A Song for the Heart sore and War-Weary

by gestaltwithluck

Summary

"Sorry, Ace," Marco murmured to himself as he riffled through the stack of old newspapers. "I don't know how it happened, but... I think I'm stalking your little brother."

Notes

See the end notes for trigger warnings.

See the end of the work for more notes

After Marineford, they all need time. Eventually, after a week or more—Marco can't really be sure—most of them begin to stir. It is evident to all that there is no more Shirohige pirate crew. They are fragmented and diminished and grieving, and while the comfort of nakama soothes the ache, the sorrow of missing faces cuts a little deeper every time.

And so they scatter. Some divisions break off as a whole and form their own separate crews, with new flags and new dreams. Some go to allied ships they have ties with. Some drift away from the pirate life altogether. Others split off in twos and threes, uncertain of their future but sure of the friends they wish to face it with.

Marco takes one of the little logia-powered boats and sets off onto the sea alone.
Recognizing the time to let go and being willing to move on are two very different things.

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He isn't fool enough to try to sail the uncertain waters of the New World by himself in his condition, so he leaves the diminishing crew after they bury their dead, passes under the Red Line and goes wherever the wind directs him, without a glance at the logpose affixed to the helm.

For a few months, he drifts from island to island, avoiding company and only staying long enough to drink himself off his head and gather together enough food to hold him over until the next island. Even Paradise isn't as kind as its nickname makes it sound, though, and eventually the strain of a bad storm is a bit too much for his little ship, and he has to stop over at the next island to perform some emergency repairs—himself, since there're no shipwrights to be found there.

There is, however, a bar, and alcohol is a lot more appealing than the prospect of considering that perhaps he's taking things a step too far and should either slow down or commit suicide in a less tiring way.

Not that he ever would. Doesn't mean the thought doesn't wander across his mind every now and then.

It's a really, truly crumby bar, and the ale has a taste of tar, but really, it's not as though he's drinking for the flavor. The woman who slams a fresh mug down before him as he drains the one before looks as though she misplaced her invitation to the grave a few decades ago, much like the bar itself. Even the stained and battered papers that litter the tables and counter are weeks and months out of date.

He almost doesn't see it—he isn't looking, after all—but when he does he chokes hard enough that the old lady comes around to his side of the bar and thumps him on the back with a strength that makes him think maybe she has a few more years left in her after all.

That idiot, why is he on a front page? What had he—that idiot had gone back to Marineford?

Marco knows that said idiot has a name, and it isn't "Ace's little brother," as he's been mentally referring to him since the first time Ace came grinning and waving a wanted poster with a drop-in-the-bucket bounty and a happy-looking kid's picture, saying, "Hey, Marco! Look at this! My little brother's got his first bounty!"

After that, Ace had been in such a good humor that he joined Marco in his boozing on the island they harbored at that evening (back when drinking wasn't just a different kind of drowning) despite his usual aversion to overindulging (something about red hair and a hangover to strike fear into the heart of all men). The drunker Ace got, the more outrageous the stories he told became. Everything from getting eaten by alligators to almost drowning five times in one afternoon to accidentally knotting himself around a tree ("How the hell does that happen?" "Well, he's a thtupid kid and he's made of rubber, dammit." "...what?").

The headline "Monkey D. Luffy's Bewildering Return to Marineford" is the most apt heading he's ever read.

(That's right. The idiot's name was Luffy.)

He reads the article through, and it's more confusing than ever. The alcohol definitely isn't helping. Why the hell did that kid go back to that hellish place with all its bad memories, scatter flowers and ring the Ox bell, and get his stupid face even more well-known? He obviously wasn't healed yet if
the bandages covering him from head to toe were anything to go by. And why would Jimbei and Dark King Rayleigh support him in his madness?

"Stupid kid," he says. He fishes in his pocket for the right coins, and slaps them on the counter. He turns to leave, and then hesitates, looking back at the stained photograph of a solemn boy with his hat held respectfully to his heart.

"Baa-san, mind if I take this?"

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The patch-up job he's done on his ship isn't going to hold and he knows it, so, for the first time in a long while, he sets out with an actually destination in mind: Water 7, seat of the best shipwrights this side of the Red Line.

