but still a village with electricity and no doubt some sort of phone or radio.

Ensemble stumbles towards it, but I catch her arm. “Are you sure we should do this?”

“Why not?” She asks.

“If you walk down that slope into that village, your dream will be lost forever. You won’t get to live in the middle of nowhere anymore.”

“I know, but I need to. I think it was a foolish dream of mine anyway, especially after this storm.”

I frown. “But didn’t you hear anything I said whilst we were walking? I want to stay here with you. I want to live your dream.”

“I know.” She swallows. “I heard you. But you don’t belong here and neither do I. All children, except one, grow up. And that one child is neither you nor I. Never forget this day, the day when we decided to become adults, get jobs and lead lives.”

I sigh, “I don’t want to.”

“You’ll thank me one day.” She says, turning and walking away. Before she is completely engulfed by the slope she looks back and says “I used to be somewhere between the imagination of my childhood and the rigid snatches of adulthood.” Her eyes are as striking as ever. “But not anymore.”

She disappears, her red hair silver in the moonlight. I think of the dead. Etienne, Kai, Gigi and Paige, all claimed by the waves. We owe it to them to survive. We owe it to them to live and become adults like they never would.

I grab a pebble off the ground, tuck it into my pocket and follow her, leaving the dead forest behind us.