"It's nothing we can't repair, but it'll take a few days, I'm afraid," Iceburg tells him (why is the Mayor of Water 7 assessing the damage to his boat?). "The propulsion mechanism is corroded pretty severely, and it'll take some time to acquire the right parts. I'd refer you to Franky, as he's faster with this kind of job than I am, but, well, he's otherwise occupied just now."

He says it with kind of worried smile.

"Love trouble?" Marco asks lightly, just to make conversation.

Iceburg somehow manages to smile and frown at the same time at that.

"Nothing of the kind. I don't really know what he's doing right now, actually, but I do know that his captain took deep wounds at Marineford."

Marco blinks. He supposes it's clear enough he's a pirate, so there's no harm to the shipwright in telling him such things, but he somehow felt that the general hush about the war and its consequences that had pervaded the Shirohige ships during his last days with them would be universal.

He swallows.

"Franky, was it? I don't know the name, but if you tell me which captain he serves under, I might be able to tell you what became of the crew."

It's Iceburg's turn to blink in surprise.

"I sailed under Shirohige," Marco clarifies, in a tone that does not invite further questions on the topic.

The blue-haired man turns back to the logia boat, the thoughtful frown back.

"I see," he says after a moment. "Thank you, but Franky's captain wasn't allied to Shirohige."

That was unusual, to say the least. Besides marines, there had been only—

"This Franky doesn't sail under Ace's little b—that Luffy, does he?"

Another surprised look, warming quickly into a smile. "It seems you know him by more than just reputation."

Somehow, from that point, Marco finds himself in the care of one Paulie, another shipwright,
apparently, who takes him drinking and tells him a tale verging on the impossible of a stupid idiot who wouldn't let his nakama go, and somehow ended up declaring war on the World Government in the process of reclaiming her.

Marco had known about Impel Down and Marineford, of course, but he hadn't heard that that idiot had made it his business to contribute to the destruction of all three major Marine bases in the first half of Grand Line. The way Paulie tells it, Enies Lobby didn't survive a meeting with the Mugiwara pirates, and nor—almost unbelievably, if Marco hadn't seen the idiocy and strength both of their captain firsthand—did the legendary CP9.

Marco wonders if Ace knew what a crazy, reckless, insanely lucky little brother he had.

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It happens again a few months later, this time in a bar on a little island not too far from Shabondy, but far enough that slavery is not an everyday reality (the thought of anything like a cage has always made him sick, and the feeling has intensified since Ace's incarceration).

There's a worn but cheerful-looking crew in the bar, getting steadily more intoxicated and telling stories of years spent in darkness after having their shadows stolen and their rescue by a band a brave pirates.

Marco would have discounted their tales as the fanciful rambling of drunks had he not known enough about the power of the Shichibukai Gekko Moria to give credence to their words.

When he asks the large woman, who introduces herself as the crew's captain, Lola, if it was indeed Moria behind the unfortunate stories of her companions, she confirms it, and, learning that Marco is a pirate himself, tells him eagerly of how they were rescued by the Mugiwara crew. The connection doesn't make itself until she mentions the captain my name.

"Luffy? Not Ace's little br—eh, Monkey D. Luffy, right?"

A suspicious look crosses her broad features. "And what if it is?" she says somewhat aggressively.

Marco raises his hands in a pacifying gesture. "No need for concern—it's just that I sailed with his brother, so I heard stories about the kid from time to time. I never heard that he'd gone toe to toe with Moria, though."

"You knew Ace, the one who gave him that vivre card? I see." She pauses thoughtfully. "Do you want to hear the rest?"

Marco nods, finding that he does indeed want to hear more about this reckless child's unbelievable actions (no wonder Ace always came off as the worrying kind of older brother talking about Luffy).

And so he hears the tale of a stubborn boy on a ship the size of an island, and how he displayed the willpower of fifty men combined and took down a monstrous giant possessed by his own shadow, and then went on to defeat Moria. He is also told, in a hushed tone, of the bravery and devotion of that boy's right hand man, who put his life and his dream on the line to save his unconscious captain, and refused to tell of what he had done and be thanked for it as he deserved.

Marco is also treated to a confusing description of the other crew members, in terms that he isn't sure can be believed. A little reindeer for a doctor, a mechanical man as shipwright (Iceburg's Franky, perhaps?), and an animated skeleton as a musician, to name only three, leave him wondering how much he can believe of this crew's story, but doubt soon dissolves into another
round of beer and a chorus of Binks' Sake, and Marco is surprised to find himself really smiling for the first time in a long while.

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His next encounter comes only a few weeks later, and is more baffling than all the rest. He has the bad luck to be shunted by a storm far off course until he risks entering the Calm Belt. He could traverse it with the power of his logia-driven boat, but it's incredibly tiring to use without the help of a little wind or tide, especially since, although his Akuma no Mi allows him to produce flames, he is a zoan type. Even if that were not the case, such a small boat would stand little chance against a sea king.

He manages to keep to safe waters, just barely, and is only just beginning to relax when a ship he recognizes as belonging to Boa Hancock appears and approaches him.

He's preparing to receive fire, and they are obviously preparing to give it, when suddenly the cannon are retracted and he is treated to the sight of the most beautiful woman alive (or so they say, and he believes it now) leaning over the railing and asking if he isn't Marco, of the Shirohige Pirates.

When he answers that he is, Hancock enters some kind of rapturous state where she, flushing and giggling, tells him that she's glad to meet (not too glad, mind you, as he's a man after all) someone who served beside her husband's brother.

"He's not your husband, princess!" comes another voice from the ship.

"Yeah, Luffy-sama turned you down. Nyon-baa said you've gotta try and remember that, princess!"

She nods, the blush in her cheeks receding somewhat, and assures Marco that Luffy is well and growing stronger, to her most recent knowledge.

He thanks her bemusedly, and finds himself gifted with a basket of exotic fruit apparently from the legendary Amazon Lily, before the Empress's ship sails off into the Calm Belt.

He isn't sure what to do with this encounter (Boa Hancock has a thing for Ace's little brother? Ace's little brother turned that riptide of a woman down?) so he tucks it away in the back of his mind to be examined at a later date, and unfurls his sail.

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He almost expects Luffy-related encounters at this point, and is not disappointed as in the coming months he hears stories of the young pirate's escapades from an old man and a pair of monkeys in a bar on Jaya, and on Drum when he stops at a village to restock on food, and by Reverse Mountain, where he almost runs afoul of an enormous whale with the Mugiwara jolly roger painted on its scarred head.

His most shocking encounter comes on Alabasta, some months later, when he finally decides to give in to his curiosity about Ace's little brother and not just wait for the next chance encounter to learn more. The royal library and archives are open to the public, so, feeling a little strange being in such a place, he enters the archive and asks to see all the newspaper articles they have on record about one Mugiwara no Luffy. The archive assistant gives him a startled look, but complies readily enough.

There's a lot more to work through than he had expected for a man who'd only been a pirate for under a year before dropping off the map. Feeling strange, he picks up the top newspaper, which
has the notice for one Monkey D. Luffy's first bounty included. He remembers Ace being very excited to see that, back on the Moby Dick, but he'd never heard the details of how he earned a bounty on his head before. By the look of things, he took down all of the big shots in East Blue (small fry anywhere else) without much trouble before making a lot of noise in Loguetown and upsetting the Marines stationed there more than a bit.

By this point, he can't say he's surprised. In fact, it seems rather tame by Luffy's standards, but that's probably due to the fact that the story went through the government before it reached the paper.

"Sorry, Ace," Marco murmurs to himself as he reads through the remaining articles. "I don't know how it happened, but ... I think I'm stalking your little brother."

Towards the bottom of the stack, he finally sees the faces of the rest of Ace's little brother's crew for the first time. It seems that every member of the crew has a bounty on their head—extremely unusual, even among small crews—and although some of them are a little questionable (the government honestly made a poster for a masked man using an obvious alias like 'Sogeking'? And why does the cat burglar look like she's posing for a magazine cover? Was there really no better description for a reindeer doctor than Cotton Candy-Loving Chopper?) they seem like a good crew, if somewhat eclectic and more than a little deranged.

"Excuse me."

Marco looks up to see a very lovely young lady (also very wealthy, from the amount of gold on her wrists and neck and woven into her long blue hair) with a large bird of some description at her side.

"I understand you asked to see the archived articles on Monkey D. Luffy," she says, and while her tone is flawlessly courteous, there's something wary in her eyes. "Would you mind telling me why, exactly?"

He shrugs, part of him confused by the question, another part accepting with resignation that even the archived edition of Ace's little brother attracts mystery and trouble. "I served on the same ship as his brother," he answers with some reserve. "And his name's come up often enough the last two years that I felt like learning a little more about the kid."

He didn't expect her wary gaze to turn watery in an instant at his words.

"You knew Ace-san, then?" she says. The bird at her side makes a sympathetic cawing noise, and she wipes her eyes quickly. "Well, that—would you like to come to dinner?"

"What?"

As she guides him from the library and through the lively streets of Alabasta, she introduces herself as Vivi, and tells him of her time with the Mugiwara crew, and meeting with Ace. This is the first time in the nearly two years since Marineford that Marco has encountered someone who knew Ace personally, in part because he has avoided islands where the Shirohige pirates were well-known, and it strikes him in a way he did not expect.

The riddle of Ace's little brother and Crocodile is answered here as she tells him of how Luffy rid the kingdom of the Shichibukai and brought it back from the brink of civil war and total ruin.

By the time they reach the palace, she has told him of how she parted ways with the crew, and is asking if there is anything he knows about Luffy and his crew, and whether they are well.

Once he gets past the fact that his companion is, in fact, a princess, and 'dinner' means a royal
banquet, in the company of the king and his royal advisers (this really isn't what he's used to), he finds himself enjoying good food and company, and tells his hosts all he knows of the Mugiwara crew's exploits since their parting.

At the end of the evening, he is invited to stay in the palace for the night, or even several days, but he declines. This isn't where he belongs—it's too far from the sea, and more, there's something in him that feels the urge to set sail suddenly, something different from the listless drifting he's submersed himself in since the Shirohige crew disbanded.

Vivi walks him back down to the harbor with Carue, the bird, bearing gifts of food and clothing for him from the palace on its back. She says a warm goodbye, and asks him to give her love to Luffy and his crew if he encounters them in his travels, and waves to him until his little boat is out of sight.

Marco follows the eternal pose he spends most of his remaining money on all the way to Shabondy.

He is done grieving for his dead and the breaking of his family. There are still people he loves in this world, and still new things to experience on the wide sea.

He is ready to return to the New World.

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When he arrives on Fishman Island and finds it buzzing with news of none other than the Mugiwara crew and Luffy most of all, it is like a good omen. So, they are on the move again after two years, and only a few days’ travel ahead of him.

He meets Jimbei there, something he hadn't expected as the fishman, welcome though he was, had always made a point of avoiding his home in respect for his status as a wanted man and a pirate, even when he was a Shichibukai. Marco hears one more unbelievable tale of Ace's little brother to add to his large collection, and is surprised to see tears in Jimbei's eyes at more than one point in the story.

"He set himself at odds with Big Mam?" Marco asks incredulously, when the tale is told. For a rookie, that kid has no sense of his own mortality, it seems. Though, after burning the World Government flag, making a monstrous enemy like one of the Yonkou might seem like nothing particularly unusual.

Jimbei nods. "That idiot," he says, with a mix of affection, concern and gratitude that is hard to understand.

"You really like him," Marco realizes with a slow smile. Jimbei's affections are hard-won, but anyone who he respects and cares for knows it and is the better for it.

"Aa," Jimbei says warmly, then, after a moment's hesitation, adds, "I made a promise with Luffy-kun that I would join his crew one day, when my work here is done."

If he hadn't gained some respect and affection for the Mugiwara crew and their captain from all the stories he'd heard over the past two years, from princesses and drunken shipwrights, of rescuing kingdoms from destruction and declaring war on the World, those words in that tone from Jimbei would have been enough.
Marco stays a few days, and before he leaves, learns from Jimbei where he last heard Jozu and Vista's crew were sailing.

He has a standing invitation from them to join their crew, and he means to take them up on it.

End Notes

Mild trigger warnings for mentions of suicide and excessive consumption of alcohol.

